

Sticky Issues

An update on the recent Technical Consultation on the International Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries

The Technical Consultation (TC) on International Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines), organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) from 20 to 24 May 2013, in Rome, Italy, was well attended. There were delegations from 68 countries and the European Union (EU).

Also represented was the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Special Rapporteur on the

The Draft of the SSF Guidelines, titled 'Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication', contained 13 sections and 108 paragraphs, apart from the Preface. In the hope that the negotiations could be completed within the week, three night sessions were scheduled.

However, the time available still proved to be inadequate. Only about two-thirds of the text (until para 7.8) could be discussed. There was agreement on about half of the 59 paragraphs discussed, implying that they are closed for further discussion.

The remaining paragraphs, however, still contain bracketed text or are fully bracketed, meaning that the text within the brackets is open to further discussion. The second round of negotiations, tentatively scheduled to be held during 3 to 7 February 2014, thus has its work cut out.

So what were some of the 'sticky issues'? There was reluctance on the part of a few delegations to recognize the rights of small-scale fishers and fishworkers to participate in the governance of aquatic resources and, in fact, an antipathy in some quarters to the use of the term 'governance' itself.

Customary rights

The right to participate in governance could undermine the authority of the State, it was feared. The recognition of customary rights and systems, and of the rights of indigenous people, consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), was not forthcoming from some delegations.

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Right to Food, as well as observers from six intergovernmental organizations.

There was a substantial 37-member-strong civil society delegation, with men and women from 18 countries, representing the civil society organization (CSO) platform comprising the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF), the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), and the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty (IPC). Included in the CSO delegation were several small-scale and artisanal fishermen and fisherwomen from both developing and industrialized countries.

Fabio Hazin from Brazil was elected as the Chair. The task before the TC was ambitious from the start.

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The CSO voice

Joint Opening Statement: World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF), World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) and the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty (IPC), made on 20 May 2013 at the Technical Consultation on International Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries, Rome, Italy, 20 to 24 May 2013

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Zoila Bustamante Cardenas. I am the President of the Chilean National Confederation of Artisanal Fishermen, an organization that unites 35,000 artisanal fishers, men and women, along the length of Chile's 4,500-km coast.

I speak on behalf of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples, the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers and the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty.

We are a platform of small-scale food producers who include fishworkers and indigenous people. Our international member-based organizations represent fishworkers from over 50 countries, from both North and South, and people actively engaged in supporting our communities.

Artisanal and small-scale fisheries represent the majority fisheries sector, and we provide the most sustainable model of fishery exploitation from a social, economic and environmental perspective.


Our engagement with FAO to develop this international instrument began in 2008 following the Global Conference on Small-scale Fisheries in Bangkok, Thailand. However, we have been knocking on the door of FAO since 1984 when small-scale fishers and their supporters were excluded from participating in decision-making processes that affected their livelihoods.

We welcome the fact that we can now engage with FAO in developing this instrument. In fact, over the last two years we have co-operated with FAO to organize around 30 national and regional-level consultations across Africa, Asia, South and North America and Europe. Through these consultations, over 2,500 people, men and women from small-scale fishing communities, have had the chance to contribute to this process.

For us, the process of developing these Guidelines represents an important milestone by adopting an inclusive approach to small-scale fisheries, an approach which places equal emphasis on social development, the human rights of fishing communities and the responsible governance of the fisheries on which their food security, livelihoods, and wellbeing depend.

We welcome the visibility the Guidelines give to women and the serious way in which they address gender issues. The Guidelines also take the unprecedented step of addressing as a whole the different aspects of small-scale fisheries from the perspective of governance, production, trade, labour and quality of life.

The Guidelines also take account of the fact that small-scale fisheries face a multitude of threats from more powerful interests both from within and outside the fisheries sector. They come at a critical juncture of global transition when we face challenges of an economic, social and environmental nature where small-scale fisheries provide the best hope for generating employment, livelihoods and food for the burgeoning world population.

We are committed to working with FAO and its member States to develop effective Guidelines and to engage wholeheartedly with you in their development and implementation once adopted by the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) next year. 

Paternoster snoek being caught and processed in South Africa



There was unwillingness on the part of some delegations to keep the focus on ‘marginalized and vulnerable groups’ within small-scale fisheries, fearing that the term could be interpreted too broadly. There were even reservations about keeping the phrase “both men and women”, which was mentioned in several paragraphs of the draft text to ensure a gender focus. Some delegations objected to the term ‘informal economy’, equating it with the ‘illegal economy’, though significant small-scale fisheries, particularly in the developing world, can be considered to be part of the informal economy.

Some of the other areas on which agreement was not forthcoming related to: the need for redistributive reforms to facilitate equitable access to fishery resources for small-scale fishing communities; the need for effective and meaningful consultations with fishing communities prior to commencing a commercial or development project which impacts them; the extent to which, and the manner in which, the role of migrant fishers, and of transboundary movements of fishers, should be reflected in the Guidelines; and the extent to which the Guidelines should stress the need for consistency with the mandate, principles, rights and obligations established in WTO agreements.

For fishworker organizations and support groups present in Rome, the reluctance of some delegations to support certain issues of fundamental importance to them was disappointing. CSOs consistently pointed out that the issues being raised were the result of an intensive, participatory, bottom-up process of consultation with small-scale fishworker groups.

Between them, CSOs had organized 20 national-level workshops spanning Asia, Africa and Latin America, two regional workshops in Africa, as well as consultations among small-scale fishers and fishworkers in the EU and Canada in the period between September 2011 and December 2012. More than 2,300 people had participated in these consultations and

shared their aspirations and proposals in relation to the Guidelines.

On a more positive note, at least some of the interventions made by CSOs on issues of critical importance to small-scale fishing communities found the support of delegations, ensuring that reference to them was retained or included in the text. As per FAO rules, CSOs were only allowed to make interventions after delegations had done so. Also encouraging was the fact that some delegations included CSO representatives.

...there is much at stake for fishworkers in the next round of negotiations...

The statement presented by CSOs (see box) at the start of the negotiations reflected the hope that fishworker and support groups had from the Guidelines process and from their delegations.

However, at the end of the first round of negotiations, Ramida Sarasit, a woman leader representing the Fisherfolk Federation of Thailand, said: “I feel we have not gained much as yet. Most of the States, as far as I can see, are not ready to respect the rights of small-scale fishing communities. Day by day, we are losing our rights, our coastal and inland water bodies, our livelihoods. We cannot see any progress unless States pay serious attention and address the root causes of our issues.”

Clearly, there is much at stake for fishworkers in the next round of negotiations; so too, to be an effective tool, the SSF Guidelines must reflect, and be relevant to, the day-to-day realities and problems faced by fishworkers.

For more



igsf.icsf.net

Small-scale fisheries guidelines

sites.google.com/site/smallscalefisheries

Civil society website on SSF guidelines