

No. 94 | July 2026

ISSN 3118-0108

SAMUDRA

REPORT

THE BIENNIAL JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL COLLECTIVE IN SUPPORT OF FISHWORKERS



Sumatra's Compound Disasters

Saving the Negombo Lagoon

Iced COFI

Fishers in the Nyéléni Process

Operationalising the SSF Guidelines

Philippine IUU Fishing Policy Wrinkles

Piecing the Global Biodiversity Puzzle

Fisheries, Communities, Livelihoods



ICSF is an international NGO working on issues that concern fishworkers the world over. It is in status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN and is on ILO's Special List of Non-governmental International Organizations. It also has Liaison Status with FAO.

As a global network of community organizers, teachers, technicians, researchers and scientists, ICSF's activities encompass monitoring and research, exchange and training, campaigns

and action, as well as communications. *SAMUDRA Report* invites contributions and responses. Correspondence should be addressed to icsf@icsf.net

The opinions and positions expressed in the articles are those of the authors concerned and do not necessarily represent the official views of ICSF.

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Sylvain Cherkouli/ FAO

Aerial view of the traditional fishing port in Djiffer, Senegal

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NO.94 | JULY 2026

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FRONT COVER



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PUBLISHED BY

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Fishworkers (ICSF)
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The Netherlands
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*Processing fish at Hydrobase District,
Saint-Louis, Senegal*
Credit: Ibrahima Mbengue/FAO



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Aigerim Kagarmanova/FAO
A woman at a food stall selling fish, Astana, Kazakhstan

New Crew, Same Horizon

As ICSF nears four decades of solidarity with small-scale fishworkers, a year of transition has opened a new chapter of renewed energy, connection and collective action

Much has happened since the last issue of *SAMUDRA Report* was published in July 2025. The year since has been especially eventful, marked by important national and international processes shaping the future of small-scale fisheries – and by a pivotal period of change for ICSF itself. As ICSF approaches the 40th anniversary of its founding this November, we look back upon four decades of transformative and inspiring work in support of small-scale fishworkers around the world, while also looking ahead from a momentous year of organizational transition and renewal.

In the fall of 2025, following a long period of internal reflection and discussion, ICSF took the difficult, yet necessary, decision to close its long-standing Secretariat office in Chennai, India, along with its host, the ICSF Trust. This move enabled us to ensure that the Secretariat could continue to adapt to, and reflect, the international context and character of ICSF's collective work, while retaining the physical flexibility needed to stay in closer contact with, and support, small-scale fisheries organizations and our members across all regions. Our small yet mighty Secretariat team is now firmly rooted and working remotely across Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe, with a mini-hub remaining in South India, ICSF's birthplace and crucible.

Despite a challenging and complex year, the new ICSF team has emerged from this transition with renewed energy, motivation and inspiration for the work ahead. This issue of *SAMUDRA Report*, the 94th edition in the publication's storied run, is the result of the collective efforts of ICSF's members and Secretariat, reflecting our strong shared commitment to ensuring that the perspectives and experiences of small-scale fishworkers around the world continue to be gathered and shared with an international readership.

In keeping with ICSF's ethos of connecting local and national experiences with international processes, this issue includes articles that span multiple levels: from the national to the global. Three articles highlight national capacity-building processes focused on implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) in Ghana, Costa Rica and the Philippines, co-organized by ICSF's members, Secretariat and local partners in November 2025. Further national-level experiences reflect on the compound catastrophe that was the Sumatra disaster in Indonesia in November 2025;

challenges in the Philippine IUU Fishing Policy Framework; the human costs of the annual fishing ban in Bangladesh; the essential history of an influential fisher federation in India; and the lived realities of lagoon fishers confronting environmental degradation in Sri Lanka.

At the international level, several articles cover global governance and advocacy processes spanning the globe. These include the third Nyéléni Global Forum, organized in Kandy, Sri Lanka, in September 2025; the 30th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change held in Belem, Brazil, in November 2025; the second International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD+20), held in Cartagena, Colombia, in February 2026; the second session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) Sub-Committee on Fisheries Management, convened in Reykjavik, Iceland, in February 2026; and the fifth World SSF Congress, held in Hua Hin, Thailand, in April 2026. Other articles in this collection reflect on the crucial linkages between small-scale fisheries and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) process; the International Platform for Ocean Sustainability (IPOS); and the 18th edition of the World International Film Festival, held in Lorient, France, in March 2026.

As we reflect on a productive year in small-scale fisheries, and look towards another, a key process will be the upcoming third Small-scale Fisheries Summit and the 37th session of COFI, to be held in Rome in September 2026, which are also highlighted in this issue. The SSF Summit will be an especially crucial moment when small-scale fishworkers' organizations, NGOs, researchers, governments and intergovernmental organizations from around the world will gather to strengthen alliances and collaboration, and to discuss the current state of implementation of the SSF Guidelines and how this process can be made more effective on the ground.

This will be an important opportunity to illuminate and draw upon the experiences, needs and priorities shared by small-scale fishworkers and their supporters in global governance spaces such as COFI. But, perhaps even more importantly, it will be an opportunity for fishworkers' organizations from many different contexts to come together, strengthen their unity and build towards their common goal: ensuring that a human rights-based approach to fisheries governance becomes the norm everywhere – from rivers to lakes and seas.



Of Safety Nets and Trampolines

In coastal Tamil Nadu, a fisher federation demonstrates how collective action and financial inclusion can build resilient communities and livelihoods

In March 2026, the Government of India celebrated the country's status as the second largest fish producer, with seafood export values doubling over the past decade (Department of Fisheries, Government of India 2026; Press Information Bureau, 2026). This statistic means little to Anjalai, a fresh fish vendor from Tiruvallur, who is more concerned about whether she will return home having sold all her fish before the sun becomes too sharp overhead. The Draft Blue Economy Policy 2022 speaks of 'optimal utilisation of all sectors of the maritime domain', through export-oriented fishing, infrastructure, and untapped energy. However, for small-scale fishers, fishwork is not just a 'sector', but a valuable source of food security and cultural inheritance. Despite being important actors in the making of the

time when policy and public discourse dismiss cooperative institutions as unsustainable, the TDFSf offers a refreshing reminder that collective arrangements can matter quite a lot in places where markets are unjust.

