

# Uniting for Change

**At a recent conference in Recife, fishers from northeast Brazil demanded recognition of their status and rights to their territories**

A conference on 'Artisanal Fishers, Protected Areas and Climate Change', was held from 31 August to 3 September 2010 at Recife, Brazil. The conference—the third conducted by the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation—was held in partnership with the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), as well as with the support of FACEPE, the State organization for research. The

in Recife or in communities of artisanal fishermen.

The gender symposium, conducted for four years by the Regional Feminista Norte e Nordeste de Estudos e Pesquisas sobre a Mulher e Relações de Gênero (Redor), the Feminist Northern and Northeastern Regional Network for Studies and Research on Women and Gender Relations, provided a forum for scholars of gender relations to get to know the actors in Brazil's fisheries sector.

Being a continental country, Brazil is marked by diversity in fishing, both in terms of ecosystems and socioeconomic factors. While the southeast and south are subtropical climate regions influenced by cold ocean currents, the northeast of the country has a tropical climate and is bathed by the warm waters of the South Equatorial Current (Atlantic Ocean), which features low productivity. The north region, despite its tropical climate, is marked by high biological productivity, as a result of the continental water flow from the Amazon River.

The coasts of the north and northeast regions have plenty of mangroves and coral reefs, ecosystems that enrich the adjacent coastal waters and facilitate the entry of artisanal fishermen into the fisheries. These regions account for more than 80 per cent of the 850,000 fishermen legally registered with the country's Ministry of Fisheries, a figure that could well be an underestimate.

## Historical invisibility

Despite the historical invisibility of artisanal fisheries in Brazil, reflected in the lack of support for the sector, it

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conference included a number of other partners, such as universities as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like the Fisheries' Pastoral from the Catholic Church. The conference discussed gender issues too through the Fourth Pernambuco Symposium on Women and Gender Relations.

The Recife conference differed from other events held in the region in that it promoted interactions between researchers and public managers with the key actors in the fisheries sector, namely, the artisanal fishermen and fisherwomen.

The Joaquim Nabuco Foundation is a research institution of the federal government oriented to conduct social research in the north and northeast of Brazil. Its Environmental Department has been developing research in the area of fishery since 1994. Annual seminars have been held in the last six years, either

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provides more than 55 per cent of the total capture fishery production in the country, which, in 2009, amounted to 585,671.5 tonnes. The artisanal sector also practices sustainable ways of fishing and living with the environment, given the characteristics of the culture and lifestyle of artisanal fishing communities. The history and culture of these people have long been important aspects of the Brazilian coast.

For the artisanal fishermen and fisherwomen of Brazil, their relationship with the land and territory is very important. For them, defending their territories in face of the conflicts due to land speculation and economic activities such as tourism, has been a continuing activity. The other threats they face include overfishing, habitat degradation, pollution and climate change. The historical pressure on coastal areas comes from the population density. Today, one quarter of the country's population lives in the coastal region, resulting in a population density of 87 persons per sq km.

Brazil owes a social debt to its artisanal fisheries. This sector, although having always accounted for a large portion of fish production in the country, has been treated as marginal, while the industrial fisheries sector has received government investments and has benefited from increased domestic production of fish (until the 1990s). The artisanal sector has recently received increasing attention both from the government and academic institutions, as well as from civil society. This recognition is the result of a series of changes that occurred after the political liberalization and the 1988 Constitution, which allowed free advocacy of rights and free association of marginalized groups of society, like the small-scale fishers. Among the other changes: the emergence of fishery social movements; the action of NGOs, and the media coverage given to the fishers, mainly due to the large pressures on the coastal environment.

Despite recent institutional changes in the fishery sector in the country, culminating with the creation

of the first Ministry of Fishery in 2009, the social policies and those encouraging the sector fall short of the demands of artisanal fishermen, who call for transparency, recognition and participation in preparing public policies for fisheries. The Recife conference highlighted the conflicts existing in the coastal region, the role of the government, especially the Ministries of Fishery, Aquaculture and Environment, the relationship between researchers and traditional communities, as well as experiences and positive actions to minimize the problems of the sector, such as the marine extractive reserves (MERs).

The conference brought together 300 participants from various regions of Brazil. They included scholars, artisanal fishermen and fisherwomen, public managers, NGOs and representatives of communities living in marine protected areas (MPAs). The conference saw presentations of 36 scientific papers and 12 reports on the experiences of fishing communities, under the following themes: Artisanal Fisheries and Gender; Artisanal Fisheries and Protected Areas for Sustainable Use: Territories and Conflicts; and Artisanal Fisheries and Climate Change.

