

Margarita and Ka Onie

## Farewell

**In the deaths of Margarita Lizarraga and Sofranjo Balagtas, small-scale and artisanal fishermen have lost two dedicated friends**

**I**t was in June 1994 that we met Margarita Lizarraga for the first time. She was sent by the Assistant Director General of Fisheries of FAO to take part in the ICSF Conference *Struggle of Fishworkers: New Concerns for Support*, which was held to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Rome Conference.

Her mission was to brief fishworker organizations about FAO's Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and to seek their participation in the formulation process of the Code. She could convince the participants about FAO's intention to make the formulation of the Code as transparent a process as possible.

Margarita's visit marked an important watershed in the relation of FAO with the artisanal and small-scale fishworker organizations. For the first time, their support was formally sought for an FAO process. The sincerity with which Margarita approached her mission was widely appreciated, and this made ICSF decide to associate seriously with the process. Not only did ICSF associate with the process, it also took along fishworker organizations from countries like the Philippines, Chile and India on its delegation to the Code formulation consultation.

To our surprise, we found the approach of FAO's Fisheries Department to NGO participation in the Code process very positive. NGOs could make written submissions and interventions,

irrespective of their official status with FAO. This was in marked contrast to its approach to NGO participation during the 1984 FAO World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development. The comments of NGOs on various articles of the Code were circulated among the delegates, and several of their points were incorporated into the Code.

Margarita, who was the Secretary of the Code sessions, became the nodal point for relations with the NGOs. ICSF was quite impressed with her commitment to the Code. So committed was she to the Code process that we used to refer to her as the 'Mother of the Code'.

The most crucial impetus to the Code process came from the Mexican government through the Conference on Responsible Fishing that it organized before the Earth Summit, in Cancun, in May 1992, where the concept of responsible defined for fisheries was the first time.

The Cancun Declaration called on FAO to draft an international Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing. Margarita played an important role in the Mexican initiative and her joining the FAO indeed gave a fillip to the whole process.

Perhaps the last international meeting that Margarita attended before she fell ill was the South Asian Workshop and Symposium on Fisheries and Coastal Area Management, organized by ICSF in Chennai in September-October 1996. She inaugurated the Symposium and gave the

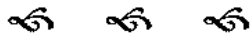
keynote address. Once again, she spoke about the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and asked for the participation of fishworker organizations in its implementation.

**I**t is indeed surprising how much difference a single person with a truly human touch and a missionary zeal can make to a process, especially when that process is plagued by all kinds of differences and uncertainties because of the historical conflicts between coastal States and distant-water fishing nations.

Margarita's principal contribution to the Code process was essentially in providing this human touch. Margarita was an ardent supporter of the artisanal and small-scale sector, and always had the Interests of developing countries at heart. She played an active role in various Mexican delegations, as the spokesperson for the Group of 77.

Before joining the FAO, as a member of the Mexican delegation to FAO, she was known for her sympathies for the artisanal and small-scale fisheries sector.

The sad and sudden demise of Margarita is certainly a great misfortune. We share with her family and colleagues a deep sense of loss.



A diminutive man, Sofranio Balagtas was affectionately called Ka One. He was an active fisherman who rose from the most humble background to challenge the might of the State. In the early 1980s, when the country was reeling under the martial law regime of President Ferdinand Marcos, Ka Onie spearheaded a heroic struggle against the privatization of Laguna de Bay, the largest brackish water lagoon in the Philippines, for the culture of milkfish. In the struggle, many fishermen were killed.

Ka Onie went to Rome in 1984 for the historic International Conference of

Fishworkers and their Supporters. At that time, the Philippines had no national fishworker organizations, and Ka Onie was only familiar with Laguna de Bay.

He took the initiative to bring together several provincial fishworkers' associations at the national level and was the leading light behind the formation of BIGKIS-LAKAS Pilipinas. By the time the tenth anniversary of the Rome conference was celebrated in Cebu, BIGKIS-LAKAS Pilipinas was already a force to reckon with.

Once hunted down by the Marcos regime, this simple fisherman went on to become the fisheries adviser to President Ramos of the Philippines. Ka Onie was highly respected for his ideas and for his integrity. Representing the artisanal and small-scale fishworkers of the Philippines, he also participated in one of the sessions of the FAO's Code of Conduct consultations.

In Ka Onie's passing, the fishworkers' movement has lost a true comrade. We join BIGKIS-LAKAS Pilipinas and CALARIZ in sharing our condolences with the bereaving family.

Both Margarita and Ka Onie were highly motivated individuals, whose work tremendously improved the lot of artisanal and small-scale fishing communities in different parts of the world. One worked from 'above', the other worked from 'below'. Both worked selflessly. They have left us more than mere memories.

This obituary notice was written by Sebastian Mathew, Executive Secretary, ICSF