From precarity to collective: The making of TDFSf

Located on the northernmost frontiers of Tamil Nadu, Pazhaverkadu is an ecological hotspot in the Tiruvallur District. It houses 11,700 families across 42 villages located along the Pulicat Lake. Most men fish in the lake, or the Bay of Bengal, and older women sell fresh and dried-salted fish in the local market and the neighbouring villages through head-load vending. Some even travel to markets in Chennai, the capital of the state.

The aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami marked the donation of many boats by the state and domestic/ international development agencies, but not all fishermen received boats. In the absence of collateral and limited credit options, many bought boats, taking loans from merchants at 48-50 percent rates of interest. These merchants also exercised a monopoly over the local market, where they paid fishers only INR 350 for 1 kg of 'vanjaram' (seer fish) worth INR 550-600. This led to a vicious debt cycle, particularly for fishers from historically oppressed Adidraavidar (Scheduled Castes) and Irular (Scheduled Tribes) communities.

In this period, the Government of Tamil Nadu and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) launched the Post-Tsunami State Livelihoods Programme (PTSLP) for income restoration and financial inclusion. The project engaged the services of the South Indian Federation of Fisher Societies (SIFFS) to mobilise fishers in the 12 affected coastal districts.

Although cooperative institutions are often dismissed as unsustainable, collective arrangements can matter quite a lot in places where markets are unjust

coastline, they are now being pushed out of the very landscape they have lived in for generations.

How are fishers responding to these shifts? In Tiruvallur, a coastal district in South India, fishers have, over the last 14 years, built the Tiruvallur District Fishermen Sangams Federation (TDFSf) as a collective platform through which they navigate changing markets and climate landscapes. Three features stand out as to why fishers continue to invest in the federation: its roots in existing community institutions, credit and savings systems designed around the realities of fishwork, and the inclusion of fisherwomen. At a

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Fisherwomen meeting at the TDFS office, Pazhaverkadu, Tamil Nadu, India

S. Ephrem (then CEO of SIFFS) and Dr. Pakshirajan (Consultant, SIFFS) led the creation of fisher societies on the basis of SIFFS's three objectives: marketing the fish caught by members at fair prices, providing credit for renewal of fishing equipment, and promoting savings (Kurien, 2025). With the help of Mr. Bernard, a local botany graduate and social worker, a group of 30 fishermen came together in August 2010 to form the first Fish Marketing Society (FMS) or 'Sangam' under the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act, 1975.

An FMS typically has 20-100 artisanal boat-owning fishermen who can avail of collective loans to repay existing ones taken to purchase boats. Each member takes the same loan amount from the PTSLP corpus and repays it over fixed intervals, accepting collective responsibility for repayment. By 2013, nine FMSs comprising 487 fishermen registered as the TDFS. A year later, the federation expanded to include fish-vending women in the region, who had similar difficulties in accessing credit, by organizing them into Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) of

four to five women each. Today, the TDFS has 1,450 fishermen and 3,545 fisherwomen members across 24 FMSs and 950 JLGs. Although funding from the PTSLP project ended in 2020, the federation is now self-financed and led by a 10-member Executive Council, with Mr. Bernard as the CEO.

Building on existing community institutions

There were multiple attempts to collectivise fishers in Pazhaverkadu after the 2004 Tsunami. However, none of them evolved into functioning and sustainable cooperatives. TDFS endured due to its management being closely woven into the local social fabric, learning from the success of fishermen cooperatives in Kerala (Kurien, 1980). Instead of replacing existing ways of organizing, the federation began with the support of traditional panchayats, which regulate access to the lake and fishing gear. In the initial stages, these panchayats were crucial to identify responsible candidates, handle resistance from merchants, and encourage fishers

to join the federation. Even today, traditional panchayats address cases of loan default by calling for a 'sabhai' (village gathering) that has helped to ensure low default rates of just 1.98 percent and 1.08 percent among men and women, respectively.

Much of the federation's day-to-day work is carried out by educated locals hired as community development officers. Under them, fishers come together for weekly meetings to collect repayments and discuss new government and federation schemes. Over time, women's groups' meetings have evolved beyond financial check-ins to include health, their children's schooling and careers. This led to the organizing of ration supplies during COVID-19 and conducting regular health camps for the fishers. Together, these two threads of local legitimacy and

To counter the market monopoly, FMS members collectively relied on a federation-appointed auctioneer who ensured both a fair price for their labour and that payments reached them directly. Over time, an informal minimum selling price emerged, shaped by season and supply rather than middlemen. Every member sets aside 15 percent of the daily income for loan repayment, compulsory savings of two percent, administrative costs, and membership fees altogether. For instance, for a catch worth INR 10,000, a fisher would receive INR 8,500 in hand and INR 200 set aside as savings. This was a stark shift compared to the INR 5,000 he received earlier, which barely covered everyday expenses, let alone savings. Today, the fishermen have outgrown this auctioneering service as they are well-informed about the local rates and individually sell their catch for good prices.

Fisherwomen and expanding everyday agency

Women are not only vendors in the market, but also unpaid managers of their households, stretching money across food, school fees, medicines, and emergencies. Earlier, women borrowed money from merchants to purchase fish or manage household expenses. These loans were provided at 10-15 percent interest – for a loan of INR 10,000, lenders gave them only INR 8,500 after deducting interest upfront. They had to repay the entire amount in three months, and even a day's delay would result in an additional INR 500 as interest. In contrast, when a woman takes a INR 10,000 loan from a JLG, she gets the entire amount in hand, pays only INR 540 as interest over a period of 10 months, and, most importantly, is treated with sensitivity.

