

A Plan of Action

A regional workshop on securing sustainable small-scale fisheries in the Lower Mekong Region, held in Thailand, identified issue and action points that need to be addressed

Sixty participants—women and men representing fishing communities, civil society organizations (CSOs) and governments in the Mekong region (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar)—along with 17 representatives from regional and international organizations participated in the Regional Workshop on Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Lower Mekong Region from 30 April to 1 May 2016.

areas support a matching ethnic and linguistic diversity that are also endemic. There are millions of women and men fishers, farmers and ethnic communities dependent on the water resources of this ecosystem for their life and livelihood. Many of them alternate between fishing and farming and many fishers are also farmers in the region. A vibrant domestic economy is dependent on small-scale agriculture and the fisheries practices of these communities in the region.

There are several issues facing both the inland and marine fishing communities in the context of the Mekong river basin ecosystem that violate rights guaranteed in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Under the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement (ACIA) and the Greater Mekong Sub-region Economic Co-operation Program (GMS), huge investments are made in the region in extractive and industrial projects as well as in tourism. Various development projects on Mekong and its tributaries, particularly a large number of upstream hydroelectric projects, are negatively impacting downstream aquatic biodiversity, the life cycle of fish, feeding and nursery areas, water quality and the river basin ecosystem (comprising rivers, floodplains, lakes, coastal mangroves, ponds, coastal lagoons, etc.).

Salinity

While there is significant reduction in river flow downstream, there is an alarming increase in salinity intrusion—attributed to climate change/variability—into freshwater fish and agriculture farms, affecting farm output and fisheries.

The Mekong River yields about 4 mn tonnes of fish, which includes large and small fish, and fish that migrates upstream from the sea to spawn.

They identified the following issues of concern to small-scale fishing communities in the region and proposed action points for the consideration of relevant government departments, regional bodies such as the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Centre (SEAFDEC), other relevant national, bilateral and multilateral bodies and civil society, as appropriate.

The Mekong River yields about 4 mn tonnes of fish, which includes large and small fish, and fish that migrates upstream from the sea to spawn. This estimate goes up to 8 mn tonnes if all Mekong wetland fish production is taken into account. The entire fisheries in the Mekong River can be termed small-scale. The river—second only to the Amazon in terms of biodiversity—is home to many endemic species. Thirty-two of these species are on the IUCN Red List. The riparian

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There is poor information available to the downstream riparian communities about these projects and their impacts. There are cumulative impacts as a result that threaten the lives and livelihoods of fishers, reducing their access to fisheries resources and violating the customary rights of indigenous peoples. They are often forced out of their homes and traditional occupations. Space needs to be created to back up local people and to empower them. Farmers, fishers and the indigenous peoples need to collaborate to protect the river basin ecosystem.

The Mekong River is shared between six countries. A regional framework for co-operation is required between the riparian States, particularly the downstream countries, towards addressing the above issues at the regional, national and local levels. The 1997 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (UNWC) may be relevant as a regional legal framework also to look at transboundary issues related to fish. Vietnam has ratified the Convention and Thailand is considering the same.

In coastal areas, the displacement of small-scale fishing communities due to the construction of deep-sea fishing ports and coal-fired power plants and the practice of destructive bottom trawling are threats

facing small-scale marine fishing communities. These are further exacerbated by insecure tenure rights to housing of small-scale fishing communities. The consent of communities is rarely sought while bringing infrastructure projects to the region.

Although nearly 50 per cent of people working in small-scale fisheries are women, their role in the sector is still severely under-acknowledged. Inequalities persist which hamper the full realization of human rights and sustainable development. Women are under-represented when it comes to decisionmaking and leadership roles even within fisherpeoples' organizations.

The importance of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) for both inland and marine small-scale fisheries in the Lower Mekong River Basin countries is recognized in the above background to:

- i. to bring about better governance reforms in relation to small-scale marine and inland fisheries, especially to facilitate unhindered and equitable access to fisheries resources for small-scale fishing communities;
- ii. eradicate hunger and poverty;
- iii. invest in social development and decent work;

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Women and men representing fishing communities, civil society organizations (CSOs) and governments in the Mekong region participated in the Regional Workshop on Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Lower Mekong Region from 30 April to 1 May 2016

- iv. adopt measures for long-term conservation and sustainable use of fisheries resources;
- v. promote alternative livelihoods;
- vi. protect tenure rights to land and water; and
- vii. valorise domestic economies dependent on small-scale farming and fishing operations within and outside the region.

The SSF Guidelines can assist in setting priorities in sustainable and responsible use of fisheries as well as strengthen initiatives to set principles and standards for regulating activities impacting small-scale fishing communities in the river basin ecosystem.

