

Ear to the Ground

How can spaces for dialogue between small-scale fisheries social movements, policymakers and scientists be revived when they remain unlinked in local policy and management?

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested the resilience of increasingly interconnected food systems and actors across the world. During this time, even as hunger increased significantly—including in rural areas of Brazil—the traditional practices of food production and sharing have secured the intake of nutrition among local communities. This, in the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA 2022), is a chance to recognize the important role of small-scale fisheries (SSF) in food security and socioeconomic wellbeing.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has identified seven ‘pillars’ or principles to guide actions in support of SSF communities as part of a Global Action Plan for governments, civil society and other stakeholders: environmental, economic and social sustainability; governance; gender equality and equity; food security and nutrition; and resilience. But the severe disconnect between fisheries social movements, science and policy presents major challenges to the strength of these pillars.

In Brazil, the pandemic somehow enhanced the interface between social movements and scientists in some cases, for example, in building solidarity networks, online debates, and observatories to address COVID-19 impacts on communities. Learning from such examples may help us collaboratively adapt to this unprecedented shock.

However, two factors threaten the future of fisheries livelihoods and the sector’s contributions to food security: overfishing and poor fisheries management, and the failure to establish mechanisms to ensure environmental justice for fishing

communities. In joint programmes between social movements and scientists, there is often a hidden tension between the need to protect fishing communities and to conserve biodiversity. But these actors recognize that novel governance arrangements are needed. It is also clear that investments of financial, social and intellectual capital are critical to meet those challenges.

This is where top-down approaches and institutions need to interact and co-operate with decentralized, community-based and self-organized mechanisms in small-scale fisheries. Brazil used to be at the forefront of community-based alternatives that encouraged local communities to be stewards of the environment and their territories. Can we recreate those

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spaces of dialogue and co-operation, at the interface between science, policy and social movements, which seem to have failed?

There may be differing views as to whether such dialogue should be initiated at the top or from the bottom. In any case, we have an immediate collective goal to revive the conversation. There have been some successes, such as the endorsement of the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines). Despite Brazil’s engagement in this process, and

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A fisherman rows to his boat at the mouth of the São Mateus River in Espírito Santo. Brazil used to be at the forefront of community-based alternatives that encouraged local communities to be stewards of the environment and their territories

sustained advocacy by civil society for its implementation, we are not taking advantage of the relationships between social movements, scientists and fisheries authorities—and momentum built over this period. Nevertheless, the process contributed to strengthen social movements, aided by scientific forums that tried to promote such integration.

What is clear is that we need to do our ‘homework’ at the national level by formulating our vision for small-scale fisheries policy and management. What is the use in fishers and fishworkers participating in more international discussions if there is no internal debate? Part of that homework is to participate in fisheries management councils; but it is also important to discuss why implementation is still at an impasse eight years after the SSF Guidelines were endorsed.

IYAFA 2022 presents a rare opportunity to start this internal debate about the needs and priorities of Brazil’s small-scale fisheries. The roadmap will

need to focus on all seven pillars that support SSF. Spaces of dialogue cannot be allowed to fail if we are to have policies that promote the resilience of the sector and of fishing communities. They will also help us prepare for future shocks, including those anticipated due to climate change.

The urgent task of initiating that dialogue at the national level cannot be swept under the carpet. The celebration may be global, but change has to begin at home. Let’s turn this international year into a local opportunity. 3

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Revealing small-scale fisheries

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