

From Blue Fear to Blue Trust

Representatives of small-scale fishing communities – the most numerous ocean users – launch a Call to Action at the United Nations Ocean Conference 2022

The Second United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC 2022), hosted by the governments of Portugal and Kenya, brought together 6,000 participants in Lisbon from June 27 to July 1. Its ambition is set out in the ‘Lisbon Declaration on Our Ocean, Our Future, Our Responsibility’.

Its focus was to take stock of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG 14): Life Below Water. It includes 10 targets. Launched in 2015 to be achieved by 2030, the 17 SDGs are interlinked global goals designed to be a “blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all”.

Small-scale fishers (SSF) and coastal communities are the most numerous users of the ocean, even though they are often the most neglected. SSF activities provide a vital source of food, livelihood, socioeconomic and cultural benefits locally and equitably to millions of people around the world, more so in the global South.

Their close relationships with the seas and coasts over the centuries have given them a rich reserve of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). Through their daily activities at sea and on the coast, small-scale fishers garner insights into the seas, about the seasonal changes in fishery and other marine resources, and weather patterns and associated phenomena. This experiential knowledge enhances their skills as seafarers, as food producers and as guardians of the seas. This represents a massively underutilized but potentially game-changing knowledge base.

Life above and below water

Together, the TEK and experiential knowledge of SSF form part of a rich biocultural diversity, contributing to diverse cultural landscapes and

seascapes. Defending and promoting biocultural diversity is key to the sustainable use of the natural resources in the oceans, seas and coastal areas.

It is highly appropriate that SSF should have a special place in the targets set for SDG 14. Of particular importance is target SDG 14b that aims to provide access to marine resources and markets for SSF.

Conserving life under the water and sustainably using the oceans, seas and marine resources are vital to sustaining human life and well-being above the water. In the main, UNOC 2022 in Lisbon brought together two main protagonists: those clamouring for

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reforms in ocean governance to ‘Save Our Ocean’ (that is, save human life on our planet), and those clamouring for reforms to open up the ‘Blue Economy’ and pave the way for giant steps in investment, industrial development and wealth creation, notably in energy generation, mineral and living resource extraction, food production, bioprospecting and shipping.

Call to action

The complexity of multi-stakeholder, multi-pathway international ocean governance makes navigating the decision-making processes difficult, even for the most adept policy wonk. Add to this the cost of international travel, translation of policy documents into local languages, and bringing information in a digestible form

*This article is by **Brian O’Riordan** (deputy@lifeplatform.eu), executive secretary of the Low Impact Fishers of Europe (LIFE) platform*

UNITED NATIONS REGIONAL INFORMATION CENTRE



16 Youth and Innovation Forum at the UNOC 2022. The conference brought together two main protagonists: those clamouring for reforms in ocean governance to 'Save Our Ocean', and those clamouring for reforms to open up the 'Blue Economy'

to remote, marginalized fishing communities, and it is no wonder that all too often, SSF are absent from the decision-making process.

Moreover, others, who are better connected and better resourced, but who are remote from the daily realities of SSF, albeit with the best of intentions. These interlocutors invariably do more harm than good by not consulting SSF

are very well able to express their own demands, hopes and fears.

This is how a group of around 20 small-scale fishing representatives from six continents found themselves among the 6,000 official delegates registered for the UNOC 2022. With support and coordination from a network of regional civil society organizations (CSOs), these representatives were able to make an early start on their road to Lisbon.

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Representing themselves

The organizations engaged in this process included the Locally Managed Marine Area (LMMA) Network from the Pacific, Kesatuan Nelayan Tradisional Indonesia (KNTI) from Indonesia, the Federation of Indian Ocean Artisanal Fishers (FPAOI), the African Confederation of Professional Organizations of Artisanal Fishers (CAOPA), and a Mesoamerican network bringing together indigenous communities from Costa Rica, Panama, Honduras and Mexico.

They were supported in this endeavour by the Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements (CFFA),

and misrepresenting their interests, leaving them more invisible and disempowered.

Hence for the Lisbon UNOC 2022, SSF wanted to be there in person. The clarion calls summarized their mood towards such interlocutors: "Talk with us, not for us!" and "There is nothing about us without us!" If enabled to participate by such interlocutors, SSF

CoopSoliDar R.L., and Blue Ventures. Joining their voices to the Call for Action were other SSF groups from Europe, Africa and Latin America.

The initial work involved meeting and sharing experiences of their daily lives, their working conditions, their hopes and fears. This was made possible by specialists in communications, interpretation, facilitation and coordination, working alongside these frontline workers to enable them to express themselves clearly and be understood. Step by step, they began to build an alliance, based on empathy, trust, and mutual respect, and to understand the boundaries of their common cause.