The implementation of the SSF Guidelines at the regional, national and local levels demands the involvement of all stakeholders, including the government and civil society. There are enabling factors in both inland and marine fisheries. Countries like Vietnam are paying greater attention to inland fisheries issues now and the SSF Guidelines can be a tool to assist this process. In marine fisheries, countries like Thailand are raising the minimum age for fishing; introducing co-management; and are using memorandums of understanding to hire migrant workers into fishing.

A legal foundation should be laid for supporting the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, especially based on a human-rights-based approach, an ecosystem approach and a gender-sensitive approach. National Constitutions provide the human-rights framework towards implementation.

Policies and legislation for mainstreaming implementation of the SSF Guidelines should not only be technical, but local culture, customary rights and traditions are also to be factored in. Both horizontal and vertical dimensions of implementation thus should be considered in an integrated and holistic manner. Both the government and the community should collaborate in implementation also by empowering local communities.

Full and effective participation of women should be ensured in this process. All forms of support, including

financial support, should be mobilized for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines.

The following actions points within the framework of the SSF Guidelines are addressed to both the State and civil society actors towards redefining the development paradigm in the Lower Mekong River Basin to promote sustainable and equitable marine and inland fisheries in the region, and to protect small-scale fishers, farmers and indigenous peoples from infrastructure and industrial projects that negatively impact their access to land, fisheries and markets.

Governance of tenure in small-scale fisheries and resource management

- Develop laws and regulations applying a human-rights-based approach, an ecosystem approach and a gender-sensitive approach.
- Secure the rights of fishing communities to land for decent housing and for fishery-related activities, particularly in areas where their access is most threatened. The specific needs of women harvesters and fish processors for access to land for fishery-related activities should be prioritized..
- Improve current arrangements for access to land and fishery resources for small-scale fisheries, both marine and inland.
- Review existing tenure rights systems for fisheries and land to protect small-scale fisheries.
- Ensure equitable participation of small-scale fisheries in co-management and other initiatives and frameworks.

Social development

- Empower small-scale fishing communities through an integrated ecosystem/holistic approach for small-scale fisheries development. Establish a national platform representing all stakeholders to support the implementation of the SSF Guidelines in a participatory manner.
- Address issues related to transborder movement of workers

to support an environment for small-scale fisheries communities to enjoy decent work.

- Promote investment in human resource development such as education, health, basic sanitation and drinking water. Enable access to education and health facilities, including medical insurance that meet the needs of small-scale fishing communities, and ensure access of women to such services. In this context, consider learning from the best practices in the region.
- Strengthen capacity building of women and youth.
- Address occupational health issues and unfair working conditions of all small-scale fishers and fishworkers.
- Ensure comprehensive social protection to small-scale fishing communities.
- Promote consumer education to support small-scale fisheries development.

Value chains, post-harvest and trade

- Improve access to credit, infrastructure, market and landing centre facilities, particularly storage, water and sanitation, as well as amenities that facilitate the work participation of women, such as creches, toilets and sanitary facilities, and secure shelters and spaces to enable women to retain and enhance their livelihoods throughout the value chain.
- Strengthen co-operatives and build their capacity to improve bargaining positions of small-scale fishers, fishworkers and fish processors. Ensure women have the support and educational resources to occupy leadership positions in such co-operatives.

Disaster risks and climate change

- Promote more research and use of alternative energy sources (solar, wind, etc.) instead of coal or hydro power plants.
- Protect communities against disasters and compensate communities that are impacted by climate change and natural disasters.

- Link national strategies for climate change and disaster risks to the local level.
- Adopt measures to protect crops from flooding and undertake research into varieties of rice and fish that are more resistant/suitable for new situations, giving preference to indigenous species and traditional practices.
- Provide better information and knowledge on how the Mekong River Basin is affected by climate change and human activities with regard to fish, habitats, livelihoods, ecosystems, etc. and what the root causes are, including how upstream activities affect communities downstream. This also includes the need for proper impact and vulnerability assessments, and pre- and post-evaluations.
- Disseminate and communicate existing knowledge (including between countries).
- Develop early warning systems with regard to water quantity and quality upstream to make sure downstream communities have information. This should include tools for detecting fish disease.
- Promote, at the government level, harmonised regional policies and regulations and regional mechanisms for sustainable and responsible fisheries and develop safeguards against negative impacts of infrastructure projects through ASEAN and SEAFDEC, as appropriate.
- Involve existing regional CSO mechanisms, or establish new ones, if needed, in the Mekong River Basin to share experiences through social media and regular meetings with regard to government policies towards achieving positive changes for fishing, farming and indigenous communities. One person in each country should be appointed to follow up and be the focal point.
- Small-scale fisheries organizations need to be strengthened and there is a need to develop capacity of community leaders with special emphasis on women and indigenous peoples. ♣

For more



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**Implementation of the
 SSF Guidelines**