

# **INTERNATIONAL COLLECTIVE IN SUPPORT OF FISHWORKERS**

## **GLOBAL FISHERIES TRENDS AND THE FUTURE OF FISHWORKERS:**

**Report of the International Conference  
Of Bangkok – Thailand – 22/27 January 1990**

### **FINAL STATEMENT**

#### **Introduction:**

The International Conference on Global Fisheries Trends and the future of Fishworkers organised by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers and hosted by the Kasetsart University, Thailand was officially inaugurated on January 22, 1990. Present at the conference were 106 participants composed of academics, fishworkers, community organizers and some fishery officials. Together they represented 28 countries from South and North America, Africa, Europe, Asia, Australia and the Pacific.

The Conference met at a juncture when the trends in the fisheries sector point to the imminent likelihood of major changes at the international level. These emerging changes arise not only from within the fisheries sector, but are also precipitated by pressure of ongoing development processes in the other sectors of the economy. The cumulative effect of these changes, in the long-run, threatens to destroy irreparably the aquatic cycle which is the basis of life on our planet. In the near future, these changes will affect the sustainability of fisheries, the survival of fishworkers and the nutritional standards of millions in developing countries.

#### **Global trends:**

During the last three decades there has been a steady increase in the world demand for fish. This tendency is predicted to continue and even to accelerate during the coming decades. Consequently, there has been tremendous effort to expand the production of fish to match this rising demand. This effort has taken place at a time when most maritime countries extended their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and thus acquired new rights and responsibilities for the management and development of their resources.

As a result of the new Law of the Sea signed in 1982, industrialised countries have been increasingly concerned with maintaining access of their long distance fleets to the waters off the coast of developing countries as well as with ensuring a steady supply of fishery products from the Third World. The latter was often achieved by enhancing the productive potential of the local fisheries through the provision of international finance, both public and private.

This development was particularly visible in the field of shrimp aquaculture in developing countries and in the rapid increase of fishing agreements between Northern and Southern countries – especially between the European Economic Community and the African countries.

Along side these efforts to enhance fish production, there are increasing threats to the aquatic eco-system due to the developments, which have occurred in the other sectors of the economy. Indiscriminate economic growth strategies have resulted in excessive pressure on natural resources, particularly in coastal regions, and in growing amounts of effluents from industries and modern agriculture which affect the biological productivity of rivers, estuaries and coastal areas. The anarchic development of tourism along coastal areas provides a striking illustration of the detrimental effects, which such profit-oriented strategies have on fisherfolk and fisheries.

These trends have accentuated in the 1980's because of the external debt problem of many developing countries. Indeed, the need to service their debts in the context of a world economic crisis has forced them to plunder their natural resources and to neglect the basic need to large segments of their people in order to earn foreign exchange quickly.

### **Issues in fisheries management and development:**

In the fisheries sector, export-oriented strategies as well as the provision of access rights to industrial fishing fleets, have resulted in enhanced competition and conflicts with local fisheries, particularly with small-scale fishing communities.

These small-scale fishing communities form a particularly vulnerable segment of the fisheries sector due to a variety of reasons. They are by and large powerless against physical intrusions in waters over which they had traditional rights. Poor access to credit, modern inputs and know-how have prevented them from upgrading their fishing technologies. The political and social marginalisation resulting from their low status and lack of organisation continue to reinforce all the above vulnerabilities.

In the case of some countries, the small-scale fishing communities have been able to get their governments to reorient fisheries policies. In other cases, they have succeeded in modernising their artisanal technologies, which has enhanced their ability to compete with industrial fleets.

Unfortunately, this latter modernization process in many countries has been only a short-term solution to the problems of these communities. This is so because fishery resources are already fully or even over-exploited when these measures are adopted. As a consequence, more efficient and costly harvesting technologies do not lead to higher catches; the investments do not pay; fishermen get entrapped in indebtedness and the socio-economic differentiation within traditional fishing communities increases.

Fishworkers from developing countries working on the industrial fishing fleets are also victims of exploitation. While there are participants in an ecologically destructive process of fishing that leads to indiscriminate plunder of the seas and also to the marginalisation of small-scale fishworkers, their own work and service conditions are abysmally poor and they are faced with the constant threat of dismissal. This prevents them from creating effective organisations of their own and in joining hands with other workers in the fishery sector.

