

# A Human-rights Approach to Fisheries

## The 'green economy' that Rio+20 hopes to focus on cannot afford to ignore a human-rights approach to sustainable fisheries

**T**wenty years after the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, the United Nations (UN) is again bringing together governments, international institutions and major groups to Rio in June 2012 for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development or Rio+20. This time, the aim is to secure political commitment for sustainable development, assess progress since the Earth Summit, and look ahead 20 years.

Rio+20 will focus on how to build a 'green economy' to achieve sustainable development and poverty alleviation, and how to improve international co-ordination for sustainable development (see page 4). So far, 147 Member States have been inscribed to speak at Rio+20. Of these, 108 are either heads of State or government, making the expected participation higher than the Johannesburg Summit in 2002.

As far as sustainable development of marine fisheries is concerned, since the Earth Summit, there have been four significant global developments worth mentioning: the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA); the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO); the Jakarta Mandate on Marine and Coastal Biodiversity in the context of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD); and the International Labour Organization's Work in Fishing Convention, 2007.

There are several international mechanisms building up on the first three developments, whose ramifications range from the global to the national and local levels. While too much attention has been given to the economic and environmental pillars of sustainable fisheries, the social pillar has been neglected. We hope Rio+20 will redress this imbalance. In order to strengthen the social pillar of sustainable development, particularly in fisheries, a human-rights approach is needed.

A human-rights approach towards sustainable fisheries will sufficiently emphasize the social dimension of sustainable fisheries. It will promote the contribution of marine living resources to eliminate malnutrition. It will recognize the importance of sustainable small-scale and artisanal fisheries, and protect the rights of subsistence, small-scale and artisanal men and women fishers and fishworkers to a secure and just livelihood, and ensure preferential access to their traditional fishing grounds and resources.

The human-rights approach will also:

- recognize the rights of small-scale fishworkers, indigenous peoples and local communities to the sustainable utilization and protection of their habitats;
- protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices compatible with conservation or sustainable use;
- ensure sustainable fisheries conservation, management and development, as well as conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity, drawing not only on scientific knowledge but also on the traditional fishery knowledge and technologies of fishing communities and indigenous peoples;
- empower traditional as well as producer organizations to undertake concurrent management of fishery resources;
- ensure consultation and effective participation of fishing

communities in the conservation, management and sustainable use of living aquatic resources;

- safeguard the interests of local communities and indigenous peoples in the negotiation and implementation of international agreements on the development or conservation of marine living resources;

- recognize the social-security rights of fishers and their dependents on par with other

workers, respect minimum age for work, recognize the right to safety and health, and the right to protection from work-related sickness or injury of fishers; and

- assure that policies and practices related to the promotion of international trade do not have adverse impacts on the nutritional rights and needs of local peoples.

These elements are already enshrined in Agenda 21, UNFSA, CCRF, the decisions of the Conference of the Parties of CBD, and the ILO Work in Fishing Convention, 2007, but poorly adopted and implemented at the national level. The FAO is also in the process of developing international guidelines on responsible small-scale fisheries, with a significant focus on a human-rights approach to small-scale fisheries.

Rio+20 hopes to generate solutions for sustainable development also by protecting oceans from overfishing, destruction of marine ecosystems and the adverse effects of climate change. All these could well reduce poverty, promote decent jobs and ensure sustainable and fair use of resources amongst fishing communities. But this will occur only if a human-rights approach towards sustainable fisheries is clearly recognized and factored into policies, legislation and reporting obligations of Member States. We hope Rio+20 will heed this lesson. **3**

