

An important milestone

An international seminar on responsible fishing, held in Ceará, Brazil, provoked informed debate

In the early 1900s, artisanal fishermen in Brazil were enlisted in the navy, against their will, and organized into fishermen's colonies. Until the 1950s, they remained under military domination and were content with some social benefits such as health services and schools for children. This dependency failed to create among the fishermen any desire to organize themselves and make their voices heard. Even as control of the fishermen's colonies was turned over to civilian governments, there was no significant movement to organize.

Only in the 1970s were the first initiatives undertaken to develop civic responsibility by the Catholic Church under the Pastoral Fishermen's Councils. Many young fishermen participated in seminars and courses, and learned about their rights. This was followed in the next decade by the constitution of the National Fishermen's Movement (MONAPE) and the Fishermen's Movement of Ceará (MOPECE).

Despite this awakening, fishermen were hardly taken as serious partners when the time came to discuss fisheries regulations. They were mostly ignored by fisheries authorities and State governments. This started to change due to the threat from illegal fishing by motorboats equipped with diving equipment which invaded areas of artisanal fishermen and decimated lobster stocks. After armed conflicts and murders at sea were ignored by fisheries authorities, the conflicts provoked the fishermen into action such as the protest trip of the S.O.S Sobrevivencia in 1993 (see SAMUDRA No. 15, July 1997).

Finally, the Fisheries Committee of the State of Ceará was created with a significant representation of fishermen.

For the first time, their representatives sat at the same table with representatives of the fishing industry, fisheries administrators and scientists.

It was against this background that the International Seminar on Responsible Fishing took place from 5 to 7 September 1997 in Praia das Fontes in the State of Ceará with the collaboration of the International Collective in support of Fishworkers (ICSF). It proved to be an important milestone towards full participation of artisanal fisherfolk in fisheries management.

For the first time, artisanal fishermen from over 20 communities participated in debates with representatives of fisheries authorities, government agencies, universities, technicians, industries and fleet owners, and presented their points of view. The interest of these participants demonstrated that fishermen are finally being accepted as responsible partners in fisheries management and development.

The seminar was an initiative of the Fishermen's Forum, a loose organization of artisanal fishermen, and the NGO, Instituto Terramar, and was made possible by a grant from Jcsv. The presence of one senator, two deputies of the House of Representatives, several State legislators and five mayors of coastal cities was important, as it demonstrated that, finally, politicians are waking up to the fact that fishing is an important industry and that the plight of the over 15,000 fishermen in the State has to be taken seriously.

Opening session

At the opening session on Friday, 5 September, the 240 delegates filled the main convention hall of the venue. The state of world fisheries and the FAO Code

of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries was dealt with by Antonio Diegues from the University of Sao Paulo and an ICSF member.

In clear and concise language, he explained the serious crisis facing the world's fisheries and the irresponsibility of the fisheries sector and governments which had allowed fishing effort to increase beyond sustainability, and permitted predatory fishing and conflicts at sea to go unchecked, with artisanal fishermen suffering the consequences. He cited the example of Brazil's fisheries management where decisions were generally taken by a restricted group of scientists and fishing industries. The FAO Code of Conduct stresses the need to include small-scale fishermen in the decision-making process.

Chandrika Sharma of ICSF presented the scope of activities of ICSF. A short presentation about coastal management vividly showed that coastal areas in different parts of the world suffer the same pressures from unsustainable development of industry and tourism. Chandrika also talked of the strength of the fishermen's movement in India which has successfully battled joint venture licensing agreements entered into by their government, which could have caused irreparable damage to small-scale fishers in India.

Nathanael Valle from the Josue Castro Centre in Recife, Pernambuco, discussed the state of fisheries in Brazil and showed how little the Brazilian government has implemented Agenda 21 of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

Lively debates followed each speakers presentation. The round-table discussion, titled 'Mayors of Coastal Cities and the Fisheries Crisis in Cear  tested three mayors, elected in 1996, on their resolve to direct priorities to fishing development.

The lack of interest of elected public officials at federal, State and municipal levels has been one of the main concerns of the Fishermen's Forum.

The discussion showed, however, that there is hope that the state of affairs is changing. All three mayors have concrete objectives for fisheries development and are joining forces with the Federal University's fisheries Department for the implementation of a development plan with the active involvement of fishing communities.

Jose Augusto Negreiro Aragao from IBAMA (Brazilian Institute for Environment) and Geovane Milton de Oliveira from CEPENE (Fisheries Research Institute of the Northeast) presented the Management Plan for Lobster Fisheries.

They paid special tribute to artisanal fishermen who, through protests and demonstrations, had finally managed to raise awareness within the fisheries sector to look for means to control predatory fishing. The Lobster Management Plan is the first serious attempt to bring some order to the chaos in fisheries in the State of Ceará.

Concluding the seminar's first working day was the presentation by the foremost expert on lobster fisheries in Brazil, Aduino Fonteles Filho of the Ocean Laboratory of the Federal University of Ceará. His conclusion was that responsible fishing is synonymous with rational fishing, while 'underfishing' means incompetence, and overfishing, lack of social responsibility.

