

Comment

Breaking up or breaking down?

The idea of forming a global body representing fishworkers was first discussed at Quebec City, Canada in October 1995. It was recognized by the representatives of fishworker organizations present there that, in a context of globalization, all coastal fishing communities faced common problems, like the degradation of coastal areas and the destruction of fisheries resources by industrial fleets.

Also recognized was the fact that fisheries problems are linked globally. The export of excess fishing capacity from countries of the North to Southern waters, for example, has negative impacts on the livelihoods of fishworkers there. A global forum representing small-scale fishworkers would be in a position to effectively influence governments to change such policies, and to work towards fisheries policies that are environmentally and socially viable.

No one, of course, had any illusions that forming such an organization would be an easy task, given, among other things, the complexities and contradictions within the fisheries sector itself and the differences in the sociocultural and economic realities of fishing communities in the North and South.

It was against this backdrop that fishworkers from 26 countries came together in New Delhi, in December 1997, to form the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF). There was a considerable sense of euphoria, since it was for the first time that national-level fishworker organizations from so many countries had come together to form a global body to represent their interests. The formation of the WFF was seen as a significant development, and was widely welcomed as filling a major vacuum at the international level for artisanal and small-scale fishworkers (see Comment in SAMUDRA Report 19).

There were, therefore, considerable expectations from the Constituent Assembly of the WFF, which was held in Loctudy, France from 2-6 October 2000, to finalize the Constitution of this body. Events, however, took an unexpected turn, as a report in this issue of SAMUDRA Report recounts (see page 3). The meeting, unfortunately, led to the formation of not one, but two, forums. One, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), brings together fishworker organizations mainly from Africa, Asia and Oceania. The other, the WFF, comprises the Americas and parts of Europe.

The split is, no doubt, unfortunate given that the *raison de etre* for the formation of a global organization of fishworkers has not changed since Quebec or Delhi and that challenges facing the artisanal sector continue to require a co-ordinated and forceful response from fishworker organizations. The disappointment is all the greater since both forums have adopted constitutions that are almost identical and stand by similar objectives.

The repercussions of this development need to be considered. At the international level, it will be difficult to justify the existence of two forums, especially when they stand for similar objectives. Even if the differences are over strategy, surely it is possible to draw from the experiences of other international organizations that are known to adopt different strategies to achieve their goals.

When member organizations of both forums are, in many cases, addressing similar issues within their own countries, working to build bridges, rather than sharpening differences and defending territories, is the call of the hour. The struggle against joint-venture agreements by fishworker organizations in Asia, against foreign fishing under fisheries-access agreements in Africa and against increasing corporate control over the fisheries in the Americas, for example, are no different in spirit. If the two forums are to be effective and relevant, they have little option but to find ways to work with each other.