Safety at sea

The tragedy of official default

Who will save small-scale fishermen lost at sea in what is perhaps the most dangerous of civilian occupations, fishing?

Marine fishing has always been the most dangerous of all civilian occupations, with fatality rates higher than those for workers in other industries. Elements of risk of various sorts and degree are inherent in almost every decision of a skipper or individual fisherman: when and where to go fishing or to run for shelter; what method / gear to use; whether or not to change a fishing spot; when and how to set or haul gear; when and where to land catch, etc.

All these decisions have to be made against a background of weather changes, conditions of boats and equipment, dexterity of crew, and so on, as well as on the skippers' cultural and individual attitudes, experience and skill, and the various economic incentives that exist for risk-taking.

Official national and international attitudes have always focused on large and medium-scale fishing fleets, in spite of the fact that the rate of accidents and casualties at sea among small-scale fisherfolk are even higher than in high-sea fisheries. This is not surprising when one remembers the conditions under which these people fish. Their vessels, safety and communication equipment, first-aid, search-and-rescue (SAR), and early warning services are often less than adequate.

Consider an African example. In Guinea, which has 7,000 artisanal marine fishermen, each year, one in every 15 canoes meets with an accident, and for every 200 registered fishermen (including men and women, fish traders and their families) one dies in a canoe accident. In Oceania, during the 1989-90 period, around 120 deaths in about 640 accidents were reported. To these 'normal' casualties we must add massive loss of life and equipment in tropical storms (cyclones, typhoons and hurricanes).

In several areas, large vessels act as 'mother ships' for a large number of small boats and their crew, for handlining on relatively distant fishing grounds. The only place where such people can rest, eat and sleep is on the ship's deck. Not only is their food supply usually poor, their safety at sea is also a low priority. There has been at least one case of a canoe with five on board being abandoned by a Portuguese-flag mother ship, leading to two deaths by starvation. Is there anyone supervising the unmotherly practices of such mother ships?

In many countries, as far as technological developments are concerned, the small-scale fishery is no longer synonymous with backwardness and poverty. Modern boats are equipped to operate a great variety of fishing gear over fishing grounds previously unaccessible to small-scale fishermen. Many of such small fishing vessels have many features of larger ones, including relatively heavy engines and deck machinery that make them sinkable as soon as they capsize or take in large amounts of water. This is one unfortunate consequence of progress—boats that stay afloat in case of accidents have saved hundreds of fishermen's lives.

At the other end of the range, in Third World countries, artisanal fishermen still operate traditional fishing gear and craft. In some places, the only progress has been the introduction of synthetics; in others, the last technological improvement was the outboard engine.

Immense progress

In between, in some Third World countries, progress has been immense

with motorized artisanal craft employing a variety of imported fishing methods. The level of working and safety conditions on board depends on the general and local social and technological standards, the economic output of the fishery, and the local cultural attitudes to risk-taking and life-saving.

In the long-standing tradition of artisanal fisheries, fisherfolk have inherited time-proven responses to crises at sea, as well as survival strategies and weather perception that, along with their fishing knowhow, have evolved through ages of operating traditional technology under specific, local conditions. However, in many cases, the introduction of modern technologies has not always been for the better and has often upset the traditional ways of doing things. Forsaking sails and neglecting the art of sailing is only one example. Another is the lack of appreciation of the limits of modern technology and, hence, a tendency to take needless risks. The problem is often compounded by insufficient technical training in operating engines, navigation, use of electronic aids and safety equipment, first aid and emergency behaviour.

The deskilling in traditional knowledge is not only due to the shift to imported technologies, but also to changes in the age composition of the crew. With the entry of many unemployed youth, old, experienced fishermen, for various reasons, stay more often ashore. Young fishermen, like young drivers, feel less vulnerable to accidents than their elders who, even if less skilled in operating machinery, are more experienced in survival at sea.

On the question of legal instruments, small-scale fisherfolk have little hope for rational regulation, improved SAR services or decent treatment of casualties and damages. There are no internationally agreed rules for safety equipment and construction of small (less than 12 m long) fishing vessels, and for the training and certification of their skippers and crew. Only a few countries ratified the 1993 Protocol to the Torremolinos International Convention on the Safety of Fishing Vessels, that addressed the safety of crew and fishing vessels of over 24 m in length (and nothing below that). Since, for worldwide enforcement, the Convention must be ratified by at least 15 States which have an aggregate 50 per cent of the world's fishing fleet, the Convention remains a 'paper shark'.

Voluntary guidelines

For fishing vessels between 12 m and 24 m in length, there exist the 1980 FAO/ILO/IMO Voluntary Guidelines for the Design, Construction and Equipment of Small Fishing Vessels. But they are hardly applicable to small-scale and artisanal fishing boats. The only

international rule that applies to vessels of any size is a reference in Chapter 5 of the SOLAS convention merely requiring "ships of less than 150 tons gross" to be fitted with a steering compass. And that is almost all there is.

Governments reluctant to ratify and enact international standards on the safety of fishermen on larger vessels, no doubt, are even more reluctant to get involved in new conventions concerning small-scale fisheries, where enforcement would be difficult and costly.