Research has to include a diagnosis of the socioeconomic conditions in artisanal fishing communities. Fisheries management and sustainable development of the coastal zone have to be integrated processes, with the participation of all the actors, especially the small-scale fishers, who constitute the majority of fishermen in Brazil.

With the debate moving away from academic and technical subjects towards everyday fisheries problems and community involvement, the fisherfolk took a more active role in the discussions. The second day opened with a round-table discussion and debate on environmental education, with speakers from IBAMA, Instituto Terramar and the Inland Waters Management Department.

The speakers presented their experiences in different coastal and inland water communities. The debate revealed that fishermen and women attach great importance to educational work with adults and children, both in formal and informal education. The high level of adult illiteracy—almost 80 per cent in most communities—is a serious handicap and has to be addressed by the school authorities of coastal communities and fisheries authorities through NGOs working on adult education.

Maureen Larkin from the Cooper Institute, SL Edwards Islands, Canada and Maria Christina Maneschy of the

Federal University of Belem shared the table with three women from local communities who had previously participated in workshops on women in fisheries. Maureen presented some information on ICSF's work with women in fisheries and the work of her institute with women of fishing communities in Canada.

Maria Christina talked about her experiences. The debate centred around the impact of irresponsible fishing on women and on the family, as well as the involvement of women in community affairs and the fishermen's movement.

One debate centred on the real problems of fisheries management which, in the past, had mostly ignored the opinions and anxieties of the fishing communities. The members at the round table represented fisheries authorities, NGOs, fishermen's colonies and three fishing communities.

They traced the problems of predatory fishing of lobster to the total lack of interest on the part of authorities to enforce existing regulations. This has led to serious overfishing and conflicts between artisanal fishermen and the industry-financed illegal fishing fleet. They recounted the murder of fishermen at sea in the late 1980s, the reaction of fishermen and their actions of protest and the pressures on the (ir)responsible public organs.

It became very clear that fisheries management is at a turning point and that only community-based conservation programmes will be able to reverse the decline of lobster and fish catches, and guarantee the success of aquaculture projects in inland waters. In order to ensure the full participation of the fishing communities in the seminar, the organizing committee had come up with a new and successful formula.

Preparatory seminars

In the two months before the seminar, preparatory seminars were held in five coastal and one inland water communities. The themes of the seminar were debated in the communities with the participation of fishermen, women and young adults, moderated by volunteers from IBAMA and Instituto Terramar.

The afternoon sessions at the international seminar opened with two videos which had been taken during the preparatory seminars to show the audience the methodology used and to bring them closer to the community problems. During the next two sessions, on Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning, the community representatives, with a mix of fishermen, community leaders, women and young adults, presented the results of the preparatory seminars and their conclusions. For many, it was the first time they were presenting their ideas before an audience of over 200 specialists, academics and fisheries students.

The proposals presented by the groups showed the strong commitment to participate in the reversal of the chaotic situation in Ceará's fisheries, and demonstrated also the resolve to participate as active partners in fisheries management. There was heavy criticism of fisheries authorities for the inefficiency, corruption and lack of means of law enforcement. The political interference in administration of fishery policies and regulations was pointed out as a serious problem that prevents continuity in fishery conservation programmes.

But the speakers were fair enough to point out their own irresponsibility, resulting from ignorance and the incentives given by lobster buyers in

landing an ever-increasing amount of juveniles. Many of the proposals presented by the communities were incorporated into the final document of the conference.

The groups also showed the commitment to work for greater unity between fishermen and their communities in order to form a strong fishermen's movement which represents small-scale fishermen and to guarantee their participation in fisheries management and fisheries development.

At the closing session on Sunday morning, the Senator Lucio Alcantara from the State of Ceará talked of the law that is being discussed in Congress and which will punish predatory fishing and other environmental crimes with heavy fines and jail sentences.

The Senator, who defended the new law proposed by the executive in 1991 in the Senate, warned of strong pressure from the CNI (National Federation of Industries) against the approval of the law in the lower Chamber of Congress (House of Representatives) and called on the fishing sector to start lobbying members of Congress.

Partnership needed

He agreed with the fishermen's position that the serious problems of fisheries in Ceará and Brazil have to be tackled

through a partnership of all segments involved in fishing.

Three fisheries delegates from Mozambique, who participated in the seminar, provided some interesting insights into fisheries management in their country. The management measures appeared much more advanced, and implemented with full community participation.

The organizing committee presented the Beberibe Declaration on Responsible Fisheries for approval by the delegates of the conference. The seminar ended with the unanimous approval of the document.

When the delegates from the fishing communities, over 100, travelled back to their villages, some of them 500 km away, there seemed to be some certainty that a new era had begun and that this first participation in the democratic process will contribute to a more sustainable fishery, *se Deus quiser* (if God permits). 🙏

This report has been prepared by the Instituto Terramar de Pesquisa e Assessoria a Pesca Artesanal, Ceará, Brazil