### **Fishworker's organizations:**

Collective action of fishworkers is necessary for monitoring fisheries effort, controlling access to the sea and managing and rejuvenating the resources. It is also a prerequisite for performing a large variety of economic, social and political functions. These include cooperative organisation for purchase of inputs and sale of outputs; improving access to credit and insurance; developing appropriate technologies and related skills; and for health and educational measures.

Many experiences reveal that when the state takes the initiative of creating cooperative structures for the supposed benefit of the people, serious problems arise. These initiatives have the effect of both impairing the effectiveness of the economic operations concerned (distribution of modern inputs; credit schemes etc...) and increasing inequalities through discriminatory and corrupt practices often occurring due to political connections. In countries where industrial fisheries get active support from the state, only organized efforts by the small-scale fishworkers can pressure the state to ensure that they also receive equal importance on matters relating to investment and credit.

A new genre of fishworkers' organisations have emerged during the last decade in some countries (e.g. India, Philippines, Chile). These organisations have focused their attention on, and directed their struggle at, ensuring that the state takes steps to ensure that appropriate fishery management measures are enacted and enforced.

However, it must be admitted that in many instances the same organisations are much weaker in their ability to cope with the self-defeating character of certain fishing methods and the anarchic increases in fishing capacity aimed initially at maintaining their incomes.

Therefore a process of education and awareness-building is a basic prerequisite for these fishermen and their new organizations. Equally important in this context is the need to revive and reinstate the encyclopaedic knowledge, which many of these communities possess about the aquatic ecosystem. This cultural knowledge should serve as an important basic for devising ways and means of controlling and reorienting fishing effort and rejuvenating fishery resources.

To extent that fishworker's organisations are effective in collective action, efforts should be made to develop their awareness and their skills with a view to enabling them to manage their fisheries. This requires that the state recognizes fully the role of the fishworkers in the fisheries management and entrusts to their organizations the rights and responsibilities to achieve this objective. Such an approach is a socially desirable alternative to the ongoing tendency of allocating individual rights to fisheries resources in the form of individual rights to fisheries resources in the form of individual transferable quotas and licenses.

Attempts by fishworkers to federate at the national level should be actively promoted. However, where such national federations are multi-sectorial, the small-scale fishworkers are likely to be marginalized within the larger structures. Such inter-sectorial problems should be openly discussed.

### **Aquaculture:**

In Latin America and Asia, coastal aquaculture has witnessed a phenomenal growth during the last decade.

Export-oriented aquaculture, it now appears, has created severe problems, which jeopardise the livelihood of local peasant and fishing communities and in the long term will affect the sustainability of the natural resource base. Evidence from many countries show how this detrimental effect are being produced particularly in the case of shrimp aquaculture.

In the case of shrimp aquaculture in tropical countries we see the destruction of large tracts of estuarian and mangrove areas, which form the natural breeding grounds of many species of aquatic life. Often, shrimp aquaculture is undertaken at the expense of the production of staple foods such as rice and fish species which were formerly locally consumed. After a few years of continuous cultivation, the fields are polluted owing to accumulation of toxic organic and inorganic substances. Since much of the demand for shrimp comes from a handful of industrialised countries the increase in shrimp production on a global scale causes a fall in the world market prices. This quickly affects not only those involved in aquaculture but is also bound to affect negatively the incomes of all small-scale fishworkers involved in capture-shrimp fisheries in developing countries.

However less intensive forms of aquaculture development can provide opportunities for fishworkers communities to manage fish resources in the area where

they live to obtain new sources of income and to enhance food production and employment. These requires that such communities are given exclusive rights to control the water bodies and the surrounding environment.

**Perspectives for the future:**

- To face the future, it is imperative to emphasize the need for a more holistic understanding of the intricate relationship between the aquatic environment and the total biosphere of our planet. As becomes of the sea fishworkers have a special role and responsibility in furthering this understanding.
- To achieve this holistic understanding there is an increasing need for fishworkers and their supporters to relate more closely to other deprived peoples who survival is also affected by environmental damage which as in the case of fisheries, is hastened by development processes that pay little heed to the rhythms of nature.
- These new alliances to protect the environment should not detract fishworkers either from the demand within the fisheries sector or from the autonomous functioning of their organisations.
- Sustainability of development requires that we move from exploitative to nurturing relationships with nature. Nurture and sustenance have always been the role of women in fishing communities. This role has often resulted in them being marginalised in their own communities. Only their active participation in the economy and a recognition of its centrality, will ensure that such new relationships with nature emerge.