Ramani still remembers standing in front of the federation office when her husband fell ill, and she could not pay her share on the usual tenth of the month. "I thought they would shout at me and come to my house, but they told me to repay it along with the amount next month. With the federation, I know that everyone will understand," she recounted.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federation also began to provide

Before the FMS were formed, most fishermen depended on merchants not only to sell their catch, but also to borrow money. With almost 50 percent interest rates, a fisher described this period as slavery

community engagement gave the TDFS its particular texture: an organization where people could discuss and negotiate openly, rather than one that decides for 'beneficiaries'.

Financial systems designed for fishers

Before the Fish Marketing Societies were formed, most fishermen depended on merchants not only to sell their catch, but also to borrow money. With almost 50 percent interest rates, a fisher described this period as slavery: "Avanagluku adimaya irunthom" (We were slaves to them). They could sell the day's catch only to their lender, who would pay them just half the price, citing loan repayment. After every hard day of labour, they left with just enough in hand and started the next morning again in debt. With the FMS, members got loans at not more than 15 percent rates of interest. As they repaid their loans, they became eligible for larger amounts. Eventually, they closed off their debts with the merchants and bought their own boats.



Boats ready for fishing, Pulicat Lake, Tamil Nadu, India

women with transport to sell their fish at Red Hills and Porur, 40 kms and 62 kms away respectively, from its headquarters. Anjalai is a JLG member who has been selling fish and shrimp at Red Hills (43 kms away) for 25 years. “Buses were not available, and even when the lockdown was lifted, we had to catch a bus at 2 am to reach by 5 am. If we were late, we would lose our customers. For this, the federation arranged a Bolero van, so we could go safely early in the morning,” she said.

Fisherwomen also set aside an amount of INR 50 per week as compulsory savings and can withdraw money only after they have saved at least INR 4,000-5,000. With members drawing larger loans, they have begun to avail life insurance for the loans. In case of death, the nominee gets back the amount paid along with INR 5,000 towards funeral expenses and the unpaid portion of the loan is settled within the federation. The insurance scheme has been crucial for the survival of many female-headed households. Lakshmi and her husband took a loan of INR 10,000 to buy nets, but

he passed away just after they paid their third instalment. “I got the Rs 2,700 I paid, and (federation) also told me I do not need to pay the remaining Rs 7,600,” she said.

Many women described their first visit to a bank with pride as they had learnt how to sign their names and talk to the bank staff confidently. They also observed that the bank staff were more responsive owing to the referral from the federation

For many women, the excitement of change came not in the market, but at the bank. For loans above INR 1 lakh (100,000), federation members get Kisan Cards to avail loans at just 2 percent interest rates. In the last two years, the federation has also worked with the Federal Bank of India, disbursing over INR 25 crores (250,000,000) to 3,000 JLG members. Many women described their first visit to a bank with pride as they had learnt how to sign their names and talk to the bank staff confidently. They

For more


Working together in small-scale fisheries: harnessing collective action for poverty eradication

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40152-018-0094-8>

State, private or cooperatives? The governance of Tawa reservoir fisheries, India

<https://lib.icimod.org/records/jnhwv-bnd03>

Navigating customary law and state fishing legislation to create effective fisheries governance in India

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0308597X17304396>

Fishermen's Cooperatives in Kerala: A Critique

<https://www.fao.org/4/ae494e/ae494e00.pdf>

Small-scale fisheries in the context of globalisation

https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/articles/report/Small-scale_fisheries_in_the_context_of_globalisation/26443915?file=48091831

Enabling a Voice for the Marginalised: Global examples of community-based approaches to natural resource management

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228725913_Enabling_a_Voice_for_the_Marginalized_Global_examples_of_community-based_approaches_to_natural_resource_management

also observed that the bank staff were more responsive owing to the referral from the federation. Banks have also emerged as important spaces of knowledge-sharing to make choices on what appliances to buy or which school to send their children to. Vimala shared: “Now that I have money, I can save and buy small things for my children. I also talk to other women – ‘Where are you from? Where did your children study?’. When I discuss this, I get all this information to go back home, talk to my husband, and we make decisions together.”

Today, these conversations have grown to accommodate local aspirations for their children. In a meeting in Annamalaicheri, one JLG begins a discussion in the larger group: “We need some coaching classes for computer (IT and typing) and English.” Many members increasingly see this as a priority, hoping that the next generation will have opportunities beyond fishwork. Commenting on the lack of community representation in governance, the federation’s CEO shared, “We are currently providing scholarships for children of members who score more than 80 percent in their 10th and 12th board examinations. The next goal is to start a knowledge centre for coaching UPSC and TNPS (public service) aspirants, we need fishers to be part of the government.”

Lessons for the future

Any coastal or marine policy in India must be reimagined to reflect the region’s cultural and ecological context, which requires local participation. Research indicates that resource and environmental management, with active support and cooperation from stakeholders and implementation of community rules such as association with temples, kinship ties, etc., is more effective than state-run technocratic approaches (Karnad, 2017; Sims & Deb, 2009). Kurien (1998) proposes a triadic structure of management where the community is the anchor that provides stability, the market acts as an oar to provide momentum, and the state is the rudder and regulator that gives direction. This is descriptive of the federation’s role in Pazhaverkadu, which the state initially funded and

guided, but was implemented at the grassroots level by fishers themselves.

The organization of cooperatives is bumpy, and socio-economic inclusion among fishers brings new challenges at each step of development, with some intractable limitations at the community level. Studies on other cooperatives in India and the broader Global South highlight the importance of autonomous decision-making and community management in addressing internal obstacles and opportunities (Jentoft et al., 2018; Jyotishi et al., 2020). Within the TDFS, however, active participation and punctual repayment has not translated to leadership: only four women have secured leadership positions, with none at the top ranks. Another concern is the sustainability of the price moderation achieved by the FMS model, with increasing commercialisation of fisheries and drive towards aquaculture in the region. As export establishments threaten local resource stocks, global value chains seem to be leading the fishers to limited or no bargaining power yet again.

