Small-scale Fisheries Upfront

The recent meet of the Committee on Fisheries of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations had a special focus on small-scale fisheries.

Small-scale fisheries was pretty much part of the flavour of the 29th Session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI 29) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Indicative of this was the fact that States, while reporting on the progress made in the implementation of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF) and related instruments, had ranked addressing the interests of small-scale fisheries in marine and inland fisheries management plans quite high on their priority list. From being ranked fifth in 2005, and fourth in 2007 and 2009, it was ranked second. Regional fisheries bodies also reported on accommodating the interests of small-scale fishers.

A sizeable delegation of about 25 persons representing small-scale fishworker and support organizations, including the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF), the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) and the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty (IPC), were present at COFI. At stake for them was the adoption of an international instrument on small-scale fisheries by COFI, a demand that has been pending since the 2008 FAO conference on small-scale fisheries in Bangkok, Thailand, titled “Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries: Bringing Together Responsible Fisheries and Social Development.”

To seek greater support for, and debate on the content and scope of, such an instrument, WFFP, WFF, ICSF and IPC organized a lively side event during lunchtime on 3 February (see box), prior to the discussion on Agenda Item 10 on small-scale fisheries.

In the end, civil society efforts met with qualified success. During discussions on Agenda Item 10, COFI agreed that, in view of the important role played by small-scale fisheries, FAO should continue to give priority to the subsector and ensure adequate visibility for it, particularly in relevant international forums that deal directly or indirectly with these fisheries. COFI also approved the development of a new international instrument on small-scale fisheries to complement the CCRF, drawing on relevant existing instruments.

Countries’ support

The proposal to develop a new instrument was supported by over 20 countries, including Brazil, Norway, Thailand, South Africa, Morocco, Namibia, Russia, Chile, Mauritania, Indonesia, Oman, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Mexico, the United States (US), Angola, Algeria, Mauritius, Cameroon and Ivory Coast. Two members—Bangladesh and Maldives—expressed reservations about such an instrument. There was also support from some members for the setting up of a subcommittee on small-scale fisheries. Several developing countries also stressed the

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The 29th session of COFI approved the development of a new international instrument on small-scale fisheries to complement the CCRF.
Small meet, large attendance

The Side Event organized jointly by WFF, WFFP, ICSF and IPC titled “What COFI Should Do: Agenda Item 10 on Small-scale Fisheries”, was well attended, to say the least. A panel comprising WFFP, WFF and ICSF presented civil society perspectives on the action that COFI needs to take to secure small-scale fisheries. They made a strong case for an international instrument with a rights-based approach, which incorporates economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights, and which has a specific focus on women. The panel also included Rolf Willmann of the FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Department, who presented the proposal prepared by the FAO for a Global Assistance Programme for Small-scale Fisheries, for comments and feedback.

The discussion was opened for debate soon after. Taking part in the discussion were several national delegations, including from India, Mauritania, Japan, the EU, Brazil, Norway, Spain, the US and Chile. Present too were representatives from the African Union, the World Bank and several multilateral and intergovernmental organizations, and fishworkers’ and fishing industry representatives.

Among most of the developing countries that attended, there was consensus that a global programme of work guided by an international instrument geared towards poverty alleviation and food security would be a boon for small-scale fisheries development in their countries.

Chile noted that the sector was highly diverse and complex, and that such an initiative would require defining small-scale fisheries more clearly.

Mexico, stressing the importance of participatory management, training, organization and alternative jobs, said that there is need to extend support for realizing the human rights of small-scale fishers. Indigenous people should have priority to fishery resources, it noted. It supported an international instrument, especially an IPOA, linked to a national plan for assisting small-scale fisheries.

India said that small-scale fisheries was the most important agenda item for COFI 29. It, however, expressed concern that no progress had been made in taking forward the suggestion made during COFI 28 on the setting up of a subcommittee as an exclusive platform for small-scale fisheries. On the international instrument, India cautioned that should COFI decide to develop it, the scope should be carefully developed so that it does not become a barrier to trade. India also noted that it did not want an overemphasis on human rights in any such instrument as such commitments already existed in the constitutions of most countries.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, supporting a subcommittee on small-scale fisheries, noted that addressing the problems of small-scale fisheries is not merely a technical exercise.

