

The first decade of ICSF

Ten years ago, on 25 November 1986, a diverse group of anthropologists, biologists, boatbuilders, community organizers, economists, social scientists and sociologists from 16 countries, gathered in the small Indian city of Trivandrum. Their aim: the formation of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF).

That act was far from impulsive—it was the direct outcome of the historic, first-ever international Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters, held in Rome in 1984, as a parallel meet to the FAO's World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development.

The founding members formed ICSF after "seeing the emerging needs for information, for training, for various kinds of support... to give form to the need for more international exchange and common action in support of the cause of fishworkers in all the regions". The term 'collective' was deliberately chosen to stress the non-hierarchical style of functioning and to emphasize transparency, flexibility and informality among the members.

It was in their individual capacities that the founding members took up the challenge to commit their time and experience to ICSF's programmes. Initially, the mandate was humble enough—to keep the organization going for at least three years.

At the 1990 Bangkok Conference, ICSF reviewed the four years of its existence—and decided to continue the organization's functioning by further streamlining programmes. The major emphasis has always been to defend the rights of artisanal and small-scale fishworkers to a better life and livelihood from fisheries resources, within the framework of the sustainable utilization of such resources.

The post-Bangkok period threw up a range of projects on, for instance, the implications of North-South fisheries agreements; the viability of maritime zoning arrangements; credit and insurance systems; and the ecological, social and economic aspects of fishing gear selectively.

One of ICSF's earliest campaigns was against the inequitable aspects of fisheries agreements between Senegal and the European Union. The campaign has since attracted several European NGOs, under the umbrella of the Coalition for Fair Fisheries Agreements (CFFA), and forced the incorporation of some demand of Senegalese fishworkers.

In the last quinquennium, ICSF intensified its campaigns. A task force looked into the conditions of work on industrial fishing vessels. ICSF also

undertook several exchange programmes to strengthen fishworkers' organizations and to transfer more environment-friendly technologies.

By actively associating with the preparatory and follow-up processes of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), ICSF entered a new phase after June 1992. This included influencing the UN Conference on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, as well as the FAO's Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, to highlight the importance of artisanal and small-scale fishing.

Samudra Report, an important output of ICSF, is published thrice a year, in English, French and Spanish, to disseminate information on a wide variety of topics. It has also served as a forum for critical debates on, for instance, issues straddling environmental and fisheries interests.

A decade after the formation of ICSF, one thing can certainly be said: global resource depletion and fishing overcapacity may have hampered the livelihood of artisanal and small-scale fishworkers, but many things have, in fact, changed for the better for fishworker communities, especially in the Third World. Not only are they more often consulted, but their worldview is also being better recognized by national governments, bilateral and multilateral agencies. The industrial model of development in fisheries is increasingly being challenged, while the role of traditional knowledge in fisheries management is being accorded a greater status.

ICSF's activities have been synergistic and the overall impact, quite positive. However, a great deal remains to be done; more contacts with fishworkers' organizations in several countries where ICSF does not yet have a presence; and, in the realm of fisheries management, steps to ensure a better future for fishworker communities and greater responsibility for fisheries resources.

For ICSF, it is a matter of pride that the world has more or less recognized artisanal and small-scale fishing and that special way of life. What remains to be done is to consolidate these gains through better programmes for resource management with community participation. Equally, if not more, important is to strive for a gender perspective on these issues.

One decade gone, a more ten years, but several nautical miles to go and many oceans to cross...

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