Opportunities at the lowest stages of the fishers’ hierarchy and their inclusion in economic progress should not be confused with a long-term sustainable development strategy. To realise a vision of genuine socio-economic inclusion, programmes to support fishers must provide them with opportunities throughout the broader economy, with the development of literacy, job skills and social resources. Concerted efforts are needed at a larger scale to address excessive and non-seasonal fishing, livelihood and habitation security, and an equitable sharing of the commons. That said, stories like that of the TDFS offer rich insights into community mobilisation and responses and what it means to truly march ‘with’ the marginalised.

This research would not have been possible without the support of the Institute of Youth and Development, Bangalore. The author sincerely thanks Mr. Bernard (CEO of TDFS), Dr. Shivakumar (Institute of Youth and Development), and Prof. Annapurna Neti (Azim Premji University) for their valuable insights and guidance.



In the Why of the Storm

The 2025 Sumatra disaster exposed the intertwined crises of environmental degradation, fragmented governance and coastal vulnerability

Predictions on the potential scale and effects of the climate crisis have long been undertaken by scientists and experts, including the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). In 2018, the FAO published a study titled 'Impacts of Climate Change on Fisheries and Aquaculture', which highlights various significant impacts on fisheries management in general, including on small-scale fisheries, fishers and coastal communities. One key finding presented in the document is that more than 80 percent of all disaster events with major social and economic impacts are climate-related disasters. As one of the world's largest archipelagic nations, situated along the Ring of Fire, Indonesia is no stranger to natural disasters.

In late November 2025, a series of severe hydrometeorological disasters – including flash floods, river overflows,

and landslides – struck the northern and central regions of Sumatra. The most severe impacts were concentrated in three provinces: Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (Aceh), North Sumatra (SUMUT), and West Sumatra (SUMBAR). Extreme weather conditions began on November 22 and peaked on November 25, triggering floods and landslides. Rainfall intensity then subsided starting on November 27.

The most severely affected areas in each province were: Aceh Tamiang (Aceh), Agam (West Sumatra), Sibolga (North Sumatra), North Tapanuli (North Sumatra), Central Tapanuli (North Sumatra), and South Tapanuli (North Sumatra). According to the latest data from the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB), at least 1,208 people have died, 137 are still missing, and 1,715 families have been displaced as of the time of writing. As of January 27, 2026, 111,800 people

Data	Details
The main affected provinces	Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (Aceh), North Sumatra (SUMUT), and West Sumatra (SUMBAR).
Time of the disaster	November 22-25, 2025
Most severely affected areas (with province)	Aceh Tamiang (Aceh), Agam (West Sumatra), Sibolga (North Sumatra), North Tapanuli (North Sumatra), Central Tapanuli (North Sumatra), and South Tapanuli (North Sumatra).
The total number of deaths	1,208 people
Missing person/not yet found	137 people
Internally Displaced Persons	1,715 families
	111,800 people
The total number of damaged homes	247,949 homes

General data on the disasters in Sumatra, November 2025

*This article is by **Marthin Hadiwinata** (hadiwinata.ahmad@gmail.com), Co-founder Member and National Coordinator of Ekologi Maritim Indonesia (EKOMARIN)*

have been displaced, with a total of 247,949 homes damaged.

The hydrometeorological conditions, characterised by heavy rainfall that intensified with the arrival of the rare and deadly Tropical Cyclone Senyar in the Malacca Strait, were among the key natural phenomena behind the scale of the disaster. Tropical Cyclone Senyar affected the Malaysian Peninsula and southern Thailand before moving toward Sumatra, Indonesia, in November 2025. The Tropical Cyclone Senyar phenomenon caused heavy rainfall to intensify into extreme weather, becoming the primary trigger for floods, landslides, and flash floods in Sumatra.

The massive extreme rainfall resulted in floods, landslides, and widespread devastation – a combination of extreme weather and ecological vulnerability caused by the degradation of forest and natural resources exploited in the

destructive impact on coastal fishing communities, paralysing fishing activities due to the accumulation of logs and trash in the waters. This damage has ruined fishing nets, drastically reduced catch yields, damaged coastal/pond ecosystems, and threatened safety. Fishermen were forced to moor their boats, resulting in a significant loss of income.

Slow disaster response: Declaration of a National Disaster

Given the urgency and severity of the adverse impacts, the government's response – particularly in the regions of Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra – appeared extremely slow, poorly coordinated, and failed to address urgent needs, including those of coastal communities and other isolated areas where road access, transportation, and even communication infrastructure had been destroyed. In fact, at the time of writing, some disaster-affected areas were yet to receive assistance.

The fundamental principle of disaster management, as enshrined under Law No. 24/2007 concerning Disaster Management, emphasises the need to provide “swift and precise” response in accordance with on-the-ground conditions. This principle serves as an absolute standard that must be met by both the central and local governments in all disaster response efforts. This time sensitivity relates to the “Golden Time” concept in disaster management, which is no more than 72 hours (3 days). An example of the government's rapid response to a natural disaster came two decades prior, during the Yogyakarta-Central Java Earthquake that occurred in the morning of May 27, 2006. Within a 24 hour-span, then-President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had visited the disaster site (in the afternoon), and stayed overnight in Yogyakarta. This was despite the fact that the 2006 earthquake was not designated as a National Disaster. Meanwhile, President Prabowo Subianto did not visit the site of the Sumatra earthquake until December 1, 2026. In fact, criticism from members of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) two

The flash floods and the resulting debris flow have had a destructive impact on coastal fishing communities, paralysing fishing activities due to the accumulation of logs and trash in the waters

upstream areas, leading to disasters downstream. Continuous heavy rainfall increases water volume in the upstream areas, but the water is not retained or absorbed in the watershed, causing it to eventually overflow. This situation is exacerbated by regional weather phenomena such as monsoon winds and cyclonic circulation, which trigger the formation of extremely heavy rain clouds. Therefore, this disaster cannot be classified as a purely hydrometeorological disaster, but rather as an ecological disaster caused by natural climate anomalies impacted by the climate crisis, and compounded by massive exploitation of nature.

