

Comment

Don't forget fishworkers

A widely reported conference on the conservation and management of highly migratory stocks like tuna, and of straddling stock species like cod that lie both within and beyond exclusive economic zones was held at New York from 12 to 30 July 1993.

The Conference was of concern to artisanal and small-scale fishworkers for various reasons. The inter-relationship of species implies that excessive harvest of any one species could sometimes affect the catch potential of others, irrespective of juridical boundaries.

The situation is worsened by burgeoning international fisheries agreements to access the under-exploited waters of the South. In Senegal, for example, the artisanal fishworkers' organisation, Collectif National des Pecheurs Artisanaux du Senegal (CNPS), has been lobbying against the fisheries agreements under the Lome Convention of the European Community. Further, overexploitation of stocks can lead to the migration of fishing fleet into inshore waters. This could threaten the lives and livelihood of artisanal and small-scale fishworkers in the North and the South.

However, the plight of victims of distant water fishing nations received scant attention at the Conference. The Conference made no mention of the importance of human rights aboard fishing vessels of countries known to operate with workers from the South, who are often employed on highly exploitative terms and conditions. Without making amends for this, and without recognizing the vulnerability of artisanal and small-scale fishing communities, there cannot be any responsible fishing. Neither can fishing vessels that do not meet the minimum standards of working conditions be expected to comply with resource management regimes.

Discussing fisheries is a very complex matter because fish is, at one and the same time, food, commodity and species. Despite well-documented difficulties, and the near impossibility of obtaining reliable data on straddling and migratory stocks, the Conference is still underpinned on traditional concepts of resource management, which have so far not prevented overfishing anywhere in the world.

Without an integrated perspective which takes into consideration all the above aspects as well as the needs and priorities of various interest groups, there will be little success with fisheries management. Special provisions should be made to protect the interests of artisanal and small-scale fishworkers who face direct and indirect threats, especially since they lack recourse to an alternative livelihood.

When the Conference meets again in March 1994, it should also address the issue of violation of human rights in joint ventures. There should be adequate provisions for implementation of strong punitive measures by the port states themselves, instead of leaving these to ill-equipped flag states. The poor system of monitoring, Control and surveillance that prevails in almost all developing countries should not become an excuse for the continued violation of the fishing space of artisanal fishermen.

But only by expanding its current, rather rigid, framework can the Conference hope to tackle these substantive issues.

