

Comment

A world of double standards

There are two possible perspectives on global fisheries: a pessimistic one and an optimistic one. According to the pessimistic view, we live in a world of double standards, of virtuous yet empty rhetoric. While world leaders pontificate on responsibility and sustainability, industrial fishing fleets are encouraged to strip global fish stocks down to the last shoal, destroying fish habitats, ruining the coastal commons and causing the collapse of fishing communities world-wide.

The optimistic view, on the other hand, is one of a world in transition, where we are moving from an inherently unsustainable industrial model of fishery extraction, towards a new sustainable pattern of resource use and management.

In response to a worsening situation of world poverty, declining resource bases and environmental deterioration, the last decade has witnessed increasing efforts at the international level to establish a framework and a commitment towards sustainable development. Yet, at the same time, the forces of the free market and commercial interests are being allowed to undermine these efforts.

In 1983, the Brundtland Commission (the World Commission on Environment and Development) received a mandate from the UN General Assembly to formulate a global agenda for change. In their report of 1987, the Commission members were unanimous in their conviction that "the security, well-being, and very survival of the planet depends on a fundamental change towards sustainable development."

Nowhere else is such a change needed as in fisheries. And perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, it is in Europe that the fishery crisis is acute. It has become clear that the Common Fisheries Policy of the European Union (EU) is neither able to address this crisis nor direct the longer-term sustainable development of European fisheries.

The industrial fisheries model, which has sounded the death-knell of European fisheries is now being exported by the EU to the waters of other countries. The redeployment of the EU's surplus fleet capacity can neither be considered responsible nor in the interests of sustainable development.

In response to the Brundtland Commission Report and the Rio Declaration of UNCED, the EU has developed comprehensive policy objectives for development co-operation. Yet, the EU's Directorate General for Fisheries maintains that fisheries agreements are purely commercial in nature, and have nothing to do with development.

The export of destructive fishing practices should no longer be permitted under the guise of commercial interests. Development and commerce have a common future, but, if sustainable development is the goal, policy and practice in both areas must be compatible.

Governments and international bodies must adopt a more integrated approach to economic and social development, and the forces of the free market must not be allowed to destroy the resource base that supports some of the world's poorest people, and the livelihoods that provide food and income to their communities.

