

No more conferences?

Sandwiched between Rome and Cebu is a decade of conferences which helped establish the two faces of ICSF as network and as entity

On the penultimate day of the Cebu Conference, seeing me sitting peacefully on the lawns of the

beautiful venue, Pierre Gillet, Secretary of ICSF's Brussels office, came up to me and asked, "John, this time you were kept away from the burden of organizing work. So have you had a chance to complete your book on 'How to Organize a Multinational, Multilingual, Multidisciplinary, Multi-everything Conference?'"

This has been a long-standing joke between us, starting from the hectic Roman encounter in 1984, where Pierre was my 'right-hand man'. He had asked me the same question after the Trivandrum, Lisbon and Bangkok Conferences too.

The book still hasn't been written—mainly because, on the penultimate days of all these conferences, we have often said to ourselves, sometimes publicly, 'No more conferences.' Never was this an expression of frustration.

It was just another way of pondering over the usefulness of such mega-meets (mega only by our modest ICSF standards and not by international standards, of course) where, normally over 100 persons from all over the world, with various cultural backgrounds and talking a plethora of languages, fly across oceans into an alien land to interact intensively for five days.

Yet, pausing to think about it, the journey to Cebu was made precisely through a series of such mega-meets. And Pierre's question only made me reflect on the course of a decade of conferences. Was it really meaningful? Have fishworkers gained from these efforts? Have we

achieved our goals? Are our visions becoming reality? My mind surfed through the years of involvement

July 1983

While I was on a work assignment in Hong Kong that month, it was the contents of a personal letter from Roll Wilmann of FAO which prompted me to take the initiative to organize the first International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters, now better known in our circles as the Rome Conference.

My first impulse was to write a common letter to a wide circle of friends—mainly activists working closely with fishing communities, academics who had examined issues relating to fisheries development, and persons in aid agencies who had supported development projects among fishing communities asking for their reaction to the idea of organizing an international meet of fishworkers and their supporters parallel to the FAO's World Conference on Fisheries, scheduled to be held in Rome in July 1984.

In my letter, I clearly stated the reason for wanting to do this. Our meet would highlight to the world's fisheries policy-makers the fact that discussions on fisheries had focused for too long on fish and technology, to the gross exclusion of concerns about those who laboured at sea and on land to convert this resource into wealth. In particular, the idea was to highlight the plight of the millions of small-scale fishermen and their families in the developing countries.

Overwhelming response

The response I got was quick and overwhelming. I had sent about 60 letters and received around 50 replies in six weeks. This provided good motivation. I held some very thorough discussions with

my colleagues in DAGA, Hong Kong, where I was about to complete a year's assignment. Their wholehearted agreement to provide organizational support to the idea was crucial in finally deciding to take up the challenge of such a meet at such short notice.

I returned to Trivandrum in August 1983. Between September and December, some more groundwork for the planning was done. In January 1984, a planning meeting was held in Hong Kong which was attended by about 20 persons, most of whom I knew only through correspondence. The final decision to conduct the conference was taken there.

We would call it an 'international' conference and not a 'world' conference. It would be a conference on its own right and not just a parallel meet. The word 'fishworkers' was also coined at this meeting. The brochure for the conference was worked out and the broad themes for discussion agreed upon.

The fund-raising would be done by DAGA, Hong Kong; the contacts in Africa and Latin America would be organized by ENDA in Dakar, Senegal; a local organization secretariat would be set up in Rome with the assistance of IDOC and the overall co-ordination would be out of Trivandrum. Perhaps this was for the first time that such a meet to be held in the First World, was being fully controlled from Third World countries.

Between January and June, as many meetings as possible of fishworkers and their supporters were planned to be held at the national or regional level to discuss the idea and content of the Rome Conference as well as select participants to attend it. Such meetings took place in Philippines, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Dakar and Columbia.

The Rome Conference was special. Certainly, it was a first. Since it was so quickly planned, it provided great scope for spontaneity in the nature and level of participation. The grand exhibition at the conference foyer, made up exclusively of exhibits brought by the participants and titled 'On the Life and Struggles of the Fishworkers', was a hit with the world press which had gathered in Rome to

cover the FAO meet. We had the 'sponsorship' of the communists-dominated civic authorities of Rome and so obtained permission to stage a cultural show at the famous Piazza Novona. This was witnessed by hundreds of tourists as well as citizens of Rome.

There was an almost palpable sense of euphoria among the participants. This sprung from the immense realization among the fishworkers that, despite the numerous differences of race, language, religion, ideology, technology and standards of living, their basic problems were the same. Little wonder that the saying 'The land divides but the sea unites' was coined there.

Interestingly, the decision of the fish-workers was that, to be true to the spirit of Rome, they should go back to start and strengthen their national and regional contacts. The global networking and international linkages were entrusted to the supporters.

The follow-up on this was again assigned to me. My responsibility I wavered upon greatly. But gentle pressure from many who were at Rome pulled me back on course to write the next common letter!

