

# Redeeming Small-scale Fishers

**Greater visibility and recognition of inland fisheries could redeem small-scale fishers and fishworkers from being amongst the most impoverished class of community**

**N**early 150 years ago, Francis Day, the colonial Inspector General of fisheries in British India, wrote in his famous Report of the Fresh Water Fish and Fisheries of India and Burma that freshwater fishermen were amongst the most impoverished class of community, and were, as a result, seeking employment outside the subsector as railway and agriculture labourers and as petty traders.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that 60 mn people—half of them, women—are fully or partially dependent on inland, small-scale fisheries in streams, rivers, lakes, reservoirs, floodplains and other wetlands, including rice fields and swamp lands, spread over 10 mn sq km worldwide, especially in Asia and Africa. They harvest nearly 12 mn tonnes of fish—which was 5 mn tonnes in 1980—at a value of US\$9 bn (see article, page 4), providing a rich source of micronutrients, essential protein, vitamins and fats, particularly to disadvantaged local communities.

The current estimates of inland capture fishery production, although more than doubled since 1980, are believed to be much below the actual levels due to problems with under-reporting and poor data collection, resulting in underestimating its economic, social and nutritional benefits and contribution to livelihoods and food security.

Inland fishery production is likely to be much higher than the estimated inland capture fishery production if inland culture fishery production—the fastest growing fishery subsector in several Asian countries—is included in it. (Currently, the inland culture fishery production is mostly reported under freshwater aquaculture production.).

Such a nutritionally beneficial increase in inland fish production is achieved in spite of the fact that decisions regarding land and water use rarely favour inland fisheries, and that the legal and policy space accorded to inland capture and culture fisheries in the context of freshwater resources is often minimal and the consumptive use of water resources is typically given disproportional priority over non-consumptive uses such as fisheries.

Equitable and reasonable utilization of land and water resources, therefore, is essential to further

enhance the protection of life and livelihoods of inland fishing communities, as well as to provide access to affordable fish and nutrition to the rural poor. Adoption of an integrated policy of land and water uses should be advocated to realize the full fisheries potential of inland water bodies, taking cognizance of the fact that the economic cost of producing acceptable nutritious fish from inland capture and culture fisheries in healthy ecosystems is much less than that from marine fisheries.



Further, considering that a significant share of inland fish production derives from waters shared by more than one nation, the nutritional security of vulnerable and marginalized sections, in particular, can be greatly enhanced in remote areas if an integrated river basin management approach

is promoted. This is to ensure that adequate water quantity and quality are maintained—including protection from indiscriminate pollution—for fisheries in shared water bodies. In this context, we encourage countries with shared watercourses to ratify the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses, to deal with governance of non-consumptive use of international watercourses.

Towards making the subsector more visible and to bring recognition to the substantial contribution of inland fisheries to food security and poverty eradication, we welcome the implementation of the Rome Declaration: Ten Steps to Responsible Inland Fisheries in conjunction with the SSF Guidelines and other instruments, such as the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security. Greater visibility and recognition of inland fisheries, we hope, will lead to the subsector being favourably included in policy discussions on how water is managed and the subsector benefiting from decisions regarding land and water use.

Such a transformation, we are sure, can definitely lead to retaining freshwater fishers and fishworkers in inland fisheries as their principal source of livelihood. It could, finally, redeem them from being amongst the most impoverished class of community.