

Sloganeering in Seattle

"Hey Hey! Ho Ho! WTO's got to go!" Thus shouted thousands at Seattle where, early this month, trade ministers met at the Third WTO Ministerial Conference to launch new negotiations to further liberalize international trade. The Conference seems to have come unstuck mainly due to disagreements between the developed and developing countries, aided by protests from NGOs, trade unions and farmers' groups.

Hundreds of proposals were mooted, including a few on fisheries subsidies and market access. Northern countries like Australia, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway and the US, and Southern ones like the Philippines and Peru, wanted to eliminate all subsidies that contribute to overcapacity. They argue that these distort trade and prevent the sustainable utilization of fish stocks.

Japan, however, urged for a larger mandate on trade, namely, effective fisheries management, control of flags of convenience, and identifying all factors, including trade-distorting subsidies, that lead to irresponsible fishing practices. It called for a negotiating group for fishery products at the WTO. As the world's largest importer of fish and fish products, Japan defends tariff and non-tariff measures, mainly in the interests of conservation and management, whereas Norway, the largest exporter, hopes to eliminate non-tariff barriers. Although developing countries account for over 40 per cent of the global export market in fish products, few had any proposals for the WTO on market access. This is particularly ironic since, in recent times, several discriminatory tariff and non-tariff measures have blocked their market access.

Few realize that export earnings are a vital part of the incomes of fishing communities in the South. Very often, fish is the only commodity that fishers produce, and the income from selling fish is vital to meet their nutritional and other basic needs. If those who marched in Seattle get their way with labour standards and child labour issues, it will be difficult for many developing countries to export fish.

Export species often fetch a higher price than those sold domestically. This forces traders to compete for supplies for the export market. The fishers thus bag a better price and a better income, despite middlemen. Even in countries of Africa and Asia, where fish is the most important source of animal protein, the domestic demand is largely for smaller pelagics, which have less of a market in the North.

Perhaps the most significant human rights achievement is the removal of poverty, which is crucially contingent upon a decent income. Removing discriminatory tariff and non-tariff barriers could promote greater access to Northern markets, while simultaneously helping build up labour-intensive fish processing facilities at home. That, among other things, could help alleviate poverty in many developing countries.

As for 'child labour', in cultures where a parent trains his/her child in a familiar, traditional profession, the term itself is a misnomer. Child labour is not synonymous with abuse. In many developing countries, opportunities for formal training are limited or unaffordable, and children are often informally trained. In artisanal fisheries, many children work with their parents or relatives. Unless they start early enough, they may never overcome seasickness—an important occupational consideration for a potential, full-time fisher. A culturally sensitive approach to labour standards and child labour issues is needed to improve human rights. Otherwise, any expression of 'concern' would be seen, more or less correctly, as a protectionist bogey to have one's cake and eat it as well, while simultaneously depriving a less privileged person of her humble gruel.