

# North or South, Small is Smart

The North has much to learn from the small-scale fisheries of the South if it wishes to tackle the social, economic and ecological crisis that has gripped its own fisheries

Discussions at the 28th Session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), on securing sustainable small-scale fisheries (SSF), brought out a significant difference in how the issue was approached by delegations of the North and the South (see “Securing Small-scale Fisheries”, page 4).

That left several questions hanging in the air: Is securing sustainable SSF only at issue in countries of the South, or is it also relevant for the North? If so, how and to what extent? Should SSF in the North be merely regarded as a welfare sector for indigenous, ethnic or subsistence fishers who have cultural ties and extreme dependence on fishery resources? Are SSF inherently more sustainable, equitable, and socially and culturally more valuable than large-scale fisheries? Or are they merely a smaller version of their larger-scale counterparts, whose development has got out of hand, and now demands stricter management, greater effort reduction and more rationalization?

The Bangkok Statement from civil society organizations (see “Recognizing Rights and Freedoms”, *SAMUDRA Report* No. 51, page 7) made no such distinctions. The call to establish SSF as the preferred model for the exclusive economic zones, and the other demands made in the Statement, should apply equally to industrialized and developing countries.

However, at the 28th Session of COFI, many Northern delegations seemed not to share this view. New Zealand, for example, held that definition and application of some of the issues related to SSF, especially poverty alleviation, do not extend to their SSF. Canada supported a special programme to adopt ‘modern’ management principles in SSF, while the European Union chose to make no mention at all of their own SSF.

The message from the Northern delegations seemed to be—not in my backyard! While it may be

fine to develop SSF to address poverty alleviation and food security issues in developing countries, they are of no concern to the North. Whether large-scale or small-scale, and with notable exceptions, fisheries play no significant role in food security or in poverty reduction there. With Northern fisheries supplying only a relatively smaller (and diminishing) proportion of the fish consumed in the

North, and the welfare State taking care of poverty, SSF is not an issue, it would appear.

Five decades of economic boom, industrialization, subsidies, corporate investments and market orientation have affected the North’s food production sectors, especially in fisheries, both small-scale and large-scale. The North now faces a crisis, with far too great a fishing effort chasing

ever-dwindling resources. Today most Northern countries depend on the South for their food security, especially so for fish, since around 80 per cent of fish production now takes place in developing countries. Policymakers in the North seem to favour smaller fleets of larger vessels, dispensing with SSF, which will only benefit fishing and marketing monopolies.

In economically well-off industrialized countries, no one is really worried about small-scale fishing communities. The welfare State will guarantee that their communities and cultures are safe, as Svein Jentoft observed in “The Human Rights of Small-scale Fishing People” (see *SAMUDRA Report* No. 51, November 2008, page 13). Despite such assurances, in many instances, he adds, “small-scale fishing people, be they indigenous or non-indigenous, are being marginalized and disadvantaged, to the extent that they are becoming extinct”.

In the current context of the North’s fisheries, SSF could play a vital role in placing fisheries on a more sustainable footing, and cushioning fishery-dependent communities from the economic and social consequences of the proposed capacity reduction.

