

Scaffolding for the Future

The social pillar of sustainable development ought to be strengthened to protect the future of lives and livelihoods in the small-scale fisheries subsector

Five years ago, on 05 December 2017, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) proclaimed the year 2022 as the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA) and invited the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to serve as lead agency for the International Year. On small-scale artisanal fisheries alone, hundreds of events have so far been organized worldwide (see <https://www.fao.org/artisanal-fisheries-aquaculture-2022/events/events-list/en/>). ICSF has also organized two regional IYAFA workshops for Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean in 2022, and regional workshops for the Europe and Africa is planned for the year 2023.

These events, undoubtedly, have raised the visibility of small-scale fisheries subsector—one of the key objectives of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines)—and its contribution to food security and nutrition. The visibility of small-scale fisheries was further demonstrated in several countries across the developing world, when all mainstream economic activities dried up in the wake of COVID-19, and the subsector provided lifeline support to coastal communities in employment, income and food security.

Despite the improving visibility and recognition of small-scale artisanal fisheries, the ICSF-IYAFA Statements (see page 12) show that the subsector continues to be disadvantaged in enjoying access to resources in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, threatened as it is by upstream and downstream activities, as well as by events adjacent to its geographic areas of engagement. These include: threats from unfair allocation of freshwater resources; reclamation of marine and inland water bodies; location of economic zones; pollution; expansion of infrastructure and forced resettlement; and conflicts with destructive and inequitable fishing gear and practices—to name a few. Threats to the subsector arise also from losing traditional and customary rights, or access, to land and water bodies due to changing economic priorities, and unsafe living and working conditions arising from climate change and extreme weather events.

Visibility aside, what is still amiss about small-scale artisanal fisheries is the persistent lack of recognition

of their rights as fishers, fishworkers, and as fishing communities, as men, women, youth or as Indigenous Peoples in spite of their role in food supply, and an absence of political will to protect their rights. There is also an obstinate reluctance to grant the status of right to traditional or historic unhindered access to resources as enjoyed by fishing communities, whether land, water or fish. Small-scale fishers are presumptively considered dispensable to more dominant economic discourses. As resonated in the ICSF-IYAFA Statements, institutionalizing the rights of fishing communities to uphold culture and to enjoy decent life and livelihood from the aquatic, riparian and coastal living spaces and resources, in a sustainable and responsible manner, is the need of the hour. This is particularly relevant in the case of the vulnerable and marginalized.



The human-rights-based approach elucidated in the SSF Guidelines, therefore, needs to be actively protected, not neglected, in the context of commons' fisheries, to provide robust scaffolding to develop legislation, policies and strategies from the local to the national, with the meaningful participation of the above stakeholders to protect their lives and livelihoods, and to visualize a better future for their children in the subsector. New legal instruments such as

the WTO Agreement on Fisheries subsume social standards under environmental standards. This needs to change.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-change impacts, and with communities facing dispossession of their coastal commons, as observed in the ICSF-IYAFA Statements, it is time to assert the social pillar as an independent leg of sustainable development, similar to the economic and environmental pillars, and to uphold the agency of local communities. Strengthening the social pillar of sustainable development could enhance financial allocation to social assistance and insurance, and could, in the process, mitigate climate-change impacts. The responsibility of the coastal State (as well as of the continental State in relation to the inland fisheries of land-locked countries) needs to be sufficiently upheld to address the social issues pertaining to fishing communities so that the coastal and riparian fishing communities can continue to see their small-scale fisheries as the granaries of their future—this ought to be the abiding message of IYAFA. **3**