

Food First?

Fish is at one and the same time both a source of food and income. This is a quintessential characteristic which should be borne in mind while discussing the issue of food security. In fishing communities, on the one hand, there are large numbers who depend primarily on fishing for a livelihood. For them, it is the income from the sale of fish that lets them pay for the bare necessities of life. On the other hand, there are those who rely on farming, fishing or mere gathering from the bush, in order to exist. For the people of such communities, fish is less a source of income than a source of subsistence—often a vital means of partially meeting their daily nutritional requirements of protein.

From the point of view of consumers, in several developing countries there exist underprivileged classes like agricultural labourers, plantation and mine workers, who bank on fish as a source of cheap protein. This demand for fish is met mostly by domestic or regional trade. In contrast, there are fairly prosperous consumers in developed countries whose culture, habits and dietary preferences, more than anything else, determine the demand for fish. The requirements for this large market are satisfied mostly from imports.

Recent international efforts to address the issue of food security have gone only part of the way. Consider the Kyoto Declaration and Plan of Action on the Sustainable Contribution of Fisheries to Food Security that sprung from last year's International Conference on the Sustainable Contribution of Fisheries to Food Security, as well as the 31st Session of the FAO Committee on Food Security in February this year. They provide only fragmentary approaches on how to effectively address the issue of food security in the context of fisheries.

Both these meetings focused only on supply-side issues. Augmenting supply *per se* means little to poorer consumers at the household level, unless the increase in supply should translate into better incomes for poorer fishworkers

Furthermore, concentrating only on the supply side, without in any way restraining demand, could be ultimately counterproductive. This is because the market is the worst enemy of good resource management. The market mechanism invariably proves efficient enough to absorb large quantities of fish and can thus subvert any management measure, however worthwhile.

For certain species of fish, it may be difficult to dissuade the fishworker from responding to market signals. This is particularly true in the case of shrimp, tuna and cephalopods—species that enjoy strong demand in international markets. This fact underscores how important—and difficult—it is to delineate a lucid policy on fisheries and food security. In countries of the South, different policy matrices can be constructed, depending on whose food security is on the agenda. Thus it is important to develop a judicious programme for fishing communities that spells out regional priorities, based on social and economic considerations. Simultaneously, such a programme should also address the consumption requirements of local consumers. The over-riding objective—necessarily double-headed and thus somewhat contradictory—should be the welfare of both fishworkers and underprivileged consumers. Clearly, this is a difficult goal. But it will never be reached if two vital aspects are forgotten: better management and allocation of fishery stocks, and greater protection of fish habitats.