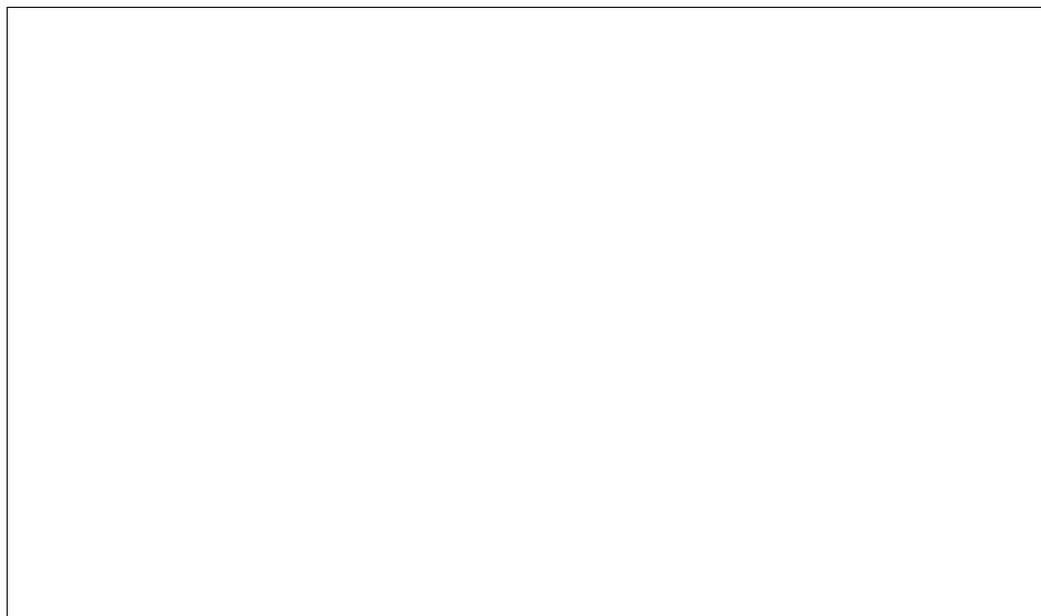
June 1986

This second letter, three years later, detailed what had happened to fish-workers after the Rome Conference, and called for reactions to the idea of forming a network to link the supporters. Around 35 persons—mostly the supporters who were at Rome—came for a 'workshop' held at Trivandrum in November 1986 to discuss the idea and give it substance and form. The result: the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) was formed.

Despite persuasion, I decided against taking any major role in active co-ordination in the future. But I had a hope then, a dream—that ICSF should come to have two faces to it: as 'network' and as 'entity'.

ICSF as network

As network, it should become relevant and meaningful to fishworkers' organizations by taking up local issues which have global ramifications, and



global questions which have local impact. If three years of such action provided meaningful linkages, and if these, in turn, won the endorsement of fishworkers' organizations, then the face of ICSF as entity could also slowly emerge. As entity, it should become a force to reckon with in the appropriate forums of world fisheries.

June 1989

The Lisbon meet in 1989 extended the network dimension of ICSF further into the North. For the first time, many fishworkers' organizations in Europe and Scandinavia met together. The major post-Rome and post-Trivandrum initiatives had taken place among fishworkers in Chile, Philippines and Senegal. Their representatives were now present at Lisbon. This provided proof of the meaning and significance of these events. It also reflected the quality of the sustained follow-up which was undertaken after Rome.

At the invitation of NORAD, a small delegation of representatives of fishworkers and supporters then travelled extensively in Norway. On 29 June 1989, as we crossed the Arctic Circle on a coastal liner, the planning for the ICSF evaluation meet-cum-conference scheduled for Bangkok was in progress on board.

January 1990

The Bangkok Conference in 1990 was basically meant for an honest soul-searching about the three-year testing period of our 'network'. The

network aspect was wholeheartedly endorsed by the fish-workers- Among the supporters, however, there were some differences. There were questions on the nature as well as linkages between the North and the South; the degree of flexibility for facilitating in-dependent networks in the North; and the nature of the links which supporters in the North should have with fishworkers' organizations in the North and the South.

If we were to continue ICSF, the question of qualifications for membership would have to be raised, particularly in the light of the fact that only a fourth of the members could be from the North. Given the signs of relationships coming under some strain, I was included in the new Animation Team, which co-ordinates ICSF. This time I willingly accepted. The new Animation Team had the mandate to develop the 'entity' aspect of ICSF.

1990-1994

In the four years between the Bangkok and Cebu meets, ICSF attained a rather high international profile. Establishing contacts with distant-water vessel fishworkers generated new concerns.

The search for a convenient Third World location to base our future work explored the possibilities of Bangkok, Hong Kong and Manila, but finally settled on Madras.

Relocating the programme co-ordination centre there, employing a full-time Executive Secretary in the person of



Interview

Sebastian Mathew, leaving the Brussels office with only the liaison and financial operations all these gave a new thrust to the work.

With hindsight I think we embarked upon the 'entity' phase a bit too fast. Our committed involvement in the UNCED process and the UN Conference on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks provided its own logic and dynamics. Our public profile became far too inflated. We would not have been able to contain this were it not for the Cebu meet.

June 1994

The Cebu Conference was certainly the greatest of the lot. Apart from the contents of the conference as such, the most important dimension—to me, at least was that, for ICSEF, it served to restore the balance between the 'network' and the 'entity' aspects.

At Cebu, the network linkages expanded both geographically and into sectors of fishworkers other than the small-scale fishermen. On the 'entity' side, we could get a clearer perception on how we present ourselves and the limits to our involvements.

On the penultimate day of the Cebu Conference, I did not hear anyone say, 'No more conferences'—not even those who were at the forefront of the organizing work, who had, on average, less than three hours of sleep a day! Looking back, it would be reasonable to conclude that the 'fall-out' of benefits from the conferences of the decade was greater than the 'costs' incurred—the money, the sleepless nights and the opportunities lost for fishing. More than the specific preparations for the conferences, it is the quality of networking and the intensity of the local involvement which give meaning to such mega-meets. As long as the mega-meets do not become ends in themselves, but, like waves, continue to be integral parts of the ocean-like movement which began in Rome, we will continue to be on course.

Should I re-consider writing the book? Ah, perhaps, but surely it will have a very limited circulation, since there are few who see conferences in this light! 

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