This is expressed in their Call to Action, demanding governments provide secure and preferential access to healthy oceans and ecosystems for small-scale fishers; to develop science-based, transparent, inclusive and participative fisheries management; to address threats posed by pollution and competition from Blue Economy industries; to invest in long-term resource management, ecosystem restoration and innovations, building on local initiatives of men and women from fishing communities; and to develop national strategic plans to implement five key areas of action by 2030, with adequate funding and guided by the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) and other relevant regional policies.

They call to five key areas:

- Urgently secure preferential SSF access and co-manage 100 per cent of coastal areas.
- Guarantee the participation of women, support their empowerment and foster recognition and respect for the roles they play.
- Protect SSF from competing Blue Economy sectors.
- Establish transparency and accountability in fisheries management.
- Build the resilience of communities to face the threats of climate change and enhance the prospects for youth

Make fisheries sustainable

The week in Lisbon was abuzz with frenetic activity, with many informal events, workshops and meetings going on around the formal UNOC 2022 sessions. However, a lack of interpretation made these difficult for the SSF delegates to engage meaningfully.

One such event was 'Future of the Ocean: finding cooperative pathways towards 2030'. The moderator and architect of the 2014 European Common Fisheries Policy, Ernesto Penas Lado, proposed that ocean activities needed to be "legitimate and compatible" in order to qualify for space in the emerging ocean governance framework. Competing interests would have to engage in meaningful dialogue to secure ever-diminishing slices of access, with non-traditional users of ocean space encroaching on traditional fishing grounds, for example. There would be winners and losers.

Vivienne Solis of CoopSoliDar, Costa Rica, speaking for CSOs, said that such a framework also had to be

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equitable. Currently, seats at the table go to those with the most power and influence. This must change. Dawda Saine, general secretary of CAOPA, observed there is no consensual view on what the Blue Economy actually is. This has led to many SSF participants referring to it as the "Blue Fear". Summing up, the moderator observed that we need to transition from blue fear to blue trust, with dialogue and inclusion being essential to that objective.

Lavenia Naivalu, a traditional leader of her community from Fiji, spoke on behalf of the LMMA Network. She highlighted how communities like hers are entirely dependent on fisheries resources; they work cooperatively to manage and sustain them. She called for greater transparency and accountability, especially to ensure that

gender-sensitive data are collected and that information about women's roles is made available, particularly that pertaining to food security, livelihoods and conservation.

Javier Garat, president of the International Coalition of Fisheries Associations (ICFA) and the European fishing vessel owners' association Europech, said it was essential for artisanal and industrial fishers to work together to reach food security through sustainable use of marine resources. This is rather like the chair of agribusiness associations calling for small-holders practising agro-ecology and industrial farming companies to work together.

The Low Impact Fishers of Europe (LIFE) responded that it is prepared to work with anyone in a constructive dialogue, so long as the historic injustices suffered by small-scale fishers are recognized. That it must reflect their rights to fair access to resources

2050. Also, achieving a climate-neutral decarbonized fishing sector will require radical changes in technology, economy and working practices.

Blue food is also firmly on the menu. Although largely undefined, this could be the thin end of the wedge, boosting environmentally destructive feed-lot aquaculture in our coastal waters, paving the way to industrial production and extraction of marine algae and seaweeds. The future may be Blue, but for SSF there is little optimism that this gives any grounds for Blue Hope.

UNOC 2022 was an inspiring and energizing event. In particular, it provided the possibility to build meaningful synergies with counterpart associations and forge alliances with like-minded organizations from around the world. It helped us to gather strength, coordinate and prepare for the struggles ahead. 

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and markets in practical support and management measures, with adequate protection from the encroachment of large-scale fishing.

Interactive dialogue

Several SSF representatives were granted permission to speak in the plenary session on 'Making Fisheries Sustainable'. Josefina Mata from Mexico, along with a member of the delegation of indigenous communities from Mesoamerica, spoke powerfully about the struggle of women, often heads of single-parent households, to put food on the table and educate their children.

The "blue fear" mentioned by CAOPA is a real and present danger. In Europe, the EU's Green Deal offshore energy-generating targets commit to increasing capacity from current levels of around 12GW to over 300 GW by

For more

UN Ocean Conference Altice Arena, Lisbon, Portugal, 27 Jun - 1 Jul 2022

<https://www.un.org/en/conferences/ocean2022>

Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG 14)

<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal14>

SSF Lisbon declaration

<https://caopa.org/en/unoc-2022-final-declaration-of-small-scalefishers/01/07/2022/news/4539/>