

Aquaculture with a Human Face

Strategies to promote aquaculture globally should shun corporate-driven agendas and focus instead on sustainability, food security and human rights

Aquaculture now accounts for 48.6 per cent of fish produced for human consumption globally. It is the fastest-growing food-production sector, with an annual growth rate of about 6.5 per cent. However, trends indicate a gradual decline in this rate, which could, by 2030, dip to around four per cent. But to meet the growing global demand for fish, it is estimated that aquaculture production would need to grow by 5.6 per cent annually. There are also regional imbalances in world aquaculture production, with Asia accounting for most of the output.

Noting this scenario, at the Seventh Session of the Sub-Committee on Aquaculture (SCA) of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), held at St Petersburg, Russia, in October 2013, over 50 countries endorsed

a Global Aquaculture Advancement Partnership (GAAP) programme to bring together a broad range of public- and private-sector stakeholders to find sustainable solutions for the problems in the sector.

GAAP is expected to review constraints to growth in aquaculture, and contribute effectively to help eliminate poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition by supporting partnership-based initiatives, which will lead to sustainable increases in aquaculture production.

The programme is mooted to be consistent with the strategic objectives of FAO, which include eradication of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition; increasing and improving the provision of goods and services from agriculture, forestry and fisheries in a sustainable manner; and reducing rural poverty.

As such, even as partnerships to boost production in the aquaculture sector multiply and gain support, and as efforts to enhance investment in aquaculture, promote foreign direct investment, joint ventures and public-private-partnerships gain ground, some fundamental questions must be raised. What forms of aquaculture have contributed to the food-security and nutritional requirements of the world's needy

populations? Who has benefited from the boom in export-oriented forms of intensive aquaculture? What kinds of employment opportunities and working conditions have been created? Is farmed-fish produced by large-scale aquaculture nutritionally at par with wild-caught fish? Is an overarching emphasis on production justified?

An evidence-based exploration of such issues, with inputs from local communities, would provide

important guidance and help avoid the severe social, environmental and economic problems that aquaculture has caused in some parts of the world. In countries like Chile, Ecuador, Bangladesh and Thailand, for example, such problems include the loss of biodiversity, introduction of alien species, spread of disease and pollution, usurpation of community resources and rights,

food insecurity, and other forms of severe violations of human rights.

It is imperative, therefore, that efforts to enhance aquaculture in the future—including through partnerships formed and resources mobilized—avoid such mistakes. They must be rooted within a human rights and sustainable-development framework, balancing economic, social and environmental aspects. Interventions must contribute directly to food security, nutrition and poverty alleviation, and to improved labour conditions and social protection for workers in the sector.

Small-scale, low-input forms of aquaculture that are locally owned, and that help in creating and sustaining livelihoods of riparian communities (especially in remote rural areas with few other employment opportunities), and in meeting nutrition- and food-security needs, must be prioritized and supported. Such partnerships must not be allowed to become a trojan horse to promote corporate-driven agendas that undermine biodiversity and human-rights imperatives.

COFI would do well to bear these concerns in mind when the report of the SCA comes up for discussion and adoption at its next session.

