

A Space in Progress

The 2024 SSF Summit was a platform for mutual learning also a multi-dimensional opportunity for building a community, making connections and coming together as a collective

In early July 2024, the second Small-scale Fisheries (SSF) Summit was held in Rome. It commemorated the tenth anniversary of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines). Funded by the European Commission and hosted and organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and its partners, the Summit

I attended the Summit for the first time this year as an academic and researcher. In this short note I reflect on the challenges and successes that the Summit faced; I also offer some thoughts on possible future pathways. One primary question frames my observations: What does a space like the Summit offer and mean for its participants?

Situating the Summit

The first SSF Summit was held in September 2022 as part of the year-long series of events organized around the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA). It was attended by 145 participants from 47 countries. The 2024 event was bigger, with nearly 300 attendees.

The increase in scale had entailed a change in venue. Unlike in 2022, the Summit moved to the main FAO building, with its more stringent access rules and requirements. From its architecture to its flags and airport-level security, FAO affirms, as much through its space as its influence on policy-making, that it not only has a seat at the table but, in fact, possesses the capacity to convene the table itself.

The bulk of the sessions over the three days of the Summit were held in the Red Room, an imposing space featuring screens and facilities for simultaneous translation at every desk. Portraits of former FAO chairpersons lined the walls. From the flags that covered the rear wall of the Red Room to the break-out rooms named after countries and the cadences of multiple languages, this was undeniably an international space, and perhaps even a trans-national one.

Space and voice

The SSF leaders at FAO were grassroots leaders with long experience in engaging, challenging and negotiating

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aimed to not just celebrate a milestone but also to take action towards a more robust implementation of the SSF Guidelines.

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Panel discussion during the SSF Summit 2024. one of the key strengths of the Summit was the multi-faceted nature of the space it offered

with their governments. A space like this, however, presents its own possibilities and challenges. In speaking with leaders and activists, I heard a refrain: Whom was the Summit meant for?

Was it primarily (or even solely) a space for SSF leaders to engage with one another and learn from each other's experiences, victories and concerns? Was it for SSF to arrive at a common platform for assertions that were global in scale and local in implementation, such as those of customary tenure rights? Was it to share perspectives on contentious issues of the day such as individual transferable quotas (ITQs) and the Convention on Biodiversity's 30x30 Agenda? Or was it a space for SSF to speak to FAO fisheries experts and communicate their concerns, frustrations and aspirations? What is the role of outsiders, be they whether environmental NGOs, funding agencies or academia?

These omnipresent questions were given particular force by the fishers' perceived exclusion from the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) meeting that was scheduled to commence the day after the Summit closed. Attended by bureaucrats and governmental representatives, COFI's theme of supporting and highlighting the contributions of SSF struck many Summit attendees as particularly ironic.

There were also considerable questions about the role of FAO. While FAO staff saw their role as facilitators in creating a space that was pliable and transformative for those within the SSF community, many fisher leaders felt

otherwise. For them, FAO was perceived as a body with significant influence over global fisheries governance; they felt strongly that FAO should play a more openly persuasive role in pushing their governments towards adopting SSF-friendly policies.

In sum

In many ways, the Summit is still in a nascent stage. Should it go on to achieve a regular periodicity, it is possible to suggest ways that the Summit might be more responsive to SSF needs and demands. These include fostering more and deeper conversations among the SSF leaders, recognizing the diversity of perspectives within the global SSF community, and supporting women and indigenous leaders within such global platforms.

For me, however, one of the key strengths of the Summit was the multi-faceted nature of the space it offered. The power of having one's presence not just welcome but affirmed cannot be gainsaid, particularly given the long history of exclusion and marginalization that SSF have faced. Not only did the Summit seek to serve as a platform for mutual learning, led by SSF leaders, it also offered opportunities for building a community, for making connections, and for coming together as a collective. During sessions, and between them, over lunches and dinners, I saw conversations flourish, cards exchanged, and ideas spark. It is the power of such interactions, and their afterlives, that ultimately determine the success of spaces like the SSF Summit. 🍷

For more

IYAFA 2022: 1st Small-scale Fisheries Summit Report, 2-4 September 2022

<https://icsf.net/resources/iyafa-2022-small-scale-fisheries-summit-report-2-4-september-2022-citta-dellaltra-economia-rome-italy-by-FAO-2022/>

Unrecognized Tenure

<https://icsf.net/samudra/tenure-rights-india-unrecognized-tenure/>

2nd Small-scale Fisheries Summit (SSF Summit 2024), Rome, Italy

<https://icsf.net/resources/2nd-small-scale-fisheries-summit-ssf-summit-2024-rome-italy/>