

## Comment

# Welcome labour

There are seven existing standards (five Conventions and two Recommendations) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) that were adopted in 1920, 1959 and 1966. Since then, as far as the world of fisheries is concerned, significant changes have occurred. The most important among them are the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the emergence of developing countries as the world's largest fish producers. There are now about 27 mn persons working solely in capture fisheries, worldwide.

The other significant development in the past two decades has been the emergence of small-scale fisheries as an important source of employment, income, nutritional security and foreign exchange in many coastal developing nations. Aided by new, miniaturized forms of propulsion, navigation and fish detection techniques, small-scale fishers are now fishing far beyond their traditional fishing grounds, sometimes extending to other exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and the high seas. A comprehensive standard on work is, therefore, a welcome development not only for industrial fisheries, but also for the small-scale fisheries, considering its changing profile all over the developing world.

The proposed agenda concerning a comprehensive standard on work in the fishing sector at the 92nd Session of the International Labour Conference in June 2004 (see page 46) envisages a total revision of the existing standards "in the light of the extension of fundamental principles and rights at work to all workers, as laid down in the ILO Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up." Two of the existing Conventions, for example, do not apply to the small-scale fishing vessels, namely, Competency Certificates Convention 1966 and Accommodation of Crews (Fishermen) Convention, 1966. Both are pertinent when we consider the changing seascape of small-scale fishing vessels.

Standards on occupational safety and health and social security will also be part of the proposed agenda. Under the proposed Convention and Recommendation, the ILO also intends to provide protection for persons working on both large and small fishing vessels. This is a welcome move, considering that the majority of the world's fishers work in small-scale fisheries.

ILO has circulated a questionnaire among governments, whose replies are to be prepared in consultation with the most representative of organizations of employers and workers. The most representative fishworker organizations should engage their national labour ministries to organize such consultations. That would be an excellent opportunity to participate in defining the scope of such a standard on work.

The fishing world is complex, and it is an onerous task to think of an all-encompassing standard on work in the fishing sector that applies to both industrial and small-scale fisheries. It is, however, important to have such a standard that will ensure that "fishermen, by virtue of their work, do not fall through the crack of social protection provided to other workers", as pointed out by the ILO Law and Practice report. The challenge will be to develop an inclusive standard. We believe such a standard will go a long way in protecting the interests of those who labour on fishing vessels, both large- and small-scale, especially in the EEZs of other countries and the high seas. Such a comprehensive standard on work can also be of great support to fishers in the event of capacity reduction or in situations of overfishing that could lead to displacement of fishers.

We see the proposed standard on work in the fishing sector as an important social instrument to complement fisheries conservation and management initiatives. We welcome this initiative of ILO.

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