

# Leap Year

**At the 35th Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI), governments and civil society reiterated their commitment to the SSF Guidelines and the IYAFA Global Action Plan**

The occasion was the 35th Session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI-35), the intergovernmental forum of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The purpose was to review and discuss issues and challenges related to fisheries and aquaculture. Campaigners for the rights of small-scale fishers and Indigenous Peoples once again joined forces to collectively voice their perspectives and advocate for the principle of food sovereignty.

They did so through the space of alliance and coordination offered by the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), an autonomous and self-organized global platform of small-scale food producers, rural workers' organizations and grassroots/community-based social movements to advance the Food Sovereignty agenda at the global and the regional level.

The IPC Working Group on Fisheries comprises major civil society networks representing small-scale fisheries (SSF); the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP); the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF); the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC); and La Via Campesina (LVC). The working group is supported by Crocevia Centro Internazionale; the Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN); the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF); and the Transnational Institute (TNI).

COFI is the main intergovernmental political space for the participation of the IPC Working Group on Fisheries. It has made key advancements, particularly through the development and endorsement of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines).

## A turning point

COFI-35 was a pivotal moment for SSF and Indigenous Peoples. Not only because 2022 is the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA) but also because COFI's last in-person meeting occurred four years ago, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The IPC Working Group on Fisheries seized this opportunity to collectively celebrate SSF movements. They brought a large group of IPC delegates to Rome, connecting with other agencies active around the world.

On August 31 and September 1, Rome hosted 32 IPC delegates to prepare for COFI. The preparatory

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meetings offered the delegates the opportunity to rebuild internal cohesion and solidarity, which had suffered for two years, limited to online meetings. They defined common messages to take to COFI. Delegates arrived from across the world: India, Gambia, Tunisia, Nicaragua, Argentina, France, Mexico, Panama, the US, Indonesia, Thailand, Mauritius, Ecuador, South Africa, Kenya, Brazil, Belize, Sri Lanka, Bahamas, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic.

Afterwards, the IPC delegates hosted the first IYAFA SSF Summit on September 2-4 with support from FAO, the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) and the SSF Hub. This Summit aimed to promote dialogue and collaboration among SSF

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Fishworker representatives at the SSF Summit to commemorate IYAFA 2022 in Rome. The SSF Summit brought together Small-scale Fishers from across regions

24

actors, including fishers' movements and organizations, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A full day was dedicated exclusively to SSF organizations, creating an autonomous space for dialogue, opening up the possibility of regional collaborations to advance the implementation of the SSF Guidelines.

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Many SSF organizations joined the event from around the world. There were representatives from the Confédération Africaine des Organisations de Pêche Artisanale (CAOPA); the Ibero-American SSF network (Ripapa); the Sambo Creek Fishers Association and Garifuna Indigenous Peoples; the Central American Network of Indigenous Peoples; and the Norwegian Sámi

Association, among others. The open discussion laid the foundation for building a common vision among various organizations and movements for strengthening fishing communities worldwide.

The IPC and members of the SSF-GSF Advisory Group (AG) presented their first preliminary report; it provided data and analysis collected by SSF communities on the status of the implementation of the SSF Guidelines in various national contexts. This report emerged from the 'SSF People-Centred Methodology to Assess the Implementation of the SSF Guidelines at the national, regional, and global levels. It is a tool developed by the IPC members for communities to examine human-rights violations of SSF people worldwide, providing a basis for SSF movements' ongoing advocacy work at national and international levels.

### Claiming their due

The event drew attention to the importance of small-scale fishers as holders of their rights, not merely artisanal actors. It explored how SSF communities and social movements

live and work in harmony with nature; how the environment interacts with human lives, shaping cultural diversities and local livelihoods. The event demonstrated that small-scale fishing is a way of life and not merely a profit-driven enterprise.

The meeting also focused on the rights of women working in SSF, still largely marginalized and unable to enjoy equal rights and opportunities. The IPC people-centred assessment showed that women's rights are frequently violated. Cultural and structural factors play a role in undervaluing their vital contributions, keeping them largely invisible. In the framework of leadership renewal, there was an emphasis on affording more space to youth, paving the way for the next generation of SSF activists.

Immediately after the SSF Summit, COFI's 35th Session was held at the FAO Headquarters in Rome. Despite the many challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the IPC worked hard to strengthen its network. Global movements had the opportunity to engage in face-to-face meetings with governments delegates. However, their right to speak in the COFI plenary was compromised when the chair cited a lack of time and stopped allowing observers to make interventions in some plenary discussions relevant to SSF, such as the establishment of a Sub-Committee on Fisheries Management, biodiversity, and climate change.

After being approached by several COFI actors, the chair then allowed a minimal number of observers to make one-minute interventions, as opposed to the customary three minutes. This denied SSF and Indigenous Peoples the opportunity to contribute to the debate, preventing government delegations from hearing the voices and perspectives of millions of small-scale fishers from around the world.

### A short shrift

Unfortunately, this was not the only concern. Government delegates gave much higher priority to the expansion of industrial, export-oriented aquaculture as a solution to the food crisis and to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14. This has dangerous implications for biodiversity

conservation, for the resilience and adaptability of marine ecosystems. It has already caused large-scale marginalization and displacement of coastal communities, endangering their rights, livelihoods and traditions.

Much attention went to increasing investments under the Blue Economy agenda; to strengthening international fish trade driven by profits, undermining local food security and sound fisheries management. Moreover, almost all COFI members welcomed both the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies and the progress made toward achieving SDG14 and the 2030 Agenda. IPC called upon governments to bring back discussions on fisheries subsidies to FAO and COFI, providing participation in the negotiations to SSF organizations.

One positive development was the governments agreeing to pursue the IYafa Global Action Plan in the coming years, while also calling upon FAO to organize SSF summits every two years, back-to-back with COFI sessions. This again confirmed the willingness of FAO's Fisheries and Aquaculture Division (NFI) to continue to support small-scale fisheries, including through the ongoing implementation of the SSF Guidelines.

IPC members will undertake further reflections and political analyses, further developing their strategy. The IPC Working Group on Fisheries has come through this process stronger and readier to continue the good fight. The struggle continues! 🍂

#### For more



##### IYafa Global Action Plan

<https://www.fao.org/3/cb4875en/cb4875en.pdf>

##### IYafa 2022 | Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF) Summit 2022

<https://www.fao.org/artisanal-fisheries-aquaculture-2022/events/events-detail/en/c/1601136/>

##### IPC WG on Fisheries COFI 35 statements

<https://www.foodsovereignty.org/cofi35/>