For three-and-a-half days, roundtable meets were organized



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## The Recife Letter

The Recife Letter, which was the outcome of the conference, and was presented on 3 September 2010, stressed:

- the importance of MERs along the Brazilian coast as a means for the conservation of marine resources and the survival of a diversity of cultures and ways of living of artisanal fishers;
- the role of these reserves in strengthening the fishers' organizations as each MER and reserve for sustainable development requires the creation of strong local social organizations and institutions;
- the role of MERs in determining a marine territory to be managed by organizations of fishers; and
- the role of these reserves in also fostering the growing participation of women.

The conference recommends:

- Further development of legal instruments for the recognition of the fishing territories of coastal artisanal fishing communities outside the existing marine reserves as well.
- The establishment of a permanent forum of civil society for discussing the demands of artisanal fishing communities, and monitoring government activities and projects related to the coastal and riverine areas.
- The organization of an electronic network by civil society organizations and marine reserves' associations to exchange ideas on positive experiences at the local level, dissemination of information on violation of fishers' rights, and organization of workshops.
- The organization of a conference every two years, similar to the Recife conference, in order to discuss and monitor the

development of MERs and for the exchange of experiences among them.

### On fishers' rights, territories and MERs

The conference acknowledges the growing number of marine reserves for sustainable use as an important strategy for fish resources conservation, particularly in the north and northeast regions where most of the 22 already established reserves are located and many more are being planned. It also recognizes that a growing organization of local associations is essential for the establishment and development of these reserves, particularly due to the fact that as their number has been rising, conflicts with other users of the coastal areas have also grown.

In view of this, the conference calls on the government and civil society to:

- respect and support the autonomous movements of fisherwomen in order to increase their social visibility and the importance of their role in fishing, processing and trading activities;
- reinforce and expand the legal status and rights of women in fisheries, including their role in the management of MERs;
- expand health and education services, taking into account the specific characteristics of fishing activities of women in the coastal communities;
- respect fishers' rights in their territories, and establish a moratorium on the expansion of commercial shrimp farms if they negatively affect mangroves and the way of living of artisanal fishers;

in the mornings, some formed exclusively by fisher leaders—male and female—and some by researchers, technicians, government officers and NGOs to discuss issues on MPAs, particularly those for sustainable use (like MERs and reserves for sustainable use, RDS), the role of fisherwomen in those reserves and climate change. In the afternoons, there were sessions organized for presentation of research papers by fisher leaders on the main issues and on the experiences in MPAs. Group discussions on relevant points that would later form the basis for the recommendations of the conference also took place in the afternoon.

Professor Antonio Carlos Diegues, a Member of ICSF, discussed the identity of coastal communities,

describing artisanal fishers: "The artisanal fisherman is someone who decides for himself how to go fishing, when to go fishing, which buddies or fellows to go fishing with. The only aspect he does not command in all this process is the commercialization. That's where he fares badly."

Researcher Lourdes Furtado from the Amazon talked about the indivisibility between land and water for the artisanal fishermen, bringing up the issue of the territories: "Land for living, water to work".

Maria Aparecida Ferreira, a community leader from the Ibiraquera MER in the State of Santa Catarina, shared the experience of strengthening the fishermen's organizations during the process

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- require the Prosecuting Office from the Ministry of Justice to be more involved in the solution of growing conflicts between artisanal fisheries and large-scale activities;
- demand that funds from environmental impact mitigation projects also benefit local coastal communities and their environment;
- ask fishers' organizations to reinforce their alliances with indigenous peoples and traditional communities participating in the National Forum of Indigenous Peoples and Traditional Communities so that they are more empowered;
- ensure that the territory of extractive reserves includes not only the marine but also the land area used by fishers;
- ask fishers' organizations and governments to promote mutual visits among extractive reserve members in order to exchange positive experiences and problems faced by the reserves; and
- promote activities complementary to fishing, in particular local or community tourism.

#### **On recognition of artisanal fishing knowledge**

- recognize and use the traditional ecological knowledge of fishermen in the planning, monitoring and running of MERS;
- ensure that scientific research and studies undertaken by several institutions benefit local communities and that the results are passed on to them;
- promote and disseminate research on traditional and scientific knowledge on MERS, and encourage researchers to send the communities a summary of their studies in an accessible format;
- incorporate the traditional knowledge of fisherwomen in the process of establishing and running MERS; and

- produce statistics on production, marketing, health and education, taking into account the specificity of women's fishing activities.

#### **On fishing communities and climate change**

Many fisher leaders have expressed their concern about the frequency and devastating powers of extreme climate changes, including intensive flooding close to the river mouths, which affects communities; change in coastal water temperature, which affects the migratory patterns of fish species, pushing some of them out into the high seas; increase in the number and severity of storms, particularly in the southern States, leading to the capsizing of a greater number of fishing boats; and coastal erosion that threatens some villages. There is also concern that fishing communities will be more affected than others, although their contribution to climate change is lower than that of industrial societies.

