

## Braving the perils of the sea

### The Third International Fishing Industry Safety and Health Conference addressed the issue of safety and health in the fishing industry

Fishing at sea has been rightly described as the most dangerous occupation in the world. Based on statistics maintained by countries on fatalities at sea, it is estimated that about 24,000 deaths occur annually. The problems are more acute in small-scale fisheries where safety and health aspects are totally neglected and, in the absence of reliable statistics, it is difficult to get a clear picture of the issues that confront the small-scale fishers. While the government has paid little attention to this growing problem, the fishers themselves appear least concerned about their safety and health, continuing to brave the perils of the sea, and living on the edge.

Overexploitation of the coastal fish stocks has forced more and more small-scale fishers to move offshore in pursuit of fish. In many developing countries, small-scale boats fish all over the exclusive economic zone (EEZ). While there have been significant advancements in fishing technology, similar improvements have not happened to fishing boats, resulting in increased accidents at sea. Poor boat and engine maintenance, fatigue from excessive days at sea, and lack of communication and safety devices on board are some of the larger issues contributing to the poor safety and health regimes in small-scale fisheries.

The Third International Fishing Industry Safety and Health Conference (IFISH 3) held at Mahabalipuram, Chennai, India, from February 1 to 4, 2006 focused on the safety and health issues of small-scale fishers. Organized jointly by the Bay of Bengal Programme Inter-Governmental Organization (BOBP-IGO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Alaska, US, the conference

brought together 52 experts from small-scale and commercial fisheries as well as from governments, who debated many aspects of the subject. They included worldwide safety challenges facing the fishing industry; regional approaches to sea safety; safety equipment and training of crew; injury prevention and health promotion; fishing vessel and equipment design; and international standards and status reports.

Lack of reliable statistics has been a major constraint in addressing the sea-safety issues of small-scale fisheries in developing countries. Better estimates are needed on causes of accidents leading to deaths and injuries. This would enable proper understanding of the problems and also in finding solutions. While governments should set up mechanisms for systematic collection, collation and analysis of information, it is also essential to involve fishers and their associations and families, as well as epidemiologists.

Small-scale fisheries often lack a proper certification system for boats, and vessels are constructed by persons with traditional skills handed down from one generation to another. Some small vessels go into the deep seas in search of fish, though they are not equipped to do so; they run into both safety and legal problems.

#### Poor certification

Registration and insurance of small fishing boats, and better co-ordination of vessel monitoring and community participation programmes can strengthen safety at sea. Also important are the introduction of a vessel monitoring system for larger vessels, and first aid for victims of injuries at sea. In many developing countries the responsibility

for fishing vessel safety lies with many government departments, creating ambiguity.

**R**epetitive training, constant re-enforcement, management commitment and safety inspections have together reduced, to a large extent, fatalities at sea in the commercial fisheries; the same needs to be done in small-scale fisheries too.

A good balance is needed between 'hardware' and 'software'. At present, the cost of safety and communication equipment is prohibitive for small-scale fishers. While very high frequency (VHF) devices are inexpensive sea-safety tools, their range needs to be extended. A coastal radio network can be very useful for fishermen. The benefits of satellite weather prediction and of simple devices like hand-held radios should be made available widely to artisanal and subsistence fishermen.

In many countries the Coast Guard is responsible for protecting fishermen and assisting them at sea. They are also responsible for undertaking search and rescue (SAR) of fishermen in distress. However, SAR operations are expensive. For example, the Indian SAR region comprises 4.6 mn sq km, and the annual expenditure on SAR is estimated at approximately US\$ 1 mn. Clearly, the cost of SAR operations must be lowered.

Savings from such reduction could be used to subsidize sea-safety measures.

A related area of neglect is health. HIV/AIDS is a major threat to the health of fishermen in many parts of the world. A community health model should be adopted to tackle this and other diseases such as tuberculosis, which is commonly prevalent among small-scale fishworkers.

The United Nations agencies responsible for fisheries (FAO), working conditions of labour (the International Labour Organization, ILO) and maritime safety of vessels, equipment and life (the International Maritime Organization, IMO) have so far not been successful in their efforts to bring out guidelines/regulations that address the issues of small-scale fishing vessels, including the safety and health of workers on such vessels. The SOLAS (Safety of life at sea) and GMDSS (Global maritime distress and safety system) regulations do not apply to small-scale fishing vessels. The proposed ILO work-in-fishing Convention is strict in relation to larger vessels but flexible with small-scale vessels. There seems to be a lack of interest in the safety of fishing vessels below 12 m.

#### **Various codes**

The FAO/ILO/IMO Code of Safety for Fishermen and Fishing Vessels (Parts A and B) as well as the FAO/ILO/IMO Voluntary Guidelines for the Design,

Construction and Equipment of Small Fishing Vessels are currently being revised and will be published soon.

**T**he Code of Conduct for safety of fishing vessels should also be implemented. Fisher groups should be involved in the decision-making process. However, safety instruments can be useful only if they are implemented and enforced; this is mainly the responsibility of the governments.

Safety at sea depends largely on awareness, prevention and mitigation. Documenting best practices and disseminating sea-safety information through popular literature and the electronic media would help fishers gain the right knowledge. Also, family members, including women and children, should be approached for long-term success with safety. Women constitute a powerful pressure group and they have often taken the lead in highlighting problems of sea safety and work conditions in fishing.

The 26 December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami killed a quarter of a million people, and made many more homeless and jobless. The absence of a proper system for boat registration, and of systematic data, compounded the problem of relief for fishermen. The tsunami generated several lessons and forced a fresh look at the development agenda in the tsunami-affected countries. The proliferation of new boats in the post-tsunami period throws up safety considerations too.

IFISH 3 succeeded in increasing awareness on the safety and health issues of fishers, especially those belonging to the small-scale category. The challenges for the future relate to government regulations, awareness and outreach programmes, and data organization and collection. Improvements are needed in the areas of communication, equipment and materials, training, community health, data collection and surveillance mechanisms. Political will is also essential to improve the safety of fishers worldwide. 3

This piece is by Yugraj Singh Yadava (yugraj.yadava@bobpigo.org), Director, Bay of Bengal Programme Inter-Governmental Organization, Chennai, India