The disaster has also affected coastal communities in the upstream areas, particularly small-scale fishers along the western and eastern coasts of Sumatra. The flash floods and the resulting debris flow have had a

AFP/GETTY



Flooding in Bengkulu, Sumatra, Indonesia

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weeks after the government's disaster response – specifically regarding the National Search and Rescue Agency (BASARNAS) – suggested that officials appeared confused, as they failed to ensure a responsive disaster response during the critical 'golden time'.

Hitherto, the central government has not acknowledged the 2025 Sumatra disaster as a National Disaster, with the President explaining on various occasions that it was not designated as such. One of the reasons given to the public was that the Sumatra disaster did not affect all the 38 provinces in Indonesia – only three provinces were impacted, leaving the rest unaffected. However, Article 7 of Law No. 24/2007 concerning Disaster Management has already established general criteria for determining the status and level of national and regional disasters, including the number of victims, level of property damage, damage to infrastructure and facilities, the extent of the affected area, and the resulting socioeconomic impacts. It is also

important to note that, as of the writing of this article, there are no particular government regulations available that specify the criteria for categorising a national disaster. In terms of precedents from previous disasters: the earthquake and tsunami in Flores, East Nusa Tenggara Province in 1992; the Indian Ocean (Aceh) tsunami in 2004; and the COVID-19 pandemic were all declared as national disasters.

The lack of acknowledgement as to the disaster's 'status' has led to questions about the role of the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB). In fact, BNPB has established protocols for declaring a state of national disaster emergency. In simple terms, a state of national disaster emergency is declared when it is determined that the affected province lacks the capacity to handle the disaster. Once a formal request from the provincial government affected by the disaster is issued, the Governor of the affected province initiates the declaration procedure through an official and formal request addressed

REUTERS



An aerial photograph shows extensive flooding in Kuala Simpang, Indonesia's Aceh province, following heavy rains

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to the President. This statement details the inability of the province to fully manage the emergency response and requests that the status of the disaster be elevated to a national disaster emergency. Upon receipt of

welcomed domestic or international initiatives to address the impacts and has apparently even rejected foreign aid. These actions have led to inconsistencies in post-disaster response and recovery efforts, given that local authorities lack the necessary capacity to respond and require strategic and systematic guidance from the central government.

The failure to declare the 2025 Sumatra disaster as a National Disaster has prompted civil society to sue the government using the 'citizen lawsuit' mechanism

this statement, the central government could still not decide to designate the event as a national disaster.

The failure to declare the 2025 Sumatra disaster as a National Disaster has prompted civil society to sue the government using the "citizen lawsuit" mechanism. The lawsuit challenges the government's administrative actions, which appear to downplay the severity of the disaster. The government has not

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Environment has filed a civil lawsuit against six companies suspected of clearing land through deforestation, which contributed to the scale of devastation caused by the floods and landslides in Sumatra. The lawsuit, which seeks damages in excess of IDR 4 trillion, aims to "uphold ecological justice and the principle of non-discriminatory law enforcement". Concurrently, the Forest Area Enforcement Task Force (Satgas PKH) revoked the operating permits of 28 companies in Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra that were "proven to have committed violations".

Post-disaster recovery and reconstruction planning

Although it was not declared a national disaster, the Indonesian government continued to provide support for disaster recovery efforts in Sumatra. The central government's specific response was only implemented on January 8, 2026, with the formation of the Task Force for the Acceleration of Post-Disaster Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of Sumatra. A week prior, the DPR RI had established the House of Representatives' Post-Disaster Recovery Task Force (S Satgas Galapana) on December 30, 2025. More recently (as of the time of writing), there has been a statement regarding the government's allocation of IDR 100.1 trillion towards the Sumatra Post-Disaster Recovery Budget over a three-year period from 2026 to 2028.

The government, through BAPPENAS, subsequently issued the Master Plan for the Acceleration of Post-Natural Disaster Rehabilitation and Reconstruction in Aceh Province, North Sumatra Province, and West Sumatra Province (Renduk PRRP Sumatra). Renduk PRRP Sumatra consists of five documents: the main volume and three related to provinces – Renduk PRRP for Aceh Province, Renduk PRRP for North Sumatra Province, and Renduk PRRP for West Sumatra Province – as well as the PRRP Action Plans from 32 ministries and government agencies. The PRRP Sumatra Draft is expected to be developed as a follow-up to Presidential Decree No. 1/2026, which will subsequently be finalised by the PRR Task Force and then issued as a presidential regulation.

The Sumatra Renduk document contains general data on stakeholders in the marine and fisheries sector, including capture fishermen, fish farmers, and fish processors. The document tallies the total number of fishers impacted by the disaster across the three provinces at 38,285 (with 33,267 in Aceh, 2,332 in North Sumatra, and 2,686 in West Sumatra). Data on the number of vessels affected totals 3,612 across the three provinces, (with 3,210 vessels in Aceh, 369 in North Sumatra, and 33 in West Sumatra). A quick review of the document revealed no specific distinctions regarding small-

scale fisheries or small-scale fishers, which appears to indicate that there has been no differentiation between small-scale fishers and other fishermen across the sector. Meanwhile, the BNPB has recognised in its strategic plan that climate change has a serious impact on marine ecosystems and coastal communities, particularly small-scale fisherfolk.

Policies for the protection of small-scale fishermen in disasters

Referring to the SSF Guidelines, countries are urged to recognise that disasters and the impacts of climate change affect poor and marginalised communities in specific and distinct ways. The Indonesian government must fully consult with small-scale fishing communities, including Indigenous Peoples, cutting across gender lines (given the different ways disasters impact men and women). The SSF Guidelines also call for special support to be given to affected communities on small islands.

Indonesia is strongly committed to protecting fishermen by enacting legislation pertaining to the Protection and Empowerment of Fishermen, Fish Farmers, and Salt Farmers (Law No. 7/2016). One of the mandates under Law No. 7/2016 is the formulation of a strategic protection plan to provide safeguards against risks in fishing, including fish farming and salt production. These include risks posed by natural disasters, fish disease outbreaks, the impacts of climate change, and pollution. Law No. 7/2016 not only applies to small-scale fishers, traditional fishers, and fish workers, but also to owners of fishing vessels ranging from 10 GT to 60 GT.

