

A New Beginning

A consultation organized in Myanmar to discuss the FAO guidelines for small-scale fisheries proved significant

The consultations for the guidelines of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) on small-scale fisheries (SSF) have been rather extensive. In the case of Myanmar, they have also provided a possibility for the SSF community to participate in the process. It was also a first-time opportunity for the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) to interact with the fishworkers of Myanmar.

fishers were from the marine sector, there were a few from the inland fishery—nearshore and brackishwater fishers as well as aquaculturists, mainly from the MFF.

Having got involved with fishing communities in the delta region after the Nargis cyclone, NAG was ideally placed to do the organizational groundwork for the consultation. As elsewhere, the small-scale fishery of the delta is different from the fisheries of the two neighbouring regions. Since this was the first time the fishers of these regions were getting together, it was felt important for them to not only interact with one another but also to understand the specificities of the small-scale fisheries of each region. Hence the consultation shunned formalities and grand speeches and got down directly into serious work in the form of discussion groups. That was the pedagogy for the first two days—a series of group discussions followed by feedback at plenary sessions, concluding in responses from a panel of selected and representative participants.

The four sessions focused on the following themes:

- Definition of SSF
- Problems and challenges faced by SSF
- Legislative provisions for SSF
- Proposals to sustain livelihoods of fishing communities

Wider understanding

Through discussions and feedback, the entire group gained a wide understanding of the fisheries of the different coastal regions. While all the fishers are expected to obtain fishing licences, it was revealed that in one

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The Myanmar consultation was organized jointly by the Myanmar Fisheries Federation (MFF), the National Activities Group (NAG) and ICSF in Yangon between 12 and 15 September 2012. It brought together 35 fishworkers (including five women) and their organizations from the three coastal States (administrative regions) of Myanmar. The participants also included 10 parliamentarians (including one woman) as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Oxfam, Green Earth and the Myanmar Livestock Group and the local FAO Programme Chief who participated on all three days. On the final day there were members who represented the State and national departments of fisheries and other concerned people from Yangon. The local press was well represented too. While the majority of the

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region fishing grounds were tendered out, leading to large-scale operations of fixed bag-nets that require the hiring of smaller-scale fishers to carry the catches to the shore. As a result, access to the common fishing grounds was limited for the family of the smaller-scale fishers who fish for subsistence.

Another issue was the control of fish catches by the traders who either lease out the fishing grounds or advance capital for fishing operations. They also control prices and marketing networks. Direct access to markets is another major issue as there are no cold-chain facilities and distances to the large towns are considerable. Although closed seasons exist, the coastal fishers complain that large foreign and other deep-sea vessels are not controlled, and they also fish within the inshore waters, raising conflicts with local fishers and limiting their fish catches.

The consultation found it difficult to concretize what actually comprises SSF. According to some participants, it only included the very small boats

using 8-hp outboard engines and operating in the nearshore waters. But there were also mini-trawlers and larger boats of 50 hp that carried catches of the fixed bag-nets, and others that used hooks-and-line and gillnets, all of which operated within the territorial waters and were owner-operated with hired crew. Why should these not be included in SSF, some wondered. Even as the consultation opened up an area of discussion, it will take time for some form of clarity to settle on the issue.

On the third day of the consultation, a larger group that included members of the fisheries department gave inputs, which were followed by presentations from selected participants of the earlier sessions. The resultant feedback proved to be excellent: A local parliamentarian spoke of the need to think anew of fisherpeople having social, political and economic rights. A local community-based organization stressed the right to organize, a right not yet institutionalized in Myanmar's legislative framework.

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The participants for the three-day workshop included 10 parliamentarians as well as NGOs, the Myanmar Livestock Group and the local FAO Programme Chief


Fishers articulated their problems. MFF outlined its role as a national platform for all fisher organizations.

These discussions pointed to the focus of future fisheries governance. From the discussions at the consultation, it appeared that Myanmar's Fisheries Department was handicapped in relation to fisheries as it had no mandate other than issuing and renewing fishing licences. No development programmes have been undertaken for SSF, and no details of fisheries budgets are available for public scrutiny. National budgets seem to allocate only the salaries

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present at the consultation showed great interest in understanding these issues and how governance could be made more democratic and people-oriented, given the fact that most of them are critical of how the military regime of the past has dealt with the national wealth and resources of the country.

In that sense, the Myanmar consultation was opportune. Despite the fact that the country has been under a rather controlled regime for the last few decades, the level of discussion at the consultation was in no way indicative of a lack of freedom of expression. Despite linguistic and ethnic differences, the overall atmosphere was one of positive interaction.

At the end of the consultation, the fishers and parliamentarians parted only after exhorting NAG to organize many more similar processes at the regional level to impart information to people so that they could organize themselves locally too. The Myanmar consultation was thus successful in highlighting issues related to SSF and in instilling a commitment to address them more seriously. 

of departmental personnel. As elsewhere in the region, aquaculture in Myanmar—both brackish- and freshwater—is gaining importance, but there was not much discussion on the issue at the consultation.

NAG made two presentations on the history of fishing rights in Myanmar, which revealed the new framework required for governance of fisheries. On behalf of ICSF, this writer presented the FAO process for the SSF guidelines, which received positive responses, since most of the participants had not yet heard about them. The presentation was followed by a lively panel discussion on questions that emerged from the floor.

Since the 2011 elections, Myanmar has been going through a process of democratization. Since fisheries is a district/regional subject, local districts are busy creating their own fisheries laws within the framework of the national law. Unfortunately, as Myanmar has been rather isolated during the last two decades, the issues of customary rights, rights to livelihood and the role of the State towards the unorganized sectors are not concepts that greatly influence contemporary debates on legislation. Nonetheless, the parliamentarians

For more

www.apfic.org/uploads/2012_myanmar_legal

A review of Myanmar Fisheries Legislation, with Particular Reference to Freshwater Fisheries Legislation

www.fao.org/fi/oldsite/FCP/en/MMR/profile.htm

FAO Fisheries Profile – The Union of Myanmar

www.ide.go.jp/English/Publish/Download/Vrf/pdf/433.pdf

Trends of Development of Myanmar Fisheries with Reference to Japanese Experiences