

Interview with Lakshmi Murthy, seaweed harvester, from Chinnapalam, a village close to the Gulf of Mannar (Marine) National Park, Tamil Nadu, India, member of the Ramnad Traditional Fishworkers Trade Union (RFTU), and recipient of the 2015 Seacology Prize for Leadership

By **Ranya Rajagopalan** (icsf@icsf.net),
Programme Associate, ICSF

Can you describe some of the activities of the women harvesters of the Gulf of Mannar?

In June 2014, women from around 21 villages, who harvest seaweed in the Gulf of Mannar, organized themselves into an association. We are also already members of existing co-operatives. The association decided to stop seaweed harvesting for 45 days every year as a conservation measure. A year ago we also decided to stop harvesting during community events, such as a marriage or a death. We had asked the Fisheries Department to issue us identity cards so that our right to harvest seaweed was officially recognized but this has not yet been granted. Our documents are pending with the Department. We have now many more restrictions than before, including not taking children to the islands to harvest seaweed.

What challenges do you face?

Though we are entitled to harvest seaweed for 12 days a month, usually we can harvest for only about ten days. And since we have no other source of income, we often face a financial crunch. Earlier, our kids didn't go to school—but now they do, which means more money is needed. Our challenges are mainly related to education and employment. Our generation has been dependent on the sea's resources but we hope our children will have more options. Another ongoing struggle is to get a better price for our harvest.

How will the award you received help your struggles?

The award gives international recognition to all the women seaweed harvesters of Gulf of Mannar. We hope we can use this recognition to gain our legal rights to access seaweed resources there.

What are your future plans?

We have had two rounds of discussion with the State Government of Tamil Nadu, demanding that our rights be recognized: once in June 2014 and later in March 2015. We have asked for identity cards but these have not yet been issued. If our traditional livelihoods are to be protected then our rights need to be protected first. We have generations of traditional knowledge regarding seaweed resources. We are confident that we will be able to manage these resources through proper community measures. ❏