Therefore, the process of formulating and finalising the PRRP Sumatra Draft must involve small-scale fishers and the various organizations representing them. The Sumatra PRRP Draft specifically needs to recognise the specific challenges faced by small-scale and traditional fishers in a manner aligned with the contexts, needs and circumstances of coastal fishing communities, particularly those on small islands.

For more



Menggugat Tindakan Administrasi Negara dalam Penanganan Bencana Ekologis Sumatera

<https://ylbhi.or.id/informasi/siaran-pers/menggugat-tindakan-administrasi-negara-dalam-penanganan-bencana-ekologis-sumatera/>

The government filed a lawsuit of Rp4.8 trillion and revoked the company's license related to the disaster in Sumatra, will it be effective?

<https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/articles/ckgx9g41e6vo>

Pemerintah Finalisasi Rencana Induk Pemulihan Pascabencana Sumatra

<https://www.bnpb.go.id/berita/pemerintah-finalisasi-rencana-induk-pemulihan-pascabencana-sumatra>

BNPB Regulation No. 5/2025 regarding Strategic Plan of BNPB Year 2025-2029

<https://siapsiaga.or.id/bnpb-supports-bali-in-integrating-disaster-management-plan-in-the-rpjmd-20252029/>

SSF disaster risks and climate change

<https://www.fao.org/voluntary-guidelines-small-scale-fisheries/key-thematic-areas/disaster-risk-and-climate-change/3/en>

The Sea of Disquiet

How broken welfare schemes and governance blind spots coupled with aggressive fishing ban enforcement hurt fisherfolk

On May 28, 2026, Bangladesh celebrated Eid-ul-Adha, the second largest religious festival for Muslims in the country. While deeply spiritual, Eid-ul-Adha is also one of Bangladesh's most significant seasonal economic drivers, generating an estimated BDT 1 trillion (approximately USD 7.5–8 billion) in economic activity. The festival fuels a vast nationwide circular economy, channeling urban

vessels in 2019. Local fishers have long expressed deep dissatisfaction with the ban's timing. Moreover, experts have advocated revising the ban schedule, citing allegations that while Bangladeshi fishers complied with the restrictions and remained ashore, Indian fishers would cross into Bangladeshi waters and exploit fishery resources illegally.

Although India also imposes fishing bans, the timing and duration of those bans differ from those of Bangladesh, creating concerns about uneven enforcement and cross-border exploitation. In response, the government revised the policy, reducing the ban to 58 days to synchronise perfectly with the neighbouring country's restrictions. This decision was a masterstroke, lauded by conservationists and coastal communities alike.

However, the welfare net meant to cushion this period remains severely flawed; while about 311,062 registered sea-going fishermen across 14 coastal districts are allocated 40 kg of rice per month under the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) programme, this food support is simply not enough to sustain a family. Starved of alternatives, many fishers are forced to risk their lives and break the law, leading to aggressive state crackdowns. For instance, during the 2025 ban, law enforcement conducted 3,585 operations and 136 mobile courts, seizing 45 vessels, confiscating over 81 tonnes of fish, and handing down prison sentences and BDT 34.82 lakh (3,482,000) in fines – trapping these marginal communities in a desperate cycle of debt, hunger, and legal despair.

Missing the joys of Eid due to closed seasons has become a familiar reality for fisher communities. In 2025, the fishing ban also fell during

Starved of alternatives during the closed period, many fishers are forced to risk their lives and break the law, leading to aggressive state crackdowns

wealth into rural communities through sectors such as livestock trading, transportation, hospitality, and leather processing. Yet, amidst this nationwide prosperity, the coastal fisherfolk of Bangladesh were barely touched by the joy or happiness of the festival. For small scale fishers' families, the seasonal economic drivers, and the celebrations, were muted by silent tears, as a strict government-imposed fishing ban completely restricted them from earning an income from fishing.

There are at least four different fishing bans in Bangladesh. To protect marine biodiversity and ensure the smooth breeding and production of around 475 fish species, the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock enforced a 58-day ban on all types of fishing in the Bay of Bengal from April 15 to June 11 this year. Under the Marine Fisheries Ordinance, a 65-day annual ban has been enforced from May 20 to July 23 since 2015. It was initially applied only to industrial trawlers, but was extended to all mechanised and coastal

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Fishermen in Cox's Bazar load ice into the fish reservoirs on their craft, ensuring cold storage conditions during their upcoming sea fishing trip

the Eid-ul-Adha period. That year, a news report broadcast by a prominent national television channel captured a heartbreaking reality with a deeply affecting headline: “Eid without joy: Silent tears in a fisher’s family”. The segment laid bare the profound grief gripping coastal communities during Eid-ul-Adha – a time meant for celebration, but one that instead brought quiet despair. The reasons behind these tears were clear: a strict government-imposed fishing ban and a devastating lack of welfare support to cushion its blow.

In 2024, a national daily published a similarly distressing report titled “No Eid joy for 10,000 fisher families in Dashmina”. It detailed how a vast majority of the 150,000 residents in Patuakhali district’s Dashmina Upazila (sub-district), who rely entirely on the river and sea for survival, were plunged into extreme hardship. Unable to cast their nets, they could barely manage two meals a day. While the rest of the nation celebrated, these families could not afford even a single piece of meat for their children. Today, across coastal Bangladesh, this grim script plays out over and over again.

From an environmental standpoint, the necessity of a fishing ban is undeniable. The ecological dividends of these restrictions are well-documented. A study published in the Dhaka University Journal of Biological Sciences confirmed that such bans significantly increase the average length and weight of Hilsa (*Tenualosa ilisha*). According to the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock’s calculations, the 65-day ban led to a record 12.78 percent increase in marine fishery resources. Yet, while this conservation effort stands as a triumph for biodiversity, it is exacting a catastrophic toll on the communities whose labour drives the sector. We are witnessing an almost completely ignored humanitarian crisis.

