

From Rhetoric to Reality

As the implementation of the SSF Guidelines gets under way, it is imperative to lobby for policies and processes that will empower small-scale fishing communities

The Thirty-third Session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), held in Rome in July 2018, proved to be a watershed for small-scale fisheries. This COFI discussed, among other things, several exciting initiatives for the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) (see article, page 39).

These initiatives, focusing on men and women from small-scale artisanal fishing communities and indigenous peoples, were reported by delegates from both developed and developing countries, including Small-Island Developing States (SIDS). It was gratifying to note that some countries that had not been so enthusiastic during the negotiation stage, are now actively promoting the SSF Guidelines at various levels.

While some of these initiatives focused on integrating the SSF Guidelines into national donor policy, national plans of action on small-scale fisheries, and national legislation on small-scale fisheries, others aimed at realizing regional strategies to ensure the sustainability of fishery resources as well as improving data on small-scale fisheries at the global level. Most, if not all, of these initiatives upheld the guiding principles of the SSF Guidelines, such as participation in decision-making processes and the need to stand up for human-rights principles and standards.

Considerable support was expressed for the civil society-initiated SSF Guidelines Global Strategic Framework (SSF GSF) to facilitate interaction between COFI Members and interested State and non-State actors to promote the implementation of the SSF Guidelines at all levels. Significant enthusiasm was shown in celebrating 2022 as the “International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture”, as proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly, and in developing a road map towards it. There was eagerness to meet the Sustainable Development Goal 14.b to provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources

and markets. In addition, delegates solidly backed the proposal to establish a new sub-committee on fisheries management under COFI, also with a focus on small-scale fisheries.

We hope these initiatives to strengthen small-scale fisheries will transform into policies and processes that will empower small-scale fishing communities and indigenous peoples who are dependent on small-scale fisheries for their life, livelihood and cultural wellbeing, at both the local and, particularly, the national level. The stories of displacement and loss of adjacency rights of indigenous peoples dependent on coastal, riverine and other inland water fisheries, as well as denial of their legal rights to territory, are many (see article on page 4, for example). Disruption of the land-sea

interface by reclamation projects, which negatively impact the livelihood of local small-scale fishing communities through pollution and destruction of coastal biodiversity as well as the exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons and minerals, are all real threats that hang over small-scale artisanal fishing communities.

We at ICSF have been following COFI meetings

since 1995, and are pleased to note that, for the first time, COFI has swung the spotlight onto small-scale fisheries. The SSF Guidelines have suddenly woken up the global community to the potential of small-scale fisheries in eradicating poverty, in enhancing food security and in securing sustainable fisheries.

Evidently, now is the time to move from rhetoric to reality. We hope there will be global support to assist small-scale fishing communities and indigenous peoples to address, in a coherent and consistent manner, local and national threats challenging their existence. In this connection we do need to be cautious that the economic, social, cultural and environmental conditions essential for the wellbeing of small-scale fishing communities and indigenous peoples are not forgotten. Prudence is required to ensure that small-scale fishing communities are understood to be integral to small-scale artisanal fisheries, and that the SSF Guidelines implementation process protects their interests in all time frames across the world.

