

Determination Renewed

ICSF's Bangkok workshop was a vibrant start to a series of international events to commemorate the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYafa 2022)

In 2017, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly proclaimed that 2022 was going to be observed as the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYafa 2022). Its lead agency is the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), in collaboration with other stakeholders. A core function of IYafa is to promote the implementation of the Voluntary

addressing these issues; and to amplify the voices of women in the inclusive development of small-scale fisheries.

This was the first in-person meeting organized by ICSF internationally since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following all COVID-19 protocols, ICSF was able to bring in a diverse group of 50 participants from the Asia region. The representation included men and women from fishworker organizations, community-based organizations (CBOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) from 11 countries in the region. They are: Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. Special efforts were made to ensure gender parity in representation.

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Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines).

In this context, ICSF and its members decided to organize four regional workshops and women's exchanges in 2022: one each in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe, in partnership with global fishworker bodies and civil society organizations. The first in this series of workshops was the 'IYafa Asia 2022 – Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-Scale Fisheries', held in Bangkok, Thailand, on May 5-8, 2022, in collaboration with the Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF).

The main objectives of the Asia workshop were to increase the international engagement of fishworkers' organizations with issues of food security, tenure rights and social development in small-scale fisheries (SSF) in the region; to deepen cooperation between fishworkers and like-minded organizations in

Kick-off

The workshop opened with opening remarks from SDF director and ICSF member Ravadee Prasertcharoensuk. She encouraged participants to have deeper conversations on SSF, encompassing themes of livelihood security, human rights, social development and sustainability, to go beyond food security or healthy fish stocks. She stressed the importance of women in fisheries and drew attention to the issues faced by them, particularly the challenges they face in realizing gender equity in the sector.

In his inaugural address, Taworn Thunaji, the Deputy Director General of Thailand's department of fisheries, emphasized the importance of ensuring sustainable utilization of natural resources for equality and fairness towards SSF, adding that sustainability is the key to ensure livelihood and food security. He elaborated on the aim of the Government of Thailand to bring together multiple stakeholders

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Participants at the IYAFA Asia Workshop in May, 2022. The meeting brought together 50 fishworker and civil society representatives from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam

in its processes, and detailed the government's efforts to support artisanal fishers and small-scale fish farmers.

While detailing the issues faced by SSF in Thailand, Piya Thedyam, chairperson of the Thailand Association of the Federation of Fisherfolk, remarked on the similar challenges observed in fisheries across the region.

Panitnart Weerawat, senior instructor at the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Centre (SEAFDEC), pointed to the challenges in quantifying the vastness of the small-scale sub-sector, in terms of employment and production. She further discussed the collaborations of SEAFDEC in capacity building, marine resource management and development. Following the inaugural address, participants watched an introductory video celebrating SSF across the 11 countries represented at the workshop.

Introducing the workshop and its objectives, Sebastian Mathew, ICSF's executive director, drew attention to the institutional and legal structures ensuring the rights of SSF. He urged

participants to use regional initiatives to contextualize the international SSF Guidelines within countries' national circumstances, and to base the discussions surrounding the SSF Guidelines on the rights and dignity of the people engaged in SSF. He also highlighted the importance of collaborative governance cutting across various governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and development partners, to ensure the sustainability of the sector and protect the rights and social development of the people involved.

Access to resources

The inaugural address was followed by a presentation on access to resources by Maarten Bavinck, ICSF chairperson. He observed the emerging shifts in labour and livelihood patterns among the fishing communities in the region, linking them to insecure tenure rights to both fishery and other resources. He cited the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (1995), the SSF Guidelines (2014) and other instruments. He emphasized

the relevance of tenure in sustaining the lives and livelihoods of fishing communities. Explaining formal and informal systems of tenure prevalent in fisheries in Asia, he called for holistic policy and management approaches that recognize diverse forms of tenure rights, in order to sustainably manage fish stocks and protect the rights to resources of small-scale fishing communities. ICSF member V. Vivekandandan chaired the session.

Thereafter, the participants came together in groups of two-to-three countries to discuss the major challenges for SSF communities to access resources. Individual country experiences emerged through this exercise. Vietnam and Cambodia, for example, reported that tenure rights of SSF were protected in law, but there was concern about poor implementation. The participants from these countries also pointed to climate change and ecological degradation limiting access to land and water bodies, further complicating tenure rights in fisheries.

