

The NGO point of view

Several different NGOs from around the world strove to speak in one voice at the UN Conference

“A number of NGOs have been actively following the negotiations leading up to this Conference and recently negotiated a Common NGO fisheries statement for the Conference.

The endorsements have come from a diverse array of organisations from both South and North, including organisations representing fishworkers and fishing communities, environmental and developmental concerns, commercial and recreational fishing interests, women’s organisations, law and policy institutes, and organisations dedicated to the issues of food and hunger.

NGOs strongly urge governments to recognise the growing crisis in world fisheries. This crisis has major implications for the livelihoods of fishworkers and their dependents, the health of the marine environment, and global food security.

FAO has classified virtually all commercially fished stocks as depleted, fully exploited or overexploited. FAO reports that in, aggregate terms, marine fish catches are declining, and that overcapitalisation and massive government subsidies, directed primarily at the large-scale sector, are endemic.

Fishworkers throughout the world face threats to their livelihoods and a future of increasing uncertainty. Many fish-workers in Northern countries are facing job losses as a result of the depletion and closure of fisheries. Fishworkers in Southern countries are increasingly threatened by the expansion and migration of fleets from depleted waters. All fishworkers are threatened by the degradation of the marine environment. Coastal fishworkers and communities are particularly vulnerable.

Deforestation, environmentally destructive and socially inequitable agriculture and aquaculture practices, and the introduction of alien species, desertification, industrial pollution and destructive coastal development generally all these pose serious threats to people dependent upon fisheries in coastal waters.

Fisheries development programmes are largely directed toward short-term considerations, to the long-term detriment of fishworkers and their communities, the marine environment and society as a whole.

Recognising all of the above, the NGO statement emphasises three key points, namely, the need for

- fisheries conservation;
- environmental protection; and
- respect for and recognition of the rights of small-scale, traditional and indigenous fishworkers and fishing communities.

The statement calls for a precautionary approach to fisheries development and management, and ecologically sound fisheries practices.

Regarding the issue of equity, the right of access to fisheries resources must recognise the needs and rights of fishing communities and be based on equitable principles and respect for the environment, and not solely on political power and availability of technology and capital.

Coastal fishworkers are often exclusively dependent on fish for food and livelihood, and any international agreement on

fisheries must respect their fundamental right to survive.

Fisheries management and development cannot be successful in the long term without the meaningful participation of fishworkers, environmental groups and other concerned segments of the society.

Fisheries decisions associated with national and international law, investment, development and aid must be made fully transparent and publicly accountable.

The NGO statement argues that for straddling and highly migratory fish stocks, a consistent management regime must apply throughout the range of the stock. Transboundary problems require transboundary solutions for all countries concerned.

In the long term, national self-interest is ultimately served through effective cooperation in fisheries conservation and management.

Effective institutional mechanisms must be established to ensure global fisheries conservation, a number of which are discussed in the NGO statement. One of the mechanisms that has not been discussed in prior negotiations is the need for a global fisheries conservation fund. We urge you to seriously consider this NGO proposal.

Finally, the NGOs have called for a quick resolution of outstanding law of the sea differences, such that the convention will be widely acceptable to all nations.

NGOs have taken the position that the Conference is an important opportunity for the nations of the world to address the crisis in world fisheries. In order to effectively do so, fundamental reforms, such as those proposed in the NGO statement, are needed. In parallel with the substantive reforms, it is essential that governments commit at the global level standards and mechanisms that are legally binding.

If fish is to continue to be an important source of food and livelihood for humankind, then fisheries must be

conserved, the oceans and coastal areas must be protected and remain healthy, and the production and consumption of fish must be based on socially equitable terms. ■ ”

This statement was presented on July 12, 1993 in New York at the opening session of the UN Conference on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks by Matthew Gianni of Greenpeace International and Sebastian Mathew of ICSF.