

Turn the Tide

Subsistence fisheries are an important source of nutrition, culture and welfare for communities in the Western and Central Pacific region, and ought to be protected

No other part of the world has a small population dispersed over such a vast ocean area. In the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, 11 million people live in 14 independent countries and eight territories, spread over 28 million sq km of ocean space. Their total land area is less than 2 per cent of the combined ocean area. Subsistence, coastal, artisanal, semi-industrial and industrial fisheries coexist in the region, harvesting species ranging from sedentary molluscs to shared, highly migratory tuna stocks. The fishing areas range from lagoons, reefs, shoals, archipelagic, internal and territorial waters, to the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the high seas.

Distant-water and national offshore fishing fleets dominate in terms of employment, revenue, income and foreign exchange in this region. They contribute 90 per cent of the fish catch in the region. Coastal commercial and small-scale fisheries (or subsistence coastal fisheries) are no less important.

Lagoons, reefs and shoals—the gleaning ground of subsistence fisheries—are significant sources of food and nutrition for the coastal population. Less than 4 per cent of the total land area is arable. In countries in the region with relatively large populations, over 80 per cent of the coastal catch is used for subsistence. In some remote atolls of the region, per capita consumption of fish, for example, is as high as 250 kg—all of it sourced from subsistence fisheries.

Subsistence fisheries are an important source of nutrition, culture and welfare in the region, and are not marginalized in the Western and Central Pacific as they are in many other parts of the world. In fact, there are secure customary tenure rights to lagoons, reefs and shoals in many of these islands.

As the article on page 8 demonstrates, the coastal fisheries are depleting. Sea cucumber, trochus, pearl oysters, corals and live reef fish species are increasingly being harvested and exported to rich Asian markets, interfering with traditional food sources. Urbanization and siltation from mining and logging are degrading fisheries habitats of subsistence fishers. These small island economies are fragile; they cannot cope with the burgeoning demographic pressures.

Several regional agreements exist for fisheries management and sustainable coastal fisheries in Pacific islands; the 2008 Apia Strategy is an example. Despite these instruments, the governments in the region, sadly,

are more focused on distant-water and national offshore fishing fleets, and less on managing coastal fisheries.

What is required to stem the decline of coastal fisheries resources and related ecosystems? How to improve the lot of subsistence fishers? We believe the course of action for the region is outlined in the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines). These provide a roadmap for the region. They need to be integrated into regional strategies and processes, such as the 2015 Noumea strategy: A New Song for Coastal Fisheries of the Pacific Community, as well as worked into national legislation and policies. To benefit from a human rights-based approach, as promoted by the SSF Guidelines, all countries in the region may be encouraged to ratify the United Nations treaties that protect all human rights.

While customary rights are enshrined in the constitutions of some countries of the Pacific region, the holders of customary rights are hardly represented in any of the regional policy initiatives. We recommend the formation of a regional association of customary rights holders, to uphold equitable and gender-just tenure rights, to engage with this process, supported by civil society organizations (CSOs) such as the Locally Managed Marine Areas

(LMMAs) network and other major non-governmental organizations (NGOs) representing coastal communities. We urge the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Sub-Regional Office in Samoa to promote the participation of CSOs/NGOs in regional fisheries-governance processes, consistent with the guiding principles of the SSF Guidelines.

To fully benefit from the provisions of the SSF Guidelines, the purview of fisheries ought to be broadened to improve the working and living conditions in coastal subsistence and commercial fisheries as well as to realizing non-fishery objectives in the Pacific region, such as improved access to drinking water, sanitation, housing, health, education, social protection, gender equity, justice to resolve disputes, and human rights institutions. Countries in the region could include, for example, the human-rights landscape of fishing communities in the Universal Periodic Reviews they submit to the UN Human Rights Council.

Protecting subsistence fisheries and the human rights of fishing communities can definitely turn the tide and make coastal fisheries sustainable. **3**

