

Preface

In Asia, fisheries are important from a social, economic and cultural perspective, and millions of people in the region depend on inland, coastal and marine fisheries for a living. The vast majority of them are small-scale and artisanal fishers and fishworkers.

Today, there is a growing recognition among governments and international and regional institutions about the important contribution of small-scale fisheries to local and national economies, and to livelihoods, poverty alleviation and food security. At the same time, there is a focus on exploring how the contribution of the sector can be secured and enhanced.

The International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) has long emphasized the pre-eminence of artisanal and small-scale fisheries from an economic, social, cultural and ecological perspective. Safeguarding the rights of communities to access fisheries resources and to lands traditionally inhabited and used by them, has also been seen as crucially important, in a context where these rights are being threatened in various ways, due to developments both within and outside the fisheries sector. It has been stressed that recognizing rights of communities to resources, within the framework of sustainable utilization of living natural resources, is necessary if fishing communities are to progressively share the responsibility for managing coastal and fisheries resources.

It was against this background that ICSF organized a workshop and symposium at Siem Reap, Cambodia, on “Asserting Rights, Defining Responsibilities: Perspectives from Small-scale Fishing Communities on Coastal and Fisheries Management in Asia”. In preparation for the meeting, case studies were undertaken in six countries—Bangladesh, Cambodia,

India, Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand—focusing on rights and responsibilities of fishing communities. Among other things, the studies aimed to document and explore the understanding that fishing communities have about their rights to fisheries and coastal resources, as well as the obligations and responsibilities associated with these rights, and to document and discuss their initiatives to assert these rights and fulfill their responsibilities. These studies, which formed the basis for discussions at the Workshop and Symposium, are being published separately, as individual case studies.

The proceedings of the Workshop and Symposium provide a bottom-up perspective on how rights are understood, and what rights are seen as important by small-scale fishing communities, if they are to fulfill their responsibilities for managing resources in a sustainable and equitable manner.

The deliberations and debates at the Workshop and Symposium are particularly relevant at a time when rights-based approaches to fisheries management, with an emphasis on property rights, are being mooted as the way forward to achieve sustainable fisheries. The consensus from the Workshop was unequivocal: the transfer of the sea from a common-pool resource into private ownership will be seen by the region’s small-scale fishers and fishing communities as a violation of their rights.

It is hoped that these proceedings, and the Statement from the Workshop will be found useful by those engaged in policymaking and advocacy in support of small-scale fisheries, as well as researchers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), fishworker organizations, and multilateral and regional organizations. ³