

The future of fishworkers

WE ARE THE BEACONS OF THE SEA

He is himself a fisherman and president of the single largest organization of fishworkers of Chile (1). A union federation, born in 1986, uniting at present some 100 local associations all over the country. Humberto Chamorro-Alvarez recounts in this article the many problems challenging the profession and suggests means of facing them. (2)

We must clearly state that our profession is facing enormous challenges which, in course of time, could lead to its disappearance. Our responsibility is to make people aware of the values we represent and the dangers that await us for the future, and thus to be able to seek global solutions to guarantee a reasonable future for millions of fishermen, who on every continent, work daily on the oceans, lakes, rivers and lagoons of our planet.

In defence of democracy

The future of small-scale fishermen the world every morning I take to the sea in a small 6-metre boat equipped with an outboard motor and two long-lines prepared for catching hake and other demersal fish. But at the same time, for the past ten years, I have also been the executive of a union organisation that counts 250 members, all fishermen. Thanks to our struggle, we have achieved the establishment of a basic infrastructure. We have our Welfare and Health Service. We enlist our doctors and pay subsidies to our ill members. We bury our dead in our own cemetery. For all this, we have had to acquire great discipline, distribute jobs among committees with various tasks and share out our endeavour. Our fishing is undertaken by 80 boats, our production provides work for approximately 1000 people and food for the city of Valparaiso.

In 1985, following an invitation from a University, we launched the idea to create a national organisation of Chilean fishermen. A special commission was thus established and a national Congress held in November 1986, 74 grass-root organisations par-

ticipated in this Congress. With the aim of forming an organisation that could represent our profession, we created CONAPACH. Thus began a long struggle for bringing together all regional organisations. A second Congress took place in 1988 and we have presently 8 regional organizations with over 100 grass root associations from all over the country. CONAPACH is actively engaged in the struggle to defend the democratic rights of the Chilean fishermen. CONAPACH opposed strongly a law project in fisheries which would cause great harm to the fishermen and the country.

This experience shows us, small-scale fishermen, the importance of creating jobs, supplying good quality food, and contributing to the regional and national economies. As fishermen we are also beacons of the sea because we detect the dangers that threaten our various resources. We know that pollution from cities, industries, mines and farming is very high in a number of countries, and that it affects life and the marine species that are the resources of our activity.

Autonomy or submission

We are suffering from a mass dispersion because in general we live far from urban centres, near the coasts or on the banks of rivers or lakes; sometimes we live far from our villages. We are surrounded by nature and we rejoice in this advantage, but at the same time we suffer from a lack of services to satisfy our needs. This dispersion is even more serious when it affects the formation of representative organisations which fight for the defence of rights and seek solutions to the problems and needs of our families and of rights

(1) CONAPACH - National Council of the Artisanal Fishermen of Chile

(2) This article represents the main points of the intervention of Hector Chamorro-Alvarez during the International Conference held at Bangkok (Thailand, January 1990). The complete intervention has been published in SAMUDRA Dossier n° 3.

and seek solutions to the problems and needs of our families and of our profession

As fishermen, we are often marginalized and we do not usually benefit from the advantages of education, housing, health, communication and culture. These advantages of modern society do not come easily to us. The problem does not lie in the lack of these services because solutions can always be found, but our marginalization is more profound since we are not considered when it is a question of participating in taking the decisions which affect our activities.

As fishermen, we are enormously dependent on creditors, merchants, local politicians and leaders of social, and sometimes religious, organizations. In a number of cases we have mortgaged not only our assets, but also our dignity and future.

We find ourselves facing a large number of contradictions and that we must clarify in order to know at last who our friends are and who our enemies. On one side we are facing the contradiction that exists between the city and the country, and because of this, the contradiction between traditional and contemporary values. We are often people of the land. We live in the country and think and act like country people. But at the same time, we incorporate contemporary values and technology and our products enter into the network of world trade. For that very reason, we are in most cases the victims of a number of consequences to which the countries of the North subordinate the countries of the South. In developing countries, we are often exploited due to poor relations in the context of international trade imposed by the developed countries. It is hard to know when the developed nations are our friends and when they are our enemies.

