

# What, food security sans fisheries?

**At the 21st session of the FAO Committee on World Food Security in Rome, ICSF commented on the Draft Policy and Plan of Action**

**W**e would like to draw the attention of the Committee on World Food Security to the very important contribution that fisheries make to food security, particularly in countries of the South, and the central role of artisanal fishworkers and their communities in ensuring the sustainability of fishery resources. We feel that the Draft Policy Statement and Plan of Action do not adequately address these issues.

FAO has estimated that 120 million people are economically dependent on fisheries. In many of the poorest communities of the world, fish is a crucial source of low-cost protein, providing essential micro-nutrients as well as income. The Draft Policy Statement and Plan of Action needs to reflect this important contribution of fisheries to food security as well as the central role of fishworkers as resource managers.

In particular, we would urge the Committee to review the section 'Food from Forests and Fisheries', under Commitment 4, especially paragraphs 59 and 60. We feel that the following points need to be given more serious consideration:

At the outset, we would like to observe that fisheries, like forestry, provide more than just food products. Fisheries can make an important contribution to food security in at least three distinct areas: livelihoods; employment and income; and nutrition. Fisheries resources are of crucial social, economic and nutritional importance in many countries, particularly Small Island Developing States and in countries with land of low agricultural potential. Fisheries can also provide an important buffer to communities in drought-prone areas (for

example, the sub-Saharan region), and those areas subject to other natural or man-made disasters.

The industrial development of fishing has had a major negative impact on the contribution of fisheries to food security. "The decade of the 1990s has witnessed a levelling off of fisheries production for direct human consumption.

This is due, in no small part, to overfishing and habitat destruction caused by overinvestment in industrial fishing, and the wide use of non-selective and environmentally unsafe fishing gears and practices. Fisheries can provide a naturally renewable resource if appropriate management practices and fishing methods and techniques are applied.

The destruction of the fishery habitat by pollution (siltation, agricultural run-off, industrialization, etc.) coastal development (construction, industry, reclamation, etc.) and destructive fishing practices threaten fishery production in many areas. Responsible habitat management can make a significant contribution to stabilizing and increasing fish production. Thus it is increasingly important to integrate fisheries into coastal area management.

#### **Central issues**

Contrary to the statement in paragraph 60, aquaculture is not the only way that current per capita fish supplies can be maintained or increased. More importantly, we have to address the central issues of overfishing and habitat destruction, as well as post-harvest losses and fish trading practices. It should also be noted that intensive aquaculture has been the cause of extensive environmental degradation in coastal areas and the

destruction of vast tracts of productive and scarce agricultural land in many countries.

**I**t has been widely recognized that one of the main causes of overfishing has been the open-access nature of fishing grounds. Appropriate property regimes need to be established and enforced, and we are concerned that the importances of neither agrarian nor aquarian reforms are highlighted in the Draft Action Plan. The allocation of user rights is a necessary step to reduce excess capacity, which has been one of the main factors responsible for overfishing.

In the case of artisanal fisheries, which are one of the most important sources of food and livelihoods in many of the lowest income and most food-deficit countries, there is a pressing need to establish and extend exclusive fishing zones to protect artisanal fishers from unequal competition. The special importance of artisanal fisheries is highlighted in the FAO's Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, and we strongly disagree that sustainability will be achieved by limiting the access of artisanal fisheries.

Over 30 per cent of the global fish catch' is reduced to fish-meal and oil for animal feeds and other products. The potential contribution of the large quantities of small pelagic fish species to global food security will only be realized if these

wasteful industrial processes are curbed and the fish redirected for direct human consumption. This is an area where research efforts need to be considerably intensified.

As much of 30 per cent of the global fish catch is wasted due to post-harvest losses. Improvement in post-harvest fish handling and processing, therefore, has the potential to greatly enhance food ' supplies,

FAO have estimated that as much as 27 million tonnes (equal to some 30 per cent of the global catch) is discarded each year I in commercial fisheries. Given that much of this discarded fish is immature, such practices can have a devastating effect on fish stocks and biodiversity,

It is estimated that some 40 per cent of the global fish catch enters the international; fish trade. There is also a highly skewed distribution of consumption patterns between the North and South, which often leads to fish which is critical for local food security moving into international markets.

#### **Critical to health**

Responsible fish trading practices which do not adversely affect the nutritional rights and food security of people for whom fishery products are critical to health and well-being need to be established and enforced.

Thus, in our view, the sustainable contribution of fisheries to food security can be enhanced if the global community commits itself to the following actions:

- counter the threats of industrial fisheries and the use of non-selective and environmentally damaging fishing gears and practices;
- integrate fisheries into coastal area management;
- develop aquaculture in ways which do not undermine other productive activities in the coastal
- recognize the importance of artisanal fisheries and territorial use rights;
- reduce post-harvest losses and channel more fish into direct human consumption; and
- enforce responsible trading practices.

This intervention at the Rome meeting of the FAO Committee on Food Security on 29 January 1996 was made by Sebastian Mathew on behalf of ICSF.