The fisheries sector is a powerhouse of the Bangladeshi economy. It contributes nearly 3.5 percent to the national GDP and more than a quarter of the agricultural GDP. Bangladesh ranks third globally in inland fish production and yields a staggering 86 percent of the global Hilsa catch – a fish deeply woven into our cultural and economic fabric. The sector sustains roughly 18 million livelihoods, exporting

hundreds of millions of dollars worth of fish products annually. But look closely behind these soaring macroeconomic figures, and you will find that the economic benefits rarely reach the small-scale, artisanal fishers who are the literal backbone of the sector.

When the ban goes into effect, daily-wage fishers face immediate, total unemployment. In Bhola district alone, more than 65,000 registered sea-going fishers are suddenly left with zero income. How do they survive? A 2024 survey conducted by an NGO in Bangladesh revealed that 79.9 percent of these families are forced to borrow money at astronomical interest rates from local moneylenders or microfinance institutions just to keep starvation at bay.

...thousands of genuine, marginal fishers remain unregistered, while non-fishers manage to game the system to secure the National Fishermen ID Cards so critical to access welfare services

The current execution of the fishing ban fractures coastal lives in two distinct ways: first, because fishing is an exclusive occupation with virtually no alternative local employment, a ban completely severs a family's financial lifeline. The government's remedy is an allocation of 40 kilograms of rice per month per fisher family. But can a household of four or five members survive on rice alone? Rice cannot pay for healthcare, buy children's schoolbooks, or cover basic daily essentials. To make matters worse, even this meager food aid is plagued by chronic administrative delays. The second rupture can be found in the fundamentally broken registration system meant to deliver this aid. Bureaucratic gatekeeping and flawed processes mean that thousands of genuine, marginal fishers remain unregistered, while non-fishers manage to game the system to secure the National Fishermen ID Cards so critical to access welfare services.

The data paints a damning picture of exclusion: In Cox's Bazar district,

there are roughly 63,193 government-registered fishers, yet the actual workforce is estimated at 100,000. In Patuakhali, only 79,000 fishers are registered out of an actual population of at least 150,000. These fishers who fall through the cracks are thus forced to confront a non-choice: they can expect to face the exact same legal penalties if they go out to sea – meaning their livelihoods are forcibly shut down and they receive absolutely zero welfare safety net in return.

If we do not provide widespread alternative livelihoods, the ecological success of our marine conservation efforts will be permanently stained by human suffering. We must fundamentally reshape our strategy. Policymakers must move away from the rigid distribution of rice and transition toward direct cash assistance. In an era dominated by mobile financial services, sending cash directly to digital wallets is simple, transparent, and immediate. Cash gives a family the agency to buy medicine, pay off debts, or buy a piece of meat for Eid.

Furthermore, the state must invest in Alternative Income Generation (AIG). Providing technical and financial training – particularly targeting the women in fisher households – can create secondary revenue streams that keep families afloat during the dry months. Finally, the government must open up hassle-free, low-interest institutional credit lines during the ban. In the absence of formal banking support, fishers are pushed straight into the jaws of exploitative local loan sharks (known as 'Dadon'), forcing many to sell their future labour in advance just to survive the ban today.

Aligning our conservation efforts with regional neighbours is an admirable, historic step for marine preservation. But conservation cannot come at the expense of human dignity and basic survival. The fisherfolk who brave the storms and risk their lives at sea to feed this nation deserve a policy that protects the oceans without starving their children. It is time for a strategy that balances ecological sustainability with basic humanity. 

For more



Time to rethink fishing ban

<https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/time-rethink-fishing-ban-3917441>

Fisherman's Family

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzHl7ejww34>

Social Development and Sustainable Fisheries: Bangladesh

https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/930.ICSF238_Social_Development_Bangladesh.pdf

Climate change impacts & small-scale fisheries: A case study of adaptation and resilience in Bangladesh

https://icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/930.ICSF257_Bangladesh-Climate.pdf

In black and white, but grey

A decade since the Fisheries Code was amended, challenges in the Philippine IUU Fishing Policy Framework remain unaddressed

On 05 June 2025, to commemorate the “International Day for the Fight Against Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing” and the 10-year anniversary of the amendments to Republic Act (RA) 8550 or the Fisheries Code of the Philippines (now referred to as RA 10654), the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) hosted a forum where it presented the results of the Philippine IUU Fishing Assessment Report 2023. From its assessment of 245 local governments, the use of compressors, fine mesh nets and active gears, fishing without permit, and commercial fishing inside municipal waters ranked as the most prevalent fishing violations.

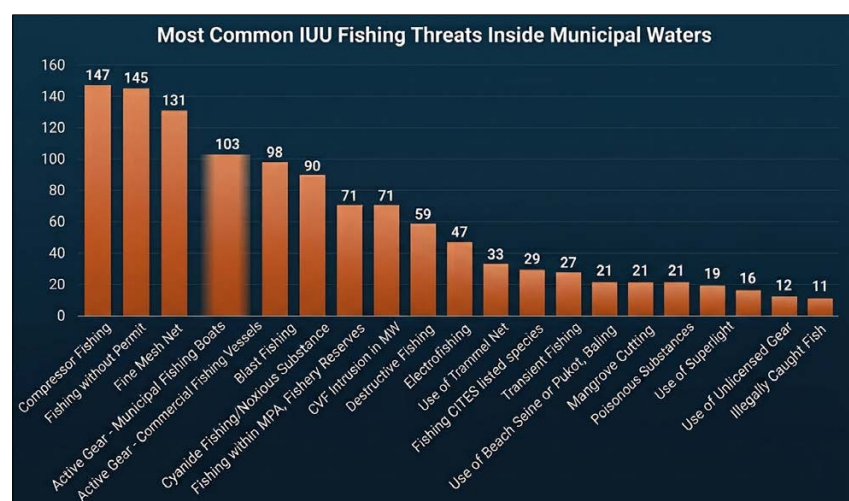
The BFAR stated that efforts to combat IUU fishing threats have become more strategic with the use of the IUU Fishing Index and Threat Assessment Tool (IFIT Tool). The tool was developed following a series of multi-stakeholder workshops that helped local governments formulate plans to reduce specific types of IUU fishing.