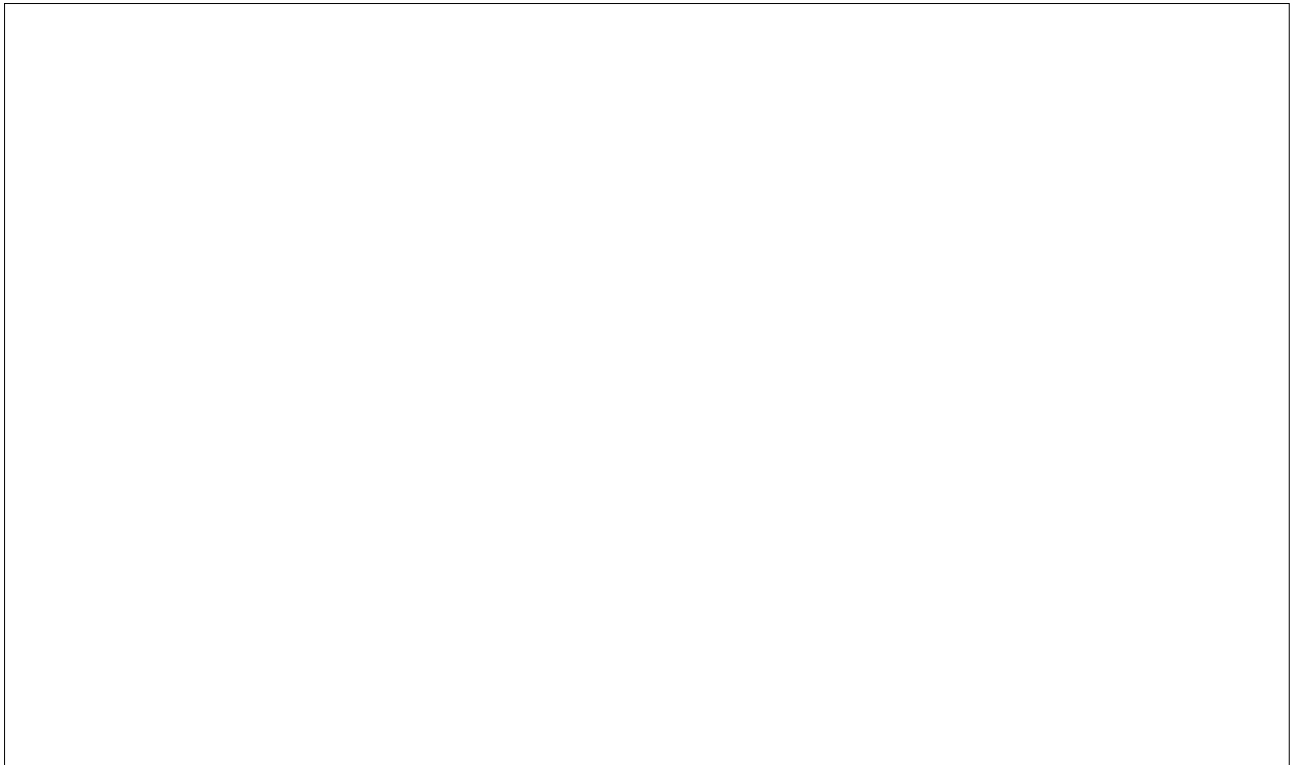
It is essential to move ahead, without losing hope, in order to seek a solution to our problems and to build our future. We already know the challenges: autonomy or submission. And the most characteristic element in the life of a fisherman is precisely his freedom, his independence to tackle the problems and the profession as a whole.

Organisation must lead towards development

Without a solid organisation, from the foundations up to regional and national structures, nothing good can be accomplished for our future as fishermen and the future of our families. But the organisation must be born of ourselves. It must be ours without outside dependence or intervention; we must take our decisions freely and completely autonomously. Only fishermen can take part in our organizations.

An autonomous organisation is the sole and major condition for building our future and for being able to confront our enemies. Based on the organisation, we will know who are our friends and who are our enemies, who is with us and who is against us. Our organisations must be profoundly democratic and the respect between us very deep. But our participation must also be highly responsible. We must accomplish our undertakings. We cannot corrupt our organisations by our own corruption or our own faults. Our organizations must distribute power and have the participation of all members on committees of various types.

The internal and autonomous organisation must be directed towards development. Donations and aid from governmental or non-governmental organisations—all the money in the world—cannot buy an organisation. Nevertheless, our organisation can lead us into spiralling development. From the moment we have a solid organisation, we can open the way towards cultural development, then towards social development. We will learn new technology and achieve economic growth. But first, we must have an autonomous organisation our own. Thanks to it, we will be able to advance and obtain social, technical, economic and cultural advantages. With all this, we will achieve our development. Many believe that outside plans and aid programmes can bring development. Yet we have seen how millions of dollars coming from banks or outside agencies are lost en route wherever there has been no truly autonomous organisation.



We must take care of our resources

The future of the organisation and internal development is also dictated by the survival of marine and aquatic resources in general. Yet these resources are in danger. Many nations have built fishing fleets or concluded accords for extracting existing resources in vast quantities along the coasts of West Africa, the South Pacific and Asia, or in coastal lagoons. On the other hand, the pollution which we have already cited affects the survival of fish, mollusks and crustaceans. For their part, nuclear experiments in the Pacific are placing in danger the quality of the water and concentrating radioactive elements in marine species. In the sea, everything communicates, and therefore, everything is in danger.

Over the coming years, we expect important changes due to the warming of the earth through the greenhouse effect caused by gas emissions and the hole in the ozone layer. These changes will affect marine life and we must not hesitate to warn about the sort of problems which are already being produced through temperature changes and rain.

Attention to the resources also means that we are seriously beginning to be "cultivators" or fish farmers within the realm of our possibilities. This is being realized primarily when resources are depleted. We must watch over our resources and be in close contact with the scientists who can cooperate and exchange

their experience and knowledge with us in order to start fish breeding and the cultivation of algae and shellfish.

Our participation must be real and not necessarily favourable to the established structures of power. If we can count on an autonomous organisation and internal and sustained development, especially in the economic sector, the authorities have to listen to us and give us the capacity to express our concern and our demands. Such was the experience of fishermen in some developed countries like France, Japan, Norway and Canada where fishermen's organisations are both respected and respectable. They are given the change to discuss laws, and the laws protect their rights in the fact of industrialists, businessmen, and other authorities of the country.

Fishermen walk on a road strewn with hope and, as executives, we cannot disappoint the expectations of millions of fellow fishermen who are spread over five continents. The future will be ours if we build it ourselves with the joint aid of those researchers and technicians who are with us.

The day will soon come when a single voice will express the outcry of all the members of our profession within one international, autonomous organisation of fishermen and fishworkers.

Humberto CHAMORRO-ALVAREZ