

Fisheries management

The First World's big bluff

All the rhetoric about efficient global fisheries management hides the fact that the needs of the developing world are neglected

It is now widely recognized that fish stocks all over the world are already overexploited. But it is in the developing nations, whose burgeoning human populations most need food, that the issue is most extreme. It is here that all trophic levels are being targeted, to the extent that too many local people are reduced to receiving remnant biomass for their immediate sustenance.

Consider these indicators I have myself seen: a handful of tiny fish—the entire day's catch—for an artisanal fishing family, ultra-fine mesh nets heaped on the docks of fishing communities, a destitute family pushing a muslin scoop through the shallows, reports of Thai trawlers landing minute mackerel and anchovy suitable only for duck feed.

In such a situation, it is ostensibly to meet these needs that governments and the larger development agencies like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank are most actively promoting fisheries development.

Small-scale grass roots initiatives at the local level directed at reducing post-harvest wastage and increasing equitable distribution might well succeed.

Yet, most typically, projects introduce industrialized fleets, supported by large-scale export-oriented infrastructure, to exploit the deep waters, supposedly beyond the capability of artisanal and small-scale local fishers. India's new deep-sea policy is just one recent example.

Frequently, the deep-water stocks are non-existent or insufficient. So the industrialized fleet encroaches on the already overexploited fisheries of the

local fleets. Shrimps often become the target species and the concomitant large by-catch has both direct and indirect impacts on the stocks exploited for food and livelihood by local fishers to the detriment of their communities.

For at least the last 15 years, the literature on fisheries development, reports and critiques by consultants, academics and practitioners of global repute—indeed, in some cases even the funding agencies own publication—shave attested to the failure of these processes to meet the nutritional and livelihood needs of the poorest.

Yet, despite this and despite the growing awareness of the crisis in world fisheries, new fleets, ports and infrastructure are still being built. Bigger, more powerful more sophisticated vessels, with vastly increased fishing power and capacity, are still being designed, built and launched.

Specialist fisheries ports—in Ethiopia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand and Taiwan, to cite just some countries—are being constructed.

Large-scale infrastructure projects, such as canneries, processing plants or cold storages are planned or coming on-stream in Ghana, Bangladesh, Micronesia, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and elsewhere to facilitate export oriented growth. This is despite existing facilities in Thailand and Indonesia, for instance, operating well below capacity.

Overdevelopment

Such development aggravates the existing problems of overcapitalization, overcapacity and overfishing. Yet the governments and agencies responsible attribute this not to overdevelopment but to a problem of open access. The solution



they advocate is the privatization of capture fisheries.

Indeed, as a conditionality for fisheries assistance, the World Bank is promoting privatization, in the form of individual transferable quotas (ITQs), as practised by the New Zealand fisheries management.

Yet, in New Zealand, it is becoming increasingly apparent that this form of management only enables those with the greatest market power to gain control of the fisheries.

Now just three companies control more than 60 per cent of the quota and local fishers and communities have tended to lose their autonomy. The rapid trend toward collapse of orange roughy stocks demonstrates that ITQs are no more conservative than other forms of management.

Clearly, the persistence of fisheries development projects and programmes in the face of widespread failure shows that the real concern is not about redressing poverty and malnutrition in the developing nations nor is it really directed at conservation.

Indeed, the recent squandering of millions of dollars on a high-profile Annual General Meeting for the Asian Development Bank with its governors enjoying the luxury of limousines and

posh hotel accommodation in Auckland, demonstrates that poverty and malnutrition are the least of their concerns.

With global fish resources declining, fisheries development will no longer increase the catch significantly. Rather, it will shift its allocation and distribution.

The prime objective of fisheries development is therefore to facilitate the access to the resources by the beneficiaries of large-scale development, national business tycoons and transnational interests.

The stated objectives and calls for economic efficiency and privatization are merely a legitimization of this process. The beneficiaries will be the wealthier consumers of the US, Europe and Japan, while the poor of the developing nations still face increasing malnutrition and deprivation. ¶

This piece is by New Zealand-based environmental fisheries consultant Leith Duncan, who has recently completed a review of fisheries development literature for the Greenpeace International Fisheries Campaign