

Focus on management

At the time of declaring their Exclusive Economic or Fishing Zones (EEZs/EFZs), the developing countries were mainly concerned about utilizing the vastly underexploited marine fishery resources. The general assumption was that resources were abundant in nature. Marine fisheries were seen as an excellent source of employment, income, food security and foreign exchange. In this process, the need for conservation and management was overlooked. Except for protecting fisheries resources from blast fishing, and fine-meshed nets, conservation and management was largely seen as a problem of rich countries.

The situation that prevails since the 1990s is vastly different from that of the 1970s and 1980s. Most of the commercially valuable stocks, especially in the inshore waters, are now overfished. China and Chile, two of the largest fish producers in the world, are going through a major crisis in their fisheries. More disturbing than the drop in production are the unmistakable signs of biological and economic overfishing. The composition of the catch is changing in favour of low-value, small-sized, species. Considering the large resource base and the investment that has been made into the industry in countries like Chile, Peru, India, China, Indonesia and the Philippines, it may not at all be wise to leave the situation to sort itself out. Moreover, the livelihoods of millions of fishworkers depend on healthy fisheries. A joint initiative by the State with the industry, fishing communities and other responsible national and international agencies is required to turn the fishery around. This clearly underscores the importance of moving from a largely *laissez-faire* fishery to a managed fishery with long-term goals and plans.

In general, the fisheries legislation in developing countries mainly target the fishing vessel rather than the fishery per se. What seems to be essentially regulated is access to fishery resources in time and space, that too in a lackadaisical manner. Conservation and management should refer to all of the rules, regulations, conditions, methods, and other measures, which are required to rebuild, restore, or maintain any fishery resource and the marine environment as qualified by relevant economic and social factors. This brings into the scope of conservation and management, not only the supply-side, but also the demand-side of fisheries, especially international trade in fish and fish products.

The architecture of such a regime is already implicit in some of the recent national legislation as well as in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the UN Fish Stocks Agreement and the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries.

Relevant measures are also needed to protect the marine environment from pollution. So far, there are few measures to protect the territorial waters from land-based sources of pollution. This lacuna has to be immediately addressed.

Export-led development of a fishery, although it brings benefits in the short run, could be ruinous in the long run, if there are no clear management plans, especially for entry into, participation in, and exit from, the fishery. Unless the safety net of conservation and management is put into place, any external stimulus to produce more fish will end up in an economic, ecological and social catastrophe. Developing countries have to move from a 'development alone' mode into a mode of 'development with management'. It is high time for this paradigm shift.