These developments also highlighted limitations in the current policy framework for addressing IUU fishing. The IFIT Tool primarily captures violations related to the use of destructive fishing gears and practices, effectively excluding activities that occur after fish are landed. Moreover, the distinct categories of “illegal”, “unreported”,

The IUU Fishing Index and Threat Assessment Tool (IFIT) primarily captures violations related to the use of destructive fishing gears and practices, effectively excluding activities after fish are landed

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and “unregulated” – which form the pillars of the 2013 Philippine National Plan of Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate IUU Fishing (NPOA-IUU) and underpin the amended national fisheries law – are not clearly specified in the classification of violations. This disjunction between the policy



Top IUU fishing threats as adapted from the Philippine IUU Fishing Assessment Report 2023

This article is by **Dane Erlo Matorres** (erlomatorres@gmail.com) and **Michael Fabinyi** (Michael.Fabinyi@uts.edu.au). It is based on research published in: **Matorres, D. E., Fabinyi, M., & Arcala-Hall, R. (2025). IUU fishing in the value chains of live grouper and squid exports: A case study of Palawan, Philippines. Marine Policy, 181, 106824.**

MICHAEL FABINYI



A squid fisher selling his catch at the community landing centre, The Philippines

Fishery exports in Palawan province

The case of Philippine export fisheries, which were valued at more than USD 1 million in 2023, illustrates the limitations with the current IUU fishing policy framework. A crucial element of export fisheries, particularly of high value commodities, is to keep the fish in excellent physical condition. This means that destructive fishing gears and practices that can potentially compromise the physical integrity of the fish tend to be less prominent in these fisheries.

Palawan is among the top exporters of fisheries in The Philippines, specifically for the live reef fish trade. In our recent study in the municipality of San Vicente, we examined the value chain of live grouper (*Plectropomus leopardus*) and squid (*Sepioteuthis lessoniana*) export fisheries. Sodium cyanide is a technique allegedly used by some municipal fishers to catch grouper. While we acknowledge the difficulty of tracing this technique and that it likely persists in some locations, we generally found no destructive fishing practices used by municipal fishers.

Municipal fishers use hooks and lines, a variety of small pelagic fish as bait, and utilise a “fish finder” device to catch groupers. Squid fishers, who are also municipal fishers, use multiple jiggers, small fish as bait, and install several light bulbs in their boats. Both fisheries require careful handling of catch to avoid any scratches or deformities. In the community landing centers, traders meticulously sort and classify groupers and squid to determine their prices.

If destructive fishing gears are not widely used, where then is IUU fishing found?

Our study points to violations and irregularities in relation to auxiliary invoice, registration and permits, and cyanide detection tests. Under the Fisheries Code of the Philippines, fish and fishery products must have an auxiliary invoice from the local government as part of the local transport permit before they are transported to different locations in The Philippines or to other countries. In practice, however, traders inaccurately list products to be transported in their

framework and its implementation through the IFIT Tool reflects the relatively high-level definitions of

The high-level definitions of IUU categories in the NPOA-IUU fail to differentiate sufficiently among diverse fishing activities and practices

IUU categories in the NPOA-IUU (and as adapted by RA 10654), which fail to differentiate sufficiently among diverse fishing activities and practices.

auxiliary invoices, with some traders selling their catch to fellow traders.

For the live reef fish trade, the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) grants a Wildlife Special Use Permit (WSUP) for the right to collect and trade economically important species. WSUP holders need to submit a list of catchers who are also required to secure a Wildlife Collector's Permit (WCP). The WSUP holders can only buy from catchers with a WCP, who can only sell their catch to traders with a WSUP. However, this is not always strictly followed, as traders often deploy "middlemen" in coastal villages to transact and collect catch. Moreover, these middlemen would frequently buy catch from any fisher without checking WCP registrations, based on our fieldwork findings.

Live reef fish traders also need to subject their shipment to a cyanide detection test as mandated by Puerto Princesa City, the capital of Palawan. While they also utilise small charter flights in San Vicente and El Nido, commercial flights in Puerto Princesa allow them to transport large volumes of live groupers at a lower cost. However, irregularities were alleged in the process such as when traders submit samples that are not from the shipment batch, or the transport of live groupers even with samples testing positive for cyanide.

Broadening our concept of IUU fishing

What do we make of the irregularities in live grouper and squid exports in Palawan?

The fishery exports in Palawan encompass practices in the value chain that can be generally considered as "unreported" and "unregulated" fishing. Even though they may not fall within the specific forms of IUU fishing "formally" listed and defined within the context of the IFIT Tool, they have similar impacts. While the BFAR has set up traceability measures through multiple policy issuances following its commitment under the NPOA-IUU (e.g., Fisheries Administrative Order 273 series of 2025 and BFAR Administrative Circular 251-I series of 2019), these are designed to meet the food safety requirements of export markets and

not strictly applied to domestic fishery trading.

Furthermore, traceability measures pay less attention to checking the authenticity and validity of registrations and licenses, as well as the accuracy of auxiliary invoice and local travel permits. Such concerns over traceability are not the focus of assessment and planning instruments such as the IFIT Tool – and more so of actual fishery law enforcement like the Fishery Law Enforcement Manual of Operations utilised by BFAR law enforcement officers.

The reproduction of these violations on permits and other regulatory requirements appears to reflect limitations in existing legal and policy frameworks to classify them –

The current policy framework on IUU fishing needs to broaden its scope to cover the entire value chain, and govern all stakeholders

particularly in how they categorise such practices within the prevailing definitions of IUU fishing. At the same time, coastal law enforcement efforts tend to prioritise addressing destructive fishing practices, while systems and capacities to track fish from harvest to consumption remain underdeveloped.

The case studies of live grouper and squid exports suggest critical areas for interventions in managing and mitigating impacts of IUU fishing. In particular, the findings call for increased traceability, transparency and improved monitoring and enforcement capacities, specifically at key market hubs or 'pinