

## Asia/ Thailand

### Coming together

*A recent meet in Thailand focused on Asian fisheries in the era of globalization*

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Millions of people in Asia depend on fisheries for a living, making it a critical component of economic growth and a major source of food security in the region. According to FAO estimates 84 per cent of the world's fishers were concentrated in Asia—9 million in China, nearly 6 million in India, and 4 million in Vietnam, Indonesia, Bangladesh and the Philippines taken together. The majority are small-scale, artisanal fishers, eking out a living from coastal and inshore resources. A conservative estimate would place the total number of people involved in fishing, processing, trading and other fisheries-related activities in Asia at about 120 million. For artisanal fishing communities, fishing is a source of livelihood as well as a culture and a way of life.

Asian fisheries have, however, witnessed major changes in the past few decades, as governments have sought to modernize the sector by bringing in more efficient gear and technologies, including bottom-trawling and purse-seining. The focus on expanding production and exports has received an impetus in the current phase of globalization.

It was to discuss these developments and their implications for the small-scale marine and inland fisheries sector that representatives of fisherfolk and peasant organizations as well as NGOs from 11 countries in Asia met from 25 to 29 January 2002 at Prince of Songkhla University, Hat Yai, Thailand for the *Asian Fisherfolk Conference: Cut Away the Net of Globalization*.

Representatives from the following countries were present: Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam, along with representatives from the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and those from Aotearoa-New Zealand and South Africa.

The conference was organized with the following objectives:

- to analyze the impact of globalization, specifically liberalization, privatization and deregulation, on the small-scale fisheries sector;
- to document initiatives and gains by Asian fisherfolk to improve their situation, such as, but not limited to, organizing, peoples' campaigns, advocacy, resource management and lobbying;
- to learn about the role and situation of women in the fisheries sector; and
- to consolidate networks among fisherfolk organizations in the Asian region.

The workshop was a joint initiative of several organizations. These included the Federation of Fisherfolk of Thailand, the Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), the Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture (FSA), NGO-COD, the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Andaman Project, the Prince of Songkhla University and the Waliluk University—all from Thailand, as well as PAMALAKAYA (the National Federation of Fisherfolk Organizations in the Philippines), the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) and the Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD).

Participants felt that globalization processes lead to a loss of income and livelihood, dislocation from fishing grounds, denial of access rights, breakup of communities, social problems, loss of traditional systems of knowledge and wisdom, degradation and destruction of aquatic resources and violations of human rights. The pressure on women of fishing communities has increased in specific ways, translating directly into increased workloads, stress and pressure to earn higher incomes. Participants called for a reversal of laws, programmes and policies as well as the dismantling of institutions of globalization that are primarily attuned to the interests of powerful economic players and that marginalize fishing communities.

One of the objectives of the meeting was to understand better the situation of women of fishing communities in Asia. For a start, the effort was to ensure that there was equal representation of women from fishworker organizations at the meeting. However, this was not possible in all cases. In several countries of the region efforts of fishworkers to organize are relatively recent. Even where fisherfolk have organized, women often do not participate actively within the organization. As a consequence, there were fewer women representatives from fishworker organizations.

It was also clear that this situation was problematic as everyone recognized that women were playing active

roles within the fishery and the fishing community. At the same time they were at the receiving end of several developments within and outside the fisheries—developments that were negatively affecting their income, livelihood, workload and quality of life. The participant from Sri Lanka, for example, shared how artisanal women processors, mainly women, are being affected by imports of dried tuna from neighbouring countries. As the imports were priced cheaper, local processors are finding it difficult to compete.

That governments in the region have largely failed to recognize the role of women of fishing communities and constructive support their work, was also discussed. To quote from the presentation of a participant from India: “The history of the 100-years of fisheries development in the country is also one of ‘masculinization’ of the sector where, with increasing inflows of technology and outflows of fish, women found themselves at the receiving end, both literally as well as figuratively. A review of the ‘development programmes’ shows a heavy bias against women—in the plethora of programmes that were spawned as part of the modernisation drive, there is hardly one targeting specifically the women in the sector.”

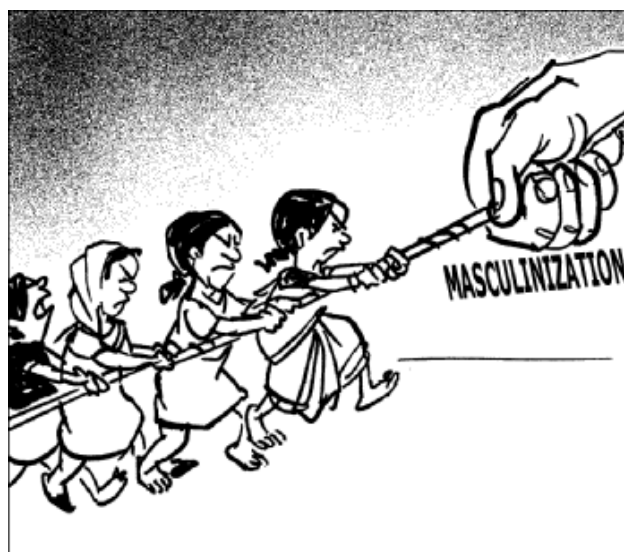
At the meeting, there was discussion on these issues. Nalini Nayak, a resource person from India who has been involved with the fishworker movement at various levels, made a presentation on the women in fisheries. Her presentation critiqued the current model of fisheries development that has marginalized women, destroyed livelihoods and the environment. She highlighted the need for a feminist perspective in fisheries.

A representative from one of the stronger fishworker organization in the region, with a long history of trying to organize women fishworkers, shared the difficulties they still faced in trying to facilitate the genuine representation of women in their organization and in adopting a feminist perspective in their work. Even though these were desirable goals, he said, they were difficult to translate into reality.

Overall, it seemed clear that women of fishing communities within Asia are starting to organize only in a few countries. They have a long way to go yet and special efforts need to be devoted to helping women organize in defense of their livelihoods and communities.

Participants at the meeting called for establishing participatory mechanisms to ensure that all decisions related to the use and management of fisheries resources at the local, national and international level are made in partnership with the fisherfolk.

Above all, participants called for the sustainable and non-destructive management and use of the resources of the lakes, rivers, seas and oceans by all humankind and asserted that the rights of artisanal fishing communities—the guardians of these water bodies—to use, manage and benefit from them, must be protected and accepted.



Finally, participants committed to protecting the rights to life and livelihood of fishing communities and to protecting and conserving aquatic resources, indigenous species and ecosystems, while demonstrating concrete alternatives towards a people-centred development. They also committed to observing the World Food Day on 16 October, the World Fisheries Day on 21 November and the Anti-WTO day on 30 November at the Asian level with a regionally co-ordinated action by fishing communities to demonstrate their solidarity.

At the end of the workshop, participants formed a follow-through committee (FTC) to take forward some of the issues discussed at the workshop. The plans discussed related to participation of fisherfolk in events related to the World Summit for Social Development to be held in September 2002, research and training on fisheries-related issues, exchange programmes between fisherfolk in the Asian countries, World Fisheries Day celebrations, training for lobby work, and participation at the World Food Summit in June 2002. The report of the workshop is under preparation and should be available by May 2002.

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