

Rallying For Collectivism

On the 40th anniversary of the International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters (ICFWS), an account of how a group of collaborators pulled off what was then a miracle

In July 1983, amidst my job tenure in bustling Hong Kong, I received a pivotal letter from a dear friend. It planted the seed for what went on to become the ambitious vision of convening an international assembly of fishers from across the globe. Exactly one year later, in July 1984, the first International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters, better known among fishers and fishery activists as the Rome Conference, culminated triumphantly.

Many have wondered at how such an endeavour was accomplished in an era predating personal computers, let alone the internet or mobile smartphones! The brief answer: the catalyst was a cohort of dedicated individuals worldwide, unified by their enthusiasm for the concept and their unwavering belief in its feasibility.

The orchestration of the conference rested on a foundation of meticulous planning, adept delegation of responsibilities, consistent communication, broad participation of fishers and their allies in preparatory activities globally, diverse funding streams, securing commitments from esteemed speakers, and seamless collaboration with local authorities and well wishers in Rome.

First, a glimpse into the chronology: In August 1983, after getting that pivotal letter, I dispatched personal letters to approximately 70 individuals worldwide with ties to the fisheries sector, proposing the idea of an international fishers' gathering; I solicited candid feedback. The rapid and overwhelmingly positive response took me aback. Encouraged by this groundswell of support, a comprehensive concept note was crafted and deliberated upon with select confidants. It became evident that a more inclusive and thorough validation of the idea was imperative to ensure its potential benefit to fishers worldwide.

So, in January 1984, a preliminary meeting was convened in Hong Kong to solidify the consensus through deliberation. Subsequently, an

International Steering Committee was convened from among those present, with specific roles assigned to members. Three pivotal decisions were made. One, adopting the term 'fishworker' to encompass all individuals labouring for livelihood within the fisheries sector. Two, the key message of our conference would be to highlight the centrality of the fishworkers in any discourse on fisheries development and management. And, three, setting the conference dates for July 4-8, 1984, strategically overlapping with the FAO/UN World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development in Rome from June 27 to July 6, 1984, thus leveraging the presence of the world press at the FAO/UN meeting to obtain maximum exposure.

Little time, much to do

With a mere six months to transform this vision into reality, meticulous coordination was imperative. Three secretariats were devised. The first was set up in Hong Kong to manage funding, travel logistics, and visa arrangements, particularly for fishers, while overseeing documentation and conference materials. A second was set up in Rome to handle local arrangements, liaise with authorities, and oversee venue logistics. A third secretariat was created in Thiruvananthapuram, India to oversee overall coordination, formal communications, and planning of pre-conference regional meetings to select the participants. Mobilizing funds emerged as a pivotal task. Soliciting financial support for an international gathering of fishers posed a unique challenge. Development funding agencies were not accustomed to such requests. Many raised valid concerns about the purposefulness of allocating resources to such an event. To counter this reluctance, a strategic approach was devised: breaking down the total estimated budget on a per capita basis, setting it at US \$2,000 per participant, and seeking funds from diverse sources.



RALLYING TO ROME

SPECIAL PEOPLE. COLLECTIVE PROCESSES. A UNIQUE EVENT.

A personal account of what went into organising the first International Conference of Fish Workers and their Supporters (ICFWS), held in Rome in July 1984

<https://www.icsf.net/resources/rallying-to-rome-1984-icsf/>

John Kurien

International
Collective
in Support of
Fishworkers



This method considerably eased the process of fund-raising, allowing outreach to individuals, trade unions, NGOs, and development agencies. Ultimately, funding was secured from 26 sources.

Significant regional meetings were convened in Latin America and West Africa to address pertinent issues among fishers from the attending countries and democratically select representatives for the Rome gathering. Additionally, national meetings were held in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and the Philippines. By the end of April 1984, the list of attending fishworkers had been finalized. This was a critical milestone, considering the challenges associated with obtaining visas, particularly for individuals lacking formal higher education, as was the case with many fishworkers. The secretariats in Hong Kong and Rome collaborated closely on visa procurement, navigating a complex and often arduous process that occasionally required exerting external pressure on Italian consulates in respective countries.

A different age, different means

This entire process of coordination was facilitated using snail mail, telex messaging, telegrams, and the occasional expensive international telephone calls. All the pre-conference newsletters and the background dossiers for the conference were printed in hard copies after being translated by a group of volunteers in English, French and Spanish.

To overcome the intractable language barriers, and to ensure a memorable experience for participating fishworkers, many of whom were venturing abroad for the first time, a decision was made to organize a comprehensive exhibition showcasing posters and models of fishing artefacts at the conference venue. This was to also attract the world press at the concurrent FAO/UN meeting. Preparation for the exhibition fostered collective pre-conference engagement among participants, prompting discussions on thematic highlights for charts and the selection of fishing artefacts and models to transport to Rome.

As a way of thanking the citizens of Rome, whose municipality had welcomed the fishworkers to their great city, preparations were also made by

each delegation for a short 'fishworkers walk' and a cultural evening of song and dance at the famous Piazza Novona.

Given that translation services would only be available in English, French, Spanish, and Italian, special consideration was given to fishworkers from countries where these languages were not spoken. Careful selection of accompanying supporters was paramount, as they would assume the additional responsibility of acting as 'whispering translators' to ensure that non-fluent attendees were not disadvantaged.

The proof of the pudding

The actual event was held at a conference facility in the centre of Rome that provided spartan but adequate facilities for accommodation, meeting halls, venues for discussion groups. It also had a large semi-covered theatre for holding the exhibition and lush outdoor tree-filled spaces to relax.

Members of a local fisher's cooperative, who would also participate at the conference, invited the international gathering to visit their fishing port and have the occasion to share a fellowship dinner with the community while learning about their professional and socio-cultural life.

By a curious set of coincidences, it also became possible for the fishworkers to be invited for an audience with the Pope—but after the completion of the conference.

The actual event itself turned out to be a very lively, educational, and inspiring gathering. Language was no major barrier for the fishworkers. The recognition that the oceans united them; that they confronted very similar sets of problems, irrespective of nationality; and that the need of the times was for greater collective action starting from the local level to the global level became the unifying theme to initiate action on getting back home.

For those who participated as supporters it was also an occasion to establish new bonds of friendship, having now physically met and interacted. This would become the basis for the formation of the new network called the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers in 1986.

The final report of the Conference was indeed handwritten in three languages, printed, and widely distributed as it was the only means at that time. 3

For more

Rallying to Rome: Special People. Collective Processes. A Unique Event by John Kurien, 2024

<https://www.icsf.net/resources/rallying-to-rome-special-people-collective-processes-a-unique-event-by-john-kurien-2024/>

Report of the International Conference of Fishworkers, and their Supporters, Rome, July 4–8, 1984

<https://www.icsf.net/resources/report-of-the-international-conference-of-fishworkers-and-their-supporters-rome-july-4-8-1984-2/>

Report of the Trivandrum Workshop Towards an International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, November 20-25, 1986

<https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/1986/11/930.ICSF083.pdf>

ICSF

<https://www.icsf.net/>