

We Must Grab Our Rights!

Despite several shortcomings, the recent Civil Society Preparatory Workshop at Bangkok, prior to the Global Conference on Small-scale Fisheries, strove for a common agenda

From the very beginning, the agenda and processes leading to both the Civil Society Preparatory Workshop at Bangkok and the Global Conference on Small-scale Fisheries (4SSF), organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Department of Fisheries, Thailand, in October 2008, were clear. A democratic process—articulated in several regional meetings over the last few years—had established the credo that fishing communities and artisanal fishers are united over the issue of human rights, and that the health and well-being of communities are directly linked to the ecosystems on which they depend.

This 'constitutional' base formed the reference point for the discussions at Bangkok on securing access rights, post-harvest benefits and human rights. That this was achieved is no small matter. Gathering hundreds of people from all over the world for a meeting requires enormous human, financial and technical resources. But success is never guaranteed, and seemingly minor issues may throw a spanner in the works. In the event, congratulations are due to the organizers of the Bangkok meet for having avoided these pitfalls.

To understand what really happened at Bangkok, one must return to the 1980s, when several groups got together to form an embryonic network that led to the alternative International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters, held in 1984, in parallel to the official fisheries conference organized by FAO. That Rome meet, in turn, led to the formation of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF).

Then, in 1997, artisanal fisher representatives gathered in New Delhi to moot the formation of a world body for fishworkers. In October 2000, the French town of Loctudy had the honour of hosting the Constituent Assembly of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF). However, despite eight days of intense debate, a consensus, though greatly anticipated, could not be reached, and two forums emerged from Loctudy: the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and WFF.

While it would be pointless to go into the specifics of the Loctudy breakup,

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we do need to understand it in order to avoid future mishaps, and strive for convergence. Those responsible for the future—fishing communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governmental and inter-governmental organizations—must understand the conditions necessary for change, and the need for constancy of effort and commitment.

Separate paths

Since the Loctudy split, WFF and WFFP have followed quite different and separate paths. There have been few contacts between the two, apart from those mediated by NGOs during different events. This dichotomy was reflected at Bangkok too. While WFFP played a key role during the Civil

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Society Preparatory Workshop, along with the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF), the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), Federation of Southern Fisherfolk (FSF) and ICSF, representatives of WFF were conspicuous by their absence, even though they had been invited to the Bangkok meet.

Little wonder, then, that European fishers—especially French fishers in Breton, with whom I am familiar—feel that they have been “sold out”.

In the days leading to the Civil Society Preparatory Workshop, WFF played its role as an organization representing fishworkers. It also contributed strongly to the Civil Society Statement that was the principal outcome of the workshop, and which served as the keystone for the rest of the Bangkok meet. In contrast, for reasons unknown, WFF did not participate in the collective preparations for the workshop.

Artisanal fishing representatives from Europe were also noticeable by their absence at Bangkok. Mediterranean Prud'hommies were

represented, as were regional committees from Guadeloupe and Martinique, but the only ‘official’ representative was from the South Western Regional Advisory Committee (SWRAC) of the European Union (EU), Xoan Alvarez Lopez, Secretary of the Galician Cofradías and Chair, the Working Group on Traditional Fisheries of SWRAC.

No EU Member State was represented at Bangkok. In light of this remarkable absence, it is doubtful whether the FAO’s Committee on Fisheries (COFI) will garner enough support to consider favourably some of the proposals that have emerged from the Bangkok Civil Society Preparatory Workshop.

The situation in Europe, of course, differs greatly from that in developing countries. Europe has no shortage of administrative structures; perhaps there are too many. Many of them, like fisheries committees or producer organizations, tend to mix artisanal and industrial fisheries. The interests of the small-scale fishing sector are often subjugated by those with the means and the time to spare for activities that do not involve going out to sea. Such a situation is not conducive to the creation of a radical alternative social movement, unlike in the South, where a powerful sense of inequity can create a

dramatic polarization of the fisheries sector into artisanal and industrial factions.

The World Bank representative told the Bangkok meet, loud and clear, that artisanal fishers from developing countries must export even more to earn foreign exchange. He put forward two, seemingly complementary, reasons for this. First, industrial fishing, since it is proving to be unsustainable, must be progressively replaced by export-driven artisanal fishing. Second, in certain parts of the world, as in Europe, fishing, as an occupation, is disappearing.

In the light of this explicit call from the World Bank representative, the policies

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Cosme Caracciolo and Zoila Bustamante of CONAPACH, Chile, at the 4SSF Conference in Bangkok: “It’s now time for us to take it forward!”

of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the EU appear perfectly coherent. Trade flows in fisheries are important. Fish imports represent 60 per cent of Europe's total consumption. In France the situation is even more dramatic, with imports accounting for 85 per cent of all seafood consumed. Trade to Europe involves a triple set of accords: of the importing countries; of the international trade regime as established by the WTO and other multilateral bodies; and of the export-oriented fishing sector in developing countries.

