

ILO conference

## Flexible, inclusive standards

The following is the statement made by ICSF to the ILO Committee on Conditions on Work in the Fishing Sector

The International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) has been working towards valorizing the artisanal and small fishers and fishworkers, particularly in developing countries, for the past two decades. We have been working towards bringing artisanal and small-scale fisheries under the ambit of the ILO labour standards since 1990.

We welcome the proposal to develop new labour standards for the fishing sector with a view to reach a greater portion of the world's fishers, particularly those working on board smaller vessels. We also appreciate the proposal to broaden the definition of "commercial fishing" to include all but subsistence and recreational fishing in marine and inland waters.

Small-scale fishing vessels are no more confined only to the littoral waters, and they are now found all over the exclusive economic zones (EEZs). While 24-metre fishing vessels targeting pelagic resources are found fishing in territorial waters, 12-metre fishing vessels longlining are found fishing in the EEZ of the flag State and beyond. This includes waters of other coastal States as well. The labour arrangements on board, as a result, have broadened from only self-employed or kinship-based sharing arrangements to include wage labour and employment of migrant workers. Distinct categories of workers and owners are emerging in several contexts.

Working and living conditions on board small-scale fishing vessels, as a result, are getting radically redefined, with implications for employment, income, safety, health and social security of fishers. In this context, we welcome the proposal to develop new inclusive

standards for the fishing sector since it has the potential to respond more meaningfully to the social needs of fishers in the context of the rapidly changing nature of fishing operations in different parts of the world.

From the 1970s, coastal States have been declaring their EEZs. Several fisheries have witnessed a boom-and-bust phase since then, and fisheries resources are believed to have reached their biological limit. Yet, there are only a few examples of national legislation urgently promoting effective fisheries management. The scenario is even bleaker when we look into national legislation to protect the living and working conditions of fishers on board fishing vessels below 24-metre length, particularly in many developing countries. This is evident from a quick read of the ILO White Report on the age of globalization. When fishing vessels and fishers from the small-scale sub-sector are moving across the EEZs, there is greater relevance not for exclusive, but inclusive, labour standards. ILO should take the initiative to lay down flexible principles and labour authorities to develop relevant and meaningful national legislation for both large and small-scale fishing vessels.

### Workshops organized

We would like to take this opportunity to inform the Committee that during 2003-2004 we organized workshops in the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India and Ghana, with a view to educate fishers, particularly in the unorganized artisanal and small-scale sub-sector, about ILO's proposed comprehensive labour standards on work in the fishing sector, and to gauge their responses to the proposed standard. Small-scale fishers have been fishing outside national waters in all these countries for several years. All of them have distinct employer and

worker categories in the small-scale sub-sector.

The artisanal, small-scale, semi-industrial and industrial fishers of Ghana and India and the artisanal and small-scale fishers of the Philippines and Sri Lanka supported the ILO proposal for a comprehensive standard on work in the fishing sector. The Sri Lanka workshop, however, observed that the nature and intensity of risk and uncertainties faced by the artisanal, small-scale sub-sector and the safety, medical care and social security issues that concern this sub-sector were different from those facing the distant-water fishing vessels. Fishers of Sri Lanka and Ghana would also like to see the scope of the Convention include beach seine fishers who do not fish from fishing vessels. The traditional, small-scale fishers of India would like to see greater flexibility in the way the standard would be implemented, making provisions for exclusions and exemptions.

The Ghana workshop further drew attention to the high incidence of girl children between the ages of 5 and 8 being employed for fishing in Lake Volta, which produces the largest quantity of inland fish in Ghana. The participants drew attention to the high incidence of accidents in Lake Volta and observed that the number of accidents in the Lake was more than that in the marine waters of

Ghana. A summary of these reports, in English, titled "Fishing for Standards" is available at the back of the conference room.

In conclusion, while negotiating flexible and inclusive standards for the fishing sector, we would like to support the concerns of the Workers' Group, cautioning against any dilution of existing standards for industrialized fishing vessels.

This statement was made by ICSF (icsf@vsnl.com) at the 92nd session of the International Labour Conference in Geneva