Similar conditions prevail in Malaysia, Bangladesh and Myanmar, where tenure rights were protected; in Malaysia even preferential access was given to SSF. However, fishers' rights were disregarded by coastal reclamation and development projects.

In contrast, Sri Lanka and Pakistan participants stated that they had no legal protection for customary tenure rights of SSF. Participants from Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand said they have constitutional or legal protection of fishers' access rights to coastal resources. However, they noted the precarity of these rights: governments can claim coastal land and resources at any time for other uses and industries.

The participants reiterated the need to address the disconnect between policy and implementation, regressive changes in national legislation, disregard for the customary rights and institutions, and the challenges from new developments in coastal, marine and inland areas. The participants unanimously agreed on the need to formally recognize the rights of fishing communities to both land and fishery resources; they emphasized that

creating spaces for dialogue among stakeholders, capacity building and organizing communities are the ways forward.

Social development

The second day kicked-off with Mathew's presentation on social development in SSF. Citing several international legal instruments guiding social development policy, he drew on the linkages between well-being and environmental sustainability. He noted that social development is key to enhancing human rights, through policies that include vulnerable and marginalized groups, and ensure their economic equality and empowerment, thereby incentivizing conservation and resource management.

Mathew stressed that social protection is a major component of social development, along with housing, sanitation, health and education services to which fishing communities should have access. He drew attention to diverse formal and informal structures for social protection, and invited participants to point out specific examples in their national contexts. He also presented a cogent case for organizing fishers into a formalized workforce to negotiate their rights to social services.

The presentation was followed by an enthusiastic discussion; the participants deliberated the need for collaboration between government agencies (guided by fisheries departments); institutional arrangements to ensure delivery of services; political participation of fishing communities; and how a universal, rather than sectoral, perspective to social protection will be preferable to include relatively small sectors such as fisheries and its workers.

This was followed by group discussions guided by questions on the availability and accessibility of social development measures in national contexts. The participants from Sri Lanka pointed out that the economic crisis in their country might further deprive vulnerable fishers of welfare measures.

The Bangladesh team compared the national averages of development indicators like income and literacy rates to that of small-scale fishers to

highlight the socioeconomic position of SSF in the country. They pointed to the need for targeted schemes for fishers, considering their unique vulnerability in the face of natural hazards, climate change and other environmental factors.

The Thai participants drew attention to the poor living and working conditions of fishworkers in their country. Participants from India and Pakistan shared similar experiences.

Describing the universal primary health and education schemes in their countries, representatives from the Philippines and Vietnam noted the inclusion of fishers in these schemes. However, they also mentioned that fishing communities usually live and work in remote locations or areas; all too often, this limits their access to drinking water, housing, power, waste management and other services.

The Cambodian representative talked about the pitiful conditions of people living in the floating villages of Tonle Sap, without access to any infrastructure and social development schemes. He also talked about the

income diversification strategies employed in Cambodia.

The Indonesian participants noted the lack of data on fishers and fishworkers, hindering the planning and delivery of government programmes. The Malaysian representative painted a different picture: SSF workers are included in government development schemes and are covered under social protection measures.

Most of the country representatives said there were large gaps in awareness of, and access to, universal schemes and basic services. The participants called for an improvement in essential services, and reiterated the need for strong social protection measures, considering the COVID-19 pandemic and uncertainties in the sector.

Voices of women

The third day of the workshop was dedicated exclusively to exchanges on women's roles and experiences in fisheries. Drawing from the workshop photo exhibition, participants used images of women fishworkers to highlight the crucial role of women

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Workshop participants discuss issues around access to resources for small-scale fisheries. They emphasized the need to formally recognize the rights of fishing communities to land and fishery resources

Looking to the Future

Reflecting on the Workshop, two participants discuss the range of commitment and contributions needed to strengthen fisherfolk movements around the world

A Foundation for Collaboration

The International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) and the Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF) organized a workshop titled ‘Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-Scale Fisheries’ in Bangkok, Thailand, on May 5-8, 2022. It commemorated the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA) 2022.

Holding an international meeting in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge. However, all fears and anxieties were overcome by the longing to meet and share stories with friends from small-scale fisheries. The workshop was, first and foremost, an opportunity to understand common challenges.

