

# Guardians of the Sea

## The Regional Plan of Action for Small-scale Fisheries in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea is a model for other regional fisheries management organizations

For the first time since the endorsement of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) in Rome in June 2014, a regional fisheries body has adopted a plan of action for sustainable small-scale fisheries that draws upon these Guidelines and other instruments.

A Ministerial Declaration of the members of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), signed in Malta on 26 September 2018, has adopted a 10-year Regional Plan of Action (RPOA-SSF) to ensure the long-term environmental, economic and social sustainability of small-scale fisheries in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea (see article, page 4). The Ministerial Declaration, signed by representatives of 18 GFCM member countries and the European Commission, encourages all stakeholders from GFCM member countries to, among other things, promote the objectives and principles of the SSF Guidelines and to establish concrete actions based on the RPOA-SSF.

The Ministerial Declaration on the RPOA-SSF recognizes the role of small-scale fisheries in supporting livelihoods and promoting social inclusion and social and environmental sustainability. It observes that small-scale fisheries have a relatively low impact on the environment and offer a greater role for women. The lack of recognition, representativeness and proper characterisation of the small-scale fisheries sector is attributed to the highly segmented and scattered nature of the sector, on the one hand, and the presence of other local fishing industries and maritime activities, on the other. The Declaration further recognizes that small-scale fishers are not only resource users but also “guardians of the sea”, whose intimate knowledge of, and close relationship with, marine ecosystems are valuable in highlighting major environmental and climate changes.

To promote action, the Declaration provides a 25-point agenda and the RPOA-SSF spells out a nine-point action plan for littoral countries. These include the promotion of decent work of small-scale fisheries workers, and equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes. Based on indicative criteria such as vessel size, gear used, duration of fishing trips, non-vessel-based fishing activities, etc., the RPOA-SSF

is expected to provide a characterization of small-scale fisheries in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea region.

We urge member countries and interested stakeholders to not only promote the objectives and principles of the SSF Guidelines but also apply them in their national and regional contexts. The principles of the SSF Guidelines encompass international human-rights standards (including standards related to the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of fishers, fishworkers and fishing communities) and pay attention to vulnerable and marginalized groups. These are significant principles to be upheld while implementing the RPOA-SSF. Global food security and nutrition, and the right to adequate food, are important objectives of the SSF Guidelines that need to be transposed to regional and national levels.



Responsible governance of tenure of land and fisheries should be considered in the context of protecting the rights of small-scale fishers and fishworkers in relation to the coast and marine space as well as in governing the spatial interaction with other commercial fishery sectors. Small-scale fishers and fishworkers, as the SSF Guidelines observe, should have secure, equitable and socially and culturally appropriate tenure rights to fishery resources. GFCM member countries are encouraged to consider granting preferential access to small-scale fishers to fish in marine waters under national jurisdiction. In addition to technical criteria at the regional level, the characterization of small-scale fisheries at the national level may include social and cultural criteria as well. The latter criteria need to be developed in consultation with fishworkers' organizations and fishing communities.

Considering the lackadaisical approach of regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) to small-scale fisheries, the RPOA-SSF for the Mediterranean and the Black Sea is a significant milestone. We hope the RPOA-SSF succeeds in taking the SSF Guidelines to small-scale fisheries actors, including fishers' and fishworkers' organizations, in all its member countries, both developed and developing. We also hope it will prove to be a vehicle to promote and apply the SSF Guidelines at regional and national levels in a holistic manner. We call upon all other RFMOs having a mandate for small-scale fisheries to follow suit. 3