

**INTERNATIONAL COLLECTIVE IN SUPPORT OF
FISHWORKERS (ICSF)
INTERNATIONAL OCEAN INSTITUTE (IOI), INDIA**

**FORGING UNITY:
Coastal Communities and the Indian Ocean's Future**

Conference Organized at IIT Madras
Chennai, India, 9 – 13 October 2001

**Forging Unity:
The Agenda**

Introductory Speech

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and

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Prof Muthukrishnan, Ms. Nita Chowdhury, Prof Rajagopalan and my esteemed delegate friends from around the Indian Ocean region and other parts of the world,

We meet together here in very troubled times. It would not be inappropriate to say that one wrong step by some world leaders can be one big leap into a very bleak future for humankind. These are the times when we are looking for symbols that unite human beings and try to reject those that divide us. It is in this context that the purpose of our small meeting here attains added significance. We are here to talk about communities, about oceans and about the integral need to forge unity. What is common to communities, oceans and the act of forging unity is that there are all very dynamic and highlight togetherness and synergy rather than division and wasteful dissipation of energy. This is the need of the hour, and in our own little way this is what we are gathered here to do.

For both ICSF and IOI the issue of community and oceans have particular significance. The IOI emphasises the central importance of the coastal fishing communities in harvesting and sustaining the world's precious marine environment, and supplying a vital source of food to the world's population. The IOI's compilation on Voices of the Oceans was dedicated to coastal communities who were rightly referred to as an endangered specie. For the ICSF a "community based" approach to development, with the labouring family unit at the centre, is of prime importance. In this context, men, women and children play complementary roles of equal importance, now and into the future. The gender-neutral term "fishworker" coined for the 1984 Rome Conference, stems from this labour oriented and community centred view.

The context of the Indian Ocean or samudra, is also of crucial importance to both the IOI and the ICSF. It is in the Indian Ocean that many of the world's seafaring and fishing traditions have their origins. For millennia seafaring people's from the Indian Ocean region have travelled, settled, struggled, traded, fished, and interacted. From the Swahili Coast to the Saurashtra and Sulawesi Coast. From the Malabar Coast to the Malacca Coast. Lands separated communities. The oceans brought them together and often united them.

As we meet today, the region is beset by problems that are having a negative impact on its coastal communities and marine living resources. While the Indian Ocean is described as one of the few oceans with untapped marine resource potential, it is also without doubt a region with one of the most poorly managed fisheries in the world.

The Indian Ocean is riven with illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing activities. Fishing crew on such vessels and other distant water vessels are subject to the most inhumane and degrading treatment. At another level small scale fishers who find themselves in neighbouring waters are summarily thrown into jail, or worse, shot at and killed.

Meanwhile, coastal resources and the fragile marine environment are being destroyed by non-selective and destructive fishing practices; encroached upon and damaged by unplanned tourist developments, intensive coastal aquaculture, and chemical pollution from land and sea to name but a few of the negative externalities.

To a great extent large-scale fisheries and destructive fishing practices have ruined the coastal and marine commons. Today we need to take our fisheries out of the hands of the relatively few large companies that control them, and hand them over to the coastal communities of small-scale fishers who are dynamically evolving new capabilities.

But let us remember that change of scale and levels of technology alone is not sufficient. It is paramount that redistribution of resources has to be accompanied by a fundamental change in our approach to management. We must not allow the mistakes of large-scale fisheries to be repeated by irresponsible and destructive small-scale fisheries. When we talk about non-destructive, selective

and responsible fishing technologies and practices, and co-management of resources, we are really talking about “reinventing” sustainable fisheries. In one sense going back, searching for our roots to be able to move into a brighter future. This needs new processes and new institutions. It also needs a new vision. We need to chart out how the transformation process should take place, and once achieved, how we can sustain and share our resources equitably.

In such a scenario, the role and responsibilities of both the communities and the nation-states needs to be carefully defined. What role should the State play? Given its jurisdiction over the resources and marine territories, the state has a fundamental responsibility to ensure that access to resources is fair and equitable. The communities on the other hand, as the “beacons of the sea” have a commitment to its sustainable use and protection. The merging and sharing of these mutual concerns is the only way forward.

This means developing and instituting new mechanisms for communities and national authorities to work together. Instituting such changes require clarifying what we mean by “community” and the respective roles and responsibilities of the actors in the community. The role of community organisations: the unions, the producer organisations, and other representative bodies. It also requires a rethink of community structure and the respective roles of the men and women in the community and the family.

Over the next 5 days we will be looking at these and other issues, analysing the problems, and sharing our concerns. We will also be working towards a “shared vision” for forging a future for the coastal communities of the Indian Ocean.

It is a daunting agenda that we have ahead. It is certain that we will not be able to develop a blueprint for action. Nor do we need one. What is more important is that we make the first step in the right direction. That is the big leap in our mindsets that we are challenged to make together.

Your presence here is adequate proof that you are willing to put behind the many social, cultural, religious and nationality differences that separate us and accept this challenge of coming together to forge unity.

Thank you for making this possible.