

Comment

The price of imprudence

In the end, the irony was not only unforeseen, but also unfortunate and bitter for fishers all over the world. At the final record vote on its adoption at the 93rd Session of the International Labour Conference (ILC), the proposed Convention on Work in the Fishing Sector did have the required two-thirds majority but the vote was declared invalid because it did not attain quorum (see pg 47). It is doubtful if there has ever been such a precedent in the history of the International Labour Organization (ILO)—that a draft Convention and Recommendation adopted by the relevant Committee have not been adopted by the ILC for want of quorum.

These instruments could have been the handles for developing countries to lift the lids off their fishing sectors and look at current developments in fishing from the perspective of labour and welfare. They provide the structure for creating standards for an occupational sector that is among the most hazardous on earth.

Intriguingly enough, despite these manifest benefits to fishers, some developing-country governments, especially from Asia, and almost all Employer representatives, decided to abstain from voting, cleverly defusing a Convention that had actually won a clear majority at the record vote.

The short-run acquiescence to the Employer group could ultimately cost dear. In the long term, developing countries would possibly be forced to comply with far stricter forms of labour standards dictated by developed countries that are important markets for fish and fish products from developing countries. (It is worth remembering that 50 per cent of fish entering the world export trade comes from developing countries.) The non-tariff measures currently confined to food safety and environmental standards can tomorrow be extended to labour as well. Prudence dictates that developing countries should voluntarily move towards labour standards in fishing, considering that it is one of the most globalized industries today.

ILO is undoubtedly the best forum to negotiate a standard that can act as the lowest common denominator for labour in fishing. It is in the interest of developing countries, especially Asian countries that account for most of the world's fish production, fishing capacity and fishers' population, to be proactive and sincerely engage with ILO processes that recognize the importance of adopting international labour standards that are set with "due regard to those countries in which climatic conditions, the imperfect development of industrial organization, or other special circumstance make the industrial conditions substantially different" (Article 19, ILO Constitution).

Considering that over two-thirds of global fish production originates from developing countries, any improvement in labour conditions will benefit mainly the nationals of developing countries. In any case, labour standards in most developed countries are already at par with, if not above, those proposed by the ILO instruments. Developing countries can also use the provisions for exclusions and exemptions to progressively improve living and working conditions on board fishing vessels, both in small- and large-scale fishing.

The governments of developing countries have a responsibility to provide sustainable employment for their coastal fishing populations. Rather than indulge wastefully in policies that promote fishing capacity and 'boom-and-bust' fisheries, they should aim for labour-intensive and sustainable fishing, along with better labour standards that they themselves can design and implement.

The proposed ILO Convention and Recommendation should be seen as an opportunity to address the most neglected aspects of working and living conditions in the fishing sector. We urge all governments, employers' and workers' groups to work towards the adoption of these important instruments at the 96th Session of the ILC in 2007.