The whole world—all sectors—suffered the impact of the pandemic. The fisheries sector was no exception. All workshop participants from fisher organizations, NGOs, cooperatives, and woman fishworkers gave strong testimonies of how this crisis reached their fishing villages. In Indonesia, small-scale fisheries felt the impact in various ways. From restrictions on fishing activity, to difficulties in selling their catch, to decline in fish prices, and even in the lack of access to social assistance provided by the government.

The climate crisis is another challenge for the fisheries sector. Starting from the migration of fish stock to changes in the marine food chain due to ocean acidification and coral bleaching, each has had impacts direct and indirect on small-scale fisheries. Fisherfolk cannot predict the time and location of fishing. There is also the high risk in going to sea during extreme weather. Sea level rise and extreme weather due to climate change also cause destruction to coastal villages from waves and tidal flooding.

Unclear coast

The workshop identified another key challenge: conflicts over coastal areas and resources, with fishing communities often threatened by other users. This ‘ocean grab’ to control and utilize coastal and marine resources weakens social well-being and exacerbates ecological damage. Ocean grabbing also occurs when trawling or other destructive fishing methods decrease the availability of fish for small-scale fisherfolk, interfering with their rights to resources.

The Bangkok workshop was a very important opportunity. It provided a space for consolidating discussions between social movements in Asia and for reflecting on the achievements and challenges in each country. The contributions of small-scale fisheries in providing food in the world can no longer be underestimated. In order to ensure the availability of fresh and nutritious fish, the fishing areas for traditional fishers need to be protected. The marine environment must also be maintained in order to remain sustainable. The point is to make the sea a foundation for food sovereignty.

In addition, countries must be encouraged to be more active in providing protections for small-scale fisherfolk at the national level. The SSF Guidelines, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants, as well as other relevant international instruments, need implementation to strengthen the roles of small-scale fisherfolk in food supply, employment generation and well-being.

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Abundant Diversity, Common Challenges

Atending the IYAFA Asia Workshop organized by ICSF and SDF was a remarkable experience. One of its highlights was the opportunity to meet and interact with the fisher representatives and organizations from 11 Asian countries.

The four-day workshop, divided into multiple sessions, provided all participants an opportunity to discuss the issues related to their specific region and present them to the forum to find common ground. All the sessions were insightful; there was ample time to engage with each of the topics with experts from the relevant sector. The sessions on access to resources, on the SSF Guidelines and on women in fisheries were particularly useful. They will help me elaborate on these issues with the stakeholders in my region of work.

The roundtable discussions showed that the issues discussed by Sri Lanka and Pakistan were very similar in nature to those faced by fishers in India, such as those related to coastal resource grabbing in the name of development, displacement of fishers for infrastructure and tourism, degradation of coastal and marine ecosystems, and the destruction of mangrove forests.

One of the main problem identified is the lack of recognition of the customary rights of fishers, worsened by the fact that national governments see the coasts as a way to boost their economy. Trawling and marine pollution were reiterated as big threats to the health of the marine ecosystem and to the future of fishing communities in almost all the participating countries.

The issues that resonated with all the Indian participants were related to women fishworkers, dilution of coastal regulations, and the focus on further mechanization of the sector while ignoring the needs of the small-scale fishers. The imperative to define small-scale fisheries was discussed in depth by the fisher representatives from India. We also highlighted the issues faced by migrant fishworkers during the COVID-19 lockdowns in India.

Most countries stressed the need for proper implementation of existing laws for the protection of the coast, fish stocks and rights of small-scale fishers, as also the need for the governments to take the SSF Guidelines into consideration while drafting new fisheries policies and legislations. The workshop statement was a sound summary of the issues discussed over the four days.

I hope this statement is considered seriously by Asian governments while developing policy for the fisheries sector. That they go one step ahead and become a reference for international fisheries negotiations of the future.

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Indian and other South Asian participants all echoed issues related to women fishworkers, the dilution of coastal regulations, and mechanization of the sector, which marginalizes small-scale fishers

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in the sector. Women participants shared their experiences, recognized the common challenges they face and outlined the collective actions that are needed to achieve gender equity in their fisheries.

Thereafter, a recorded presentation by Arlene Nietes Satapornvaint, a specialist on gender issues in Southeast Asian fisheries, focused on how the invisibility of women in the sectoral policies and discussions is in sharp contrast to the large female fisheries workforce – formal and informal, paid and unpaid, full-time and part-time. Their invisibility is reflected in the lack of appropriate infrastructure for women in post-harvest fisheries, and of targeted programmes for women in fisheries policy. She remarked that fisherwomen often bear a triple burden, with their productive, reproductive and organizational responsibilities.