Maldives said that, keeping in mind its experience with a third-party ecolabelling certification, it is uneasy about an international instrument. Such an instrument might lead to costs of production going up. It, therefore, supported India’s proposal to have a subcommittee on small-scale fisheries.

Bangladesh also favoured a subcommittee on small-scale fisheries.

New Zealand said a focus on human rights would considerably extend the mandate of COFI; the focus should be on fisheries issues, it stressed. Assistance to small-scale fisheries should be provided to generate wealth and remove people from poverty. For this, coherent partnerships, avoiding duplication of work between donors, are needed. New Zealand further pointed to the several instruments that already exist, which can be used to support small-scale fisheries. If anything at all, it favoured a chapter dedicated to small-scale fisheries in the CCRF.

Costa Rica also opined that humanRights issues were beyond the mandate of COFI. El Salvador, speaking on behalf of seven Central American countries, said it is important to support the human rights of those
involved in small-scale fisheries, as also mentioned in the declaration from the regional consultative workshops organized by FAO. It called for regional action plans on small-scale fisheries, as well as specific programmes, including for inland fisheries. It also drew attention to issues of indigenous peoples. The need for a regional approach, as through the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA), was reiterated by Venezuela.

The US wanted greater attention to be paid to small-scale fisheries, while ensuring greater clarity on what this constitutes. The mere size of fishing vessels as a criterion, for example, is not enough. The proposed instrument should focus on developing countries, it stressed, with due attention paid to social, economic, cultural and rights-based themes. Planning and management of risks and disasters, and plans to cope with climate change to reduce vulnerability of small-scale fisheries to such risks, is important. The US supported an IPOA or guidelines as a preferred way forward, rather than opening up the CCRF. The IPOA or guidelines can be an associated document to the CCRF, the US proposed.

The European Union (EU) said though small-scale fisheries is an important subsector requiring systematic attention, it was not convinced that a new international instrument is needed. Rather, effective implementation of existing instruments, such as the CCRF, is important. However, the EU said it will not block any emerging consensus to develop an international instrument on small-scale fisheries for developing countries.

Japan recognized the importance of small-scale fisheries in both developed and developing countries and the fact that they are often socially disadvantaged. Given the diverse realities facing the sector, it called for a case-by-case response to deal with issues facing the subsector. Small-scale fisheries, it further noted, also has negative impacts on fisheries resources. There is need for integrating small-scale fisheries into international fisheries management systems to ensure policy coherence, and to promote bottom-up approaches like participatory co-management.

Canada stressed the importance of an ecosystem and a value-chain approach to fisheries, and of managing small-scale fisheries as part of an overall approach. It also pointed to the need for engaging all stakeholders in the management process.

The civil society statement, following the interventions by States, was read out by Zoila Bustamente, the President of the Chilean artisanal fishworker organization, CONAPACH, on behalf of WFFP, WFF, ICSF and IPC.

The statement noted that over 20 countries had supported an international instrument on small-scale fisheries to complement the CCRF. Such an instrument should guide regional and national plans of action. It should be global in scope and should recognize the social, economic, cultural, civil and political rights of small-scale, artisanal and indigenous fishing communities.

Such an instrument, as well as a global programme of assistance for small-scale fisheries, should be developed and implemented in consultation with civil society. This would go a long way in ensuring a better and more dignified future for small-scale fishing communities, the statement concluded.

There was concern, particularly among small-scale and artisanal fishworker and indigenous peoples’ groups from Europe and Canada, that the focus would be mainly on developing countries, in keeping with the interventions by the EU and the US. Civil society groups agreed, however, to continue advocating for an instrument that is global in scope, focusing also on issues facing small-scale and artisanal fishing communities as well as indigenous fishing communities in countries of the North.