

Now Let's Take It Forward

In the light of the discussions at the Bangkok meet on small-scale fisheries, it is time to work towards the future of the sector worldwide

Undeniably, the Civil Society Statement adopted at Bangkok on 13 October 2008 by the Civil Society Preparatory Workshop, prior to the Global Conference on Small-scale Fisheries (4SSF), organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Department of Fisheries, Thailand, and subsequently presented to it, was a singularly significant achievement. It marked the beginning of a new-found unity and common purpose of organizations active in small-scale fisheries across the world, beyond just the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP). While not perfect, the

harmful industrial aquaculture and undemocratic ecolabelling schemes.

The Statement will find resonance in all fishing communities, whether in developing countries or in industrialized, so-called 'developed' countries. While a new liberalism flourishes in these developed countries, their indigenous fishing communities are being displaced and marginalized to make way for luxurious corporate extravagance.

Ultimately, the belief that access to small-scale fisheries is a basic human right and not a tradeable or transferable economic commodity, holds steadfast in the Statement—as it did in the main 4SSF Conference. That this view never came under attack or challenge during the 4SSF Conference is significant. It is, therefore, self-evident that the perspectives argued in the Statement should have considerable influence in shaping the development of global and national policy frameworks for small-scale fisheries. Or will it?

There can be no illusion that the unity found in the Civil Society Statement is by no means complete or binding on absentee groups. Many who share the vision argued in the Statement stand outside only due to their physical absence or lack of knowledge thereof. Opportunities must be created to bring them under the banner of the Statement without diluting its central thrust. The Statement must be used to garner greater support in fishing communities across the world.

Policy positions

There can be no illusion too that FAO and national government policies will miraculously conform to the views argued in the Statement. Arriving at

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Statement lays the basis for a global understanding of 'rights-based fishing'. It is significant to highlight that the Statement had its origins in the contributions made by fishing communities at various forums organized in direct preparation for the Bangkok workshop.

The Statement traverses pre- and post-harvest processes, and intersects with various other themes critical to the protection of small-scale fisheries. Amongst these are value addition, gender equity, environmental protection, and the protection of the rights of local and indigenous communities. Activities and practices that have negative impacts on these processes are also addressed—like

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global policy positions (as mediated by bodies like the United Nations and FAO) are complex and intricate processes. Implementing these is even more challenging. Changing or developing national fishery policies are just as complicated. Competing national interests and the strong power that commercial conglomerates hold on these, often lead to the voices of small-scale fishing communities being confined to the fringes. Influential too is the carrot of easy money that international fishing companies offer developing nations' governments (particularly in Africa) to access their natural marine resources at the expense of the local small-scale fisheries. This is done in the misplaced belief that these monies will bring relief to poverty-stricken nations. Creative ways will have to be explored to address this matter.

The 4SSF Conference was silent about how the views expressed at Bangkok will be taken forward. How can a 'human-rights-based fishery' be achieved in real terms? What practical steps will be taken to 'walk the talk' of 4SSF? What is the future of 4SSF?

For 4SSF to be branded as a success, the following three areas will have to be addressed in the coming period.

National-level organization

It is imperative that small-scale fisheries maintain a high level of organization at local and national levels. Meeting local needs will not emerge from the mere adoption of an international 'consensus statement'. This must be supplemented by engaging in hard and active struggles on the ground on an ongoing basis. Communities must use every available organizing tool to articulate their demands and voice their aspirations. Fishing communities must find a space in the minds of influential policymakers. This is only achieved by being upfront, vocal and relevant.

Importantly, these activities must be inclusive and involve all stakeholders in small-scale fisheries who share the vision described in the Statement. But, critically, this work must also be done in a manner that empowers poorly literate and marginalized fishing communities to assert their rights as human

beings. The traditionally acquired knowledge of fisher people must be institutionalized and inserted into the general epistemic science worldwide. Traditional knowledge is relevant and will contribute to the sustainability of natural resource management.

Moreover, such organization must actively include women and other marginalized groups in the fishing or coastal community so that they can claim and protect their rightful places and equitable involvement in the sector. In many communities, the role of women has proven to be a powerful

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one. It both corrects their historical marginalization and the crucial role that they play in sustaining the social fabric of communities. This position must be alleviated and institutionalized.

Such national-level mobilization will contribute greatly to ensuring that the democratic voices of small-scale fishers become part of the national political landscape. This, in turn, will help to influence national policy.

International solidarity

It is necessary that we must reach international solidarity as much as we can. Such solidarity must translate into a global action plan to achieve the effect of the views expressed at the 4SSF meet.

Specific local challenges do not necessarily equate into global challenges. But it is clear that local issues can also be globalized into universal demands. Struggles at the national level can find their roots in a global ideological position. The adage of "acting locally while thinking globally" remains relevant. While some of the processes at the 4SSF meet were disempowering, WFFP, nevertheless, succeeded in making sure that the collective civil society voice was heard. The power of civil society must not be underestimated.



Guinean fishermen setting a gillnet while rowing. The concerns of small-scale fisheries cannot be forever relegated to the sidelines of the global agenda

The challenge is to extend this international solidarity. The more voices that can be rallied to support this position, the stronger will be the collective global voice of small-scale fishers. But critical is the need for an action plan that can drive this voice, especially now that we are no longer in the same physical space that 4SSF provided. What is needed now is the outline of such a global action plan. This must target all the existing international institutions as they currently exist.

FAO co-operation

Given that FAO was the principal organizer of the 4SSF Conference, it is necessary that it plays an active role to make sure that the views expressed at Bangkok are taken forward. It would be highly immoral for it to not think beyond Bangkok.

FAO has the power of influencing the agenda and work of its Committee on Fisheries (COFI). Civil society organizations must make sure that FAO stands tall to the task of placing the deliberations of the Bangkok meet on the working agenda of COFI. Hopefully,

FAO will do so by itself. Were that not to happen, the spirit of Bangkok would have been attained in vain.

Importantly also, the concerns of small-scale fisheries must be placed on the mainstream agenda of the United Nations. They cannot be forever relegated to the sidelines of the global agenda.

In conclusion, we should state that the tasks and challenges ahead are not easy. The Bangkok meet provided an opportunity for civil society to come together to express its views uniformly—and it did so powerfully. It also provided a platform for FAO to listen to, and intersect with, these views.

Now let's take it forward. **3**

For more



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World Forum of Fisher Peoples

sites.google.com/site/smallscalefisheries/

Civil Society Preparatory Workshop