Kyoto Kusakabe, professor at the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok, stressed the importance of post-harvest fisheries. “Fishing provides the fish, but post-harvest activities are what turns it into income,” she said, detailing the wide

scope of women’s pre- and post-harvest activities, ranging from net making through fish processing to fish vending. She highlighted the social, economic and human rights challenges women face. Recognizing the role of women in fisheries through gender-disaggregated data and assessments of their needs through a gendered analysis of the sectors is the best way to address discrimination against women, she said.

Group discussions then identified the key challenges women face in terms of recognition, access to resources and markets, social development, and participation in decision making. Participants shared their insights on how to address some of these problems, including mobilizing women to demand action (as expressed by participants from the Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and India); generating gender-disaggregated data (India, Bangladesh); integrating women fishworkers into fisheries cooperatives (Sri Lanka); and using innovative marketing and technology to improve women’s incomes (Vietnam).

Integration of women into existing cooperatives was identified as an imperative to further the collectivisation efforts of women. Formalization based on inclusivity, consultation and social protection is integral in improving the visibility and recognition of women fishworkers, leading to the protection of their rights, it was noted.

In the concluding session to develop a regional plan for action on gender, the participants pointed to the need for more gender-disaggregated data, meaningful participation, capacity building, networking and dialogue. Some called for a regional platform to share knowledge, challenges and success stories.

MEL framework

Considering the long-standing interest to monitor and learn from ongoing initiatives to implement the SSF Guidelines, the last session of the workshop was dedicated to a discussion on the FAO's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework - a set of indicators and tools that governments, civil society and other stakeholders can use to assess the progress made on implementing the SSF Guidelines in their national contexts.

Lena Westlund from the FAO traced the process to develop the MEL Framework. She detailed its principles and enabling conditions: policy coherence, research and communication, implementation support and monitoring. She said that the framework is participative, gender-sensitive and in alignment with the SSF Guidelines. Elyse Mills, programme associate at ICSF, explained the work undertaken by the organization to refine the assessment indicators and to prepare a handbook for users of the MEL Framework.

A group discussion on improving SSF Guidelines implementation in the country context followed the presentations. Country participants (from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Bangladesh) held that CSOs and CBOs need to be actively involved in the implementation of the guidelines. The need to build capacity of communities (Thailand, Myanmar), to include inland fisheries (India), to mainstream gender equity (Indonesia),

and to draft appropriate fisheries policy (Pakistan) were discussed and debated at length by the participants.

Reaching a consensus

The last day of the workshop was dedicated to the presentation and discussion of the Workshop Statement, prepared in consultation with the participants, listing their recommendations and aspirations for IYafa 2022. The statement noted the unique importance of fisheries in the Asia region (in terms of employment and production) and highlighted fishers' and fishworkers' experiences with regard to the three main focal points of discussions at the workshop: tenure rights, social development and gender.

Cognizant of the major disruptions in the sector associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, it called upon governments, the private sector, CSOs and the international community to address these challenges. To ensure fair and equitable distribution of resources, while protecting the customary tenure rights of fishing communities and their active participation in governance.

The statement also called for the recognition of women's contributions in fisheries, greater access to resources and markets, enhanced social protection and social development measures, and capacity building of fishers and fishworkers, especially women.

The Statement urged governments to redouble efforts to implement the SSF Guidelines, upholding a human rights-based approach. Reading the final statement together, participants brought to a fulfilling conclusion four days of intense discussions and planning. They parted with the promise of looking to the future with renewed determination to make the SSF Guidelines a reality. 🍀

For more

Asia Workshop: IYafa 2022-Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-scale Fisheries, 5 to 8 May 2022, Bangkok, Thailand

<https://www.icsf.net/resources/asia-workshop-iyafa-2022-celebrating-sustainable-and-equitable-small-scale-fisheries/>

ICSF's SSF Guidelines

<https://www.icsf.net/ssf-guidelines/>

ICSF IYafa 2022: Asia workshop statement: Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-scale Fisheries

<https://www.icsf.net/resources/icsf-iyafa-2022-asia-workshop-statement/>