There have been some attempts, though. One is the standard for construction and stability for fishing vessels, also under 15 m in length, jointly produced by the Nordic countries. There is also the FAO/Bay of Bengal Programme(BOBP)'s regional safety programme, spurred into life by the disastrous cyclone which struck the coast of northeast India in 1996. BOBP has published a pertinent and very good Safety Guide for Small Offshore Fishing Boats, and India has a working cyclone warning system, though its end links (to fisherfolk at sea and on the beach) still seem to be rather weak.

FAO also has regional activities for the Caribbean and the Pacific islands. Some governments in the Caribbean region seem to have started a process of enactment and enforcement of prescribed standards for the construction of small fishing vessels. NGO- and internationally-sponsored activities have been reported from Senegal, Guinea, Pacific islands and some other countries.

However, valid national legislation and actual efforts by governments to alleviate risks and dangers among fisherfolk are rather scarce, to say the least, and, if any, have still to achieve success. The NGOs' activities remain a mere drop in the ocean.

Interestingly enough, countries that lack large-scale fisheries seem to be paying more attention to their small-scale fisheries, than some of the leviathan nations in fisheries. While, for instance, the US' regulation hardly touches small-scale fisheries, and Japan's stops at boats of approximately 8 m in length, Barbados, Grenada, Senegal and Israel have reported regulation of safety equipment and other requirements for smaller fishing boats as well. Whatever be the number of countries that boast safety rules covering small-scale fisherfolk and their boats, the general picture is still grim. As of now, the small-scale fisheries represent a sector whose safety is least taken care of by legislation and enforcement.

In some places, safety gear inspection simply means that fishermen who can not afford the equipment prescribed have to bribe their way out. Another way out is to cheat by borrowing the equipment just for the inspection period. Where fishing licences are required, they are not always stipulated by seaworthiness and safety inspection, or by skippers' certification.

There are two basic types of SAR services: (1) civilian, often voluntary inshore and even offshore lifeboat services that may be the main ones, or auxiliary to the State's services, characteristic of some industrial marine countries, (e.g. UK, Australia, New Zealand); and (2) naval, air force, coast guard, special agencies, and marine police units that provide SAR services when necessary to people and vessels in trouble (as in the US, Japan and Israel).

However, fishermen in trouble at sea are mostly found and rescued by their fellow fishermen, not only because of the traditional solidarity ("I help you today, you help me tomorrow"), but also because, in most cases, small-scale fishermen are fishing while in visual or other contact with their fellows, which reduces the rate of fatalities. In many countries, however, there is little preoccupation with fisherfolk's safety and provision of effective SAR services. The reasons are numerous: insufficient awareness; lack of funds; lack of personnel skilled in marine safety problems or specialized in marine safety and SAR; lack of suitable craft; the huge numbers of fishing units spread over long coastlines and numerous, often remote islands; and inadequate technical and institutional infrastructure; and above all, the lack of political will, to mention a few.

Underestimation

Official statistics tend to underestimate the numbers of fishermen missing at sea.

Public interest is low except in the immediate communities of the missing ones, and the media wakes up to the subject only when the dead become newsworthy because of their huge numbers.

Fisherfolk, as a rule, lack the leverage and lobbying power to influence authorities to deal with, and invest money and efforts in, improving their safety. Preoccupied with their daily struggle for survival, their political action, if any, would be targeted at their immediate economic problems. Unquestionably, the great majority of the world's small-scale fisherfolk have been left to their own designs and their own means, as far as their safety at sea and on the beach goes, with efficient SAR services confined to industrialized countries.

The safety of the world's 15-20 million male and female small-scale and artisanal fishermen who produce about half of the world's fish for human consumption have yet to attract adequate national and international attention. What prevails is the tragedy of official default to legislate, enact and implement rules and regulations, to train and educate, and to fund services essential for reducing casualties and fatalities among the small-scale fisherfolk.

So, what is to be done? Two basic strategies should be applied: (i) reduce the consequences of accidents; and (ii) prevent accidents. The first has to do with SAR, safety equipment on board, emergency communication systems, and skipper and crew performance in case of emergency.

The second is mainly about boat design and construction quality, stability, training and licensing of personnel, working weather warning systems, as well as the reduction of sociocultural and economic incentives to take risks.

Countries which do not have their own design and construction standards for small-scale fishing craft should have them worked out by international and inter-governmental bodies, and use them as a basis for their own regulation and enforcement.

Artisanal craft locally built by traditional design and construction methods can be improved without changing the overall character of the craft. In artisanal and other small fishing craft, for example, designing for buoyancy to cope with capsizing or flooding and, where possible, for the opportunity of righting the boat by swimming crew, represents an important prerequisite.

Local institutions

Where governments are not effective in other public services too, Western-type voluntary and State-run SAR programmes would wither soon after expatriate expertise and external funding terminate.

One solution, therefore, is to identify local, traditional institutions, and local leadership that, with some support of NGOs and international organizations, would organize their own SAR and storm-safety services, and other related projects. Another option is to keep the external support going for as long as necessary.

For safety standards and regulation, the economic situation of the fisherfolk and their preferences, as well as the availability of materials, and general technological levels and infrastructure must be taken into consideration through involvement of their representatives in the process.

Training and education are of paramount importance, and can be applied by nationally and internationally initiated and locally executed courses, seminars and workshops, including itinerant, regionally adapted well-equipped courses for training trainers, SAR activists, extension workers and skippers.

For things to happen, however, fishworkers must exert more political pressure, and develop activities addressed at public opinion.

For this purpose, they must organize locally, nationally, regionally and internationally.

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