

## Comment

# A new forum and new hopes

For the world's fisheries, the last quadrennium has been strewn with several milestones of far-reaching significance. The historic United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea was ratified in 1994. The United Nations Agreement on the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks was opened for signature in 1995. Also in the same year, the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries was adopted by the FAO Conference. And now, from a totally different initiative comes the formation of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF) in New Delhi in November 1997. The Forum represents those who are directly engaged in fishing, processing, sale and transportation of fish in the subsistence/artisanal/aboriginal/traditional sectors. It, however, excludes merchants, large corporations and their affiliates as well as industrial aquaculture operators.

The Forum's principal objective is to protect, defend and strengthen the communities that depend on fisheries resources for their livelihood. It thus seeks to improve their quality of life. Towards this end, it has an action plan to better protect fisheries resources from both land-based and sea-based threats like pollution, tourism and industrial aquaculture as well as overfishing arising from the use of non-selective methods and practices.

The Forum promotes sustainable fishing as well as the conservation and regeneration of fisheries resources, and greater protection of all aquatic ecosystems. It advocates a rights-based fisheries in waters under national jurisdiction and a central role for fishworker organizations in fisheries management worldwide. It stands for greater compliance with relevant international agreements in fisheries and advocates tough measures against fleet migration from the North to the South. It takes both an educational as well as a proactive role. It wants fishworkers to be better organized and vigilant.

The formation of the World Forum is, in a sense, the consummation of a process that started with the International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters in Rome in 1964, when fish-workers, mainly from the developing countries, emphasized the importance of building up national organizations before attempting an international organization. The Forum fills a major vacuum at the international level for artisanal and small-scale fishworkers. So far, the interests of these fishworkers had to be defended by support groups like ICSF.

The Forum has the potential to give the artisanal and small-scale sector the most significant producers of food from the sea a major say in international decision-making processes in fisheries development and management. It is particularly welcome at a time when several governments are critically reviewing their national fisheries policies which once favoured the industrial fisheries sector.

In an age when fisheries resources are getting increasingly globalized due to active market forces and unequal potential of different fishing grounds, only an initiative like this that links fishworkers across continents can succeed in stopping certain destructive tendencies in fisheries development and trade. The Forum's interest in ensuring compliance with relevant international agreements could go a long way in enlisting the support of fishworkers' organizations worldwide towards the implementation of such agreements. This would be particularly useful in the case of FAO's Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries.

At a time when fisheries management is moving more towards a regional, rather than a national approach, an organization like the World Forum could significantly influence developments in the future. Moreover, now that the ecosystem approach and individual transferable quotas are being increasingly mooted as panaceas for all ills plaguing fisheries management, an initiative like the World Forum, that juxtaposes principles of sustainability with social concerns, will help maintain focus on issues of life and livelihood of fishworkers, along with conservation of fish and fish habitats. We wish this initiative all success and hope that, on the eve of the 21st Century, it becomes a significant voice in matters related to fisheries management and development.