Despite the paramount role of trade in fisheries, at Bangkok, however, representatives of civil society, particularly members of WFFP and WFF, remained silent on the issue. It is easy to understand that silence: Fishers from the South are keen to export to remunerative markets, even if it should ultimately prove detrimental to their food sovereignty.

Undoubtedly, traditional artisanal fishers from the South should be supported in their efforts to sell their catches in the markets of the North. But two important issues must not be overlooked. First, it should be realized that WTO policies are geared to the interests of the most powerful. Second, artisanal fishers themselves, particularly in Europe, will not survive the coming realignment of trade-induced policies. The fact that European artisanal fishers are considered disposable in the adjustment of trade flows of seafood products does not seem to interest anyone, apart from the fishers themselves. They will have to, therefore, rely on their own resources and capacities to organize themselves around issues, given that the interests behind the seafood export drive are powerful. Little wonder, then, that European fishers—especially French fishers in Brittany with whom I am directly concerned—feel that they have been “sold out”.

Issue of trawling

At the Civil Society Preparatory Workshop at Bangkok, the issue of trawling was raised several times, often with emotion. All the same,



Trade in fish and fish products is of paramount importance for fishers of the South. A scene from a Bangkok fish market

surprisingly enough, it was treated with a certain reserve, with responsibility and in a nuanced way. The rationale for a trawl ban is easy to fathom. In many countries, large trawlers—national, foreign or pirate—fish up to within a few metres of the coast. Given the lack of efficient monitoring, control and surveillance systems, the temptation is strong for small-scale fishers to organize themselves around the demand for a total ban on trawling.

At Bangkok, though, the debate was more nuanced. The Civil Society Statement called for “illegal fishing

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and all destructive fishing gear and practices” to be prohibited. The implication is that trawling is not always destructive; it may be selective, and can be regulated. Such a view of trawling is more acceptable, particularly to fishers from, say, the Bay of Biscay in France, whose fisheries regulation and multi-gear selectivity were greatly appreciated at Bangkok.

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Marie Ademar of Martinique, a member of WFFP, addressing the Civil Society Preparatory Workshop at Bangkok

The absence of debate on energy at Bangkok also needs to be highlighted. The cost of fuel and transportation is a huge problem for fishers all over the world, in both domestic and export markets. Thus it was surprising that energy did not figure in the Bangkok deliberations. There could be two reasons for that. First, the Civil Society Preparatory Workshop agenda was perhaps adhered to with too much vigour, leaving little space for other issues to be taken up. Second, there is a strong feeling among artisanal fishers that they can do nothing about the issue of fuel. Whether the price of a barrel of oil goes up or comes down, they must somehow cope. Nonetheless, this issue cannot be wished away; it will doubtless return to the top of the fishers' agenda.

And then there is the issue of women in fisheries. Since the 1990s, delegations of fishworker representatives have aspired to be composed of men and women in equal numbers. At Bangkok, however, women made up only a quarter of the participants. It may be easy to justify that skewed representation, but it surely renders superficial all talk of "women having the right to fully participate in all aspects of artisanal fisheries".

At Bangkok, most of the time, the male participants seemed to be listening with only one ear to the women speaking about the need to

assert their rights, which the men, in their hearts, seemed to have no intention of sharing. That is a pity since it would be so much easier to guarantee access rights, and economic and social rights if the issue of women's rights is taken more seriously. In this context, a very practical question was posed at Bangkok: "How come a man is the sole owner of an individual transferable quota when his wife may be the owner of 50 per cent of his fishing vessel and fishing company?"

Even though several men feel that these are questions that should never be asked, the reality of the prevailing patriarchy, both in the North and the South, has to be recognized. Men will give up nothing unless they are obliged to do so. Hence, the clamour by one participant at Bangkok: "We must grab our rights!"

In a sense we, as 'civil society', needed to make such a strong, coherent and collective call, so forceful that agencies like FAO can only react positively in favour of fishworkers and fishing communities all over the world. In advocating such a common agenda, we have had to act out a dramatic play, as it were, in which all the scenes are well known and thoroughly rehearsed, but where there is always the danger that, in a moment of folly, one of the principal actors could stumble on her lines.

To turn the tide at a global level requires the application of enormous energy, time, devotion, funds, communication, information technology, networking, open-mindedness and exhaustive groundwork. Given the vastness and complexities of the world of fisheries, and the varied options available, a whole lifetime's work may not be enough to achieve that goal. 3

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