

## Comment

# Deal with hunger and poverty first

The discussions and decisions on Agenda Item 18.2 on marine and coastal biological diversity at the recently concluded Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP7) are highly relevant to the over 200 million artisanal and small-scale fishworkers, most of whom are from the developing world.

Coastal and indigenous fishing communities undoubtedly have a long-term stake in the protection and sustainable use of biodiversity, given their reliance on coastal and marine biodiversity for livelihoods and income. It should not, therefore, come as any surprise that several decades before issues of conservation and sustainability of coastal and marine resources became part of the international agenda, fishworkers in many countries of the developing world were drawing attention to, among other things, the negative impacts of pollution, uncontrolled expansion of industrial fisheries and aquaculture, and technologies such as bottom trawling for shrimp, both on coastal biodiversity and on their livelihoods.

Against this backdrop, the commitment by governments to promote the implementation of the objectives of the CBD and significantly reduce the current rate of loss of marine and coastal biological diversity by 2012 can only be welcomed.

Equally to be welcomed is the stress on participation of indigenous and local communities, on protecting the preferential access of artisanal and small-scale fishworkers to traditional fishing grounds and resources, and on ensuring that the programme of work directly contributes to poverty alleviation (see page 42).

For artisanal and small-scale fishworkers, this could well mean opportunities to address issues relevant to both their livelihoods and biodiversity protection. More concretely, it could mean an opportunity to draw attention to, and regulate, the pollution of inshore waters caused by effluents and tailings from industries, mining activities and fishmeal plants. It could mean the opportunity to strictly regulate bottom trawling, particularly in tropical, multispecies fisheries. It could mean opportunities to regulate the destruction and pollution caused by industrial forms of aquaculture. It could also mean that the initiatives taken by fishworkers to regulate and manage their resources are accorded due legal, institutional, financial and other forms of recognition.

All this will, however, remain in the realms of wishful thinking if governments do not put in place an enabling legal framework that recognizes, protects and strengthens the rights of coastal fishing communities to access and use biodiversity in a responsible manner, to pursue sustainable livelihoods and to participate in decision-making and resource management processes at all levels.

The very real danger of imposing prefabricated models of marine protected areas, which do not take into account local histories and knowledge systems, needs to be avoided at all costs. There is enough available experience to indicate that non-participatory conservation initiatives, which do not draw on and recognize local knowledge and management initiatives, are counterproductive not only in terms of protection of biodiversity, but also from the point of view of avoiding further exacerbation of poverty in communities well known for their economic and social vulnerability. As celebrated Canadian geneticist and environmentalist David Suzuki stressed in his keynote presentation to COP7, "If we don't deal with hunger and poverty, we can forget the environment; people have other priorities".