#### **In view of this, the conference recommends:**

- More attention should be paid by the government to the impacts of climate change on fishing communities, as many of them are distant from urban centres.
- Coastal communities should develop their local institutions to cope with these events.
- Special funds should be allocated to community organizations to cope with climate change and its impacts.
- Coastal communities should share their knowledge on the impacts of these changes and ways to cope with them.
- Marine and coastal reserves can be important tools to protect the environment and communities against the consequences of climate change.

of creating a reserve: "Formalizing the reserve is just a detail; what really matters is the union of a people in search...the hardest part is to engage the community. A reserve makes the fishermen bring the responsibility upon themselves".

Fisherwoman Eliene Maria, from the National Articulation of Fisherwomen of Ceará State, described the creation of the movement, highlighting the fisherwomen's difficulty in having their work valued and acknowledged, while struggling to establish themselves against the power of the fishermen in their own community.

"If I go to a clinic, I have to state in writing that I'm a fisherwoman. But what do the women do? They say they're housewives. Today we are calling for changes in the

documentation. We must state what we are; if I am a fisherwoman, I must say I am a fisherwoman," said Maria.

The non-recognition of occupational diseases by the healthcare system was also discussed to a great extent, especially in relation to the shellfish fisherwomen, as explained by Maria Jose Pacheco from the Fisheries' Pastoral: "The health policy does not take into consideration the specific health aspects of the communities, especially of the shellfish fisherwomen".

Climate change was also discussed at the conference, and MPAs were cited as a way to cope with such external changes. The need to sensitize communities to the effects of climate change was cited by fisheries engineer Jefferson Souza from the NGO, Terramar Institute: "Who among us

does not feel the bio-ecological change of some species?”

The relationship between researchers and community, and traditional and scientific knowledge was constantly discussed at the plenary sessions. That was also the topic of the presentation by Professor Maria de Los Angeles Gasalla, who focused on climate change and the vulnerability of artisanal fisheries: “It is very important to know what is going on, what is changing in our environment, in order to adapt—because adapting is what you (fishers) know how to do”.

The creation of MERs—the Brazilian experience in sustainable-use MPAs—was regarded by communities and researchers as one of the most appropriate policies to minimize the existing conflicts in the coastal region that directly affect traditional communities. By definition, MERs are “protected areas aimed at sustainable use and conservation of natural renewable resources by traditional extractive populations”. Such MERs are currently seen as the best institutional arrangement to ensure fishing areas, minimizing the impacts and conflicts mentioned earlier. The main difference between the MERs and other MPAs is that management is performed by a deliberative managing council of the absolute majority of users—artisanal fishermen and fisherwomen—apart from the fact that MERs may only be set up upon the request of fishing communities.

As a result, a new generation of young male and female fisher leaders is being formed who participate actively in the process of establishing MERs. This is especially important since in some places conflicts occur with commercial shrimp farms, large-scale tourist interests and mining industries, among others.

The conclusions from the Recife conference were presented to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) meeting in Nagoya, Japan, in 2010 during a side-event organized by ICSF and resulted in a statement published in the “Action for Biodiversity Convention: Towards a Society in Harmony with Nature”,

where MERs were cited as an important stake in marine resources by the coastal communities in Brazil.

The Recife conference was conducted to open up a discussion space for the actors in artisanal fisheries in the northeast of Brazil. It resulted in the “Recife Letter”, a document that summarized the sector’s aspirations and claims, which was distributed to public and academic institutions, as well as to coastal communities. In addition, three demands that focused on the actual problems in the sector were produced:

- Support the struggle of the caiçara fishermen from the Jureia-Itatins Ecological Station, State of São Paulo, who are threatened with expulsion from their traditional territories, and who are demanding the creation of MERs in their territory.
- Support the struggle of fishermen and shellfish fisherwomen from the Baía de todos os Santos Bay of All Saints, in particular the struggles of the extractivist fishworkers from Iguape Bay MER against the implementation of economic projects which are harmful to fishing.
- Support the permanent rights of the families in the islands of the Sirinhaém estuary, State of Pernambuco, to have their territory of residence and work officially recognized by the State with the creation of the Sirinhaém-Ipojuca MER.

#### For more

[www.fundaj.gov.br/](http://www.fundaj.gov.br/)

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[icsf.net/icsf2006/uploads/publications/monograph/pdf/english/issue\\_99/ALL.pdf](http://icsf.net/icsf2006/uploads/publications/monograph/pdf/english/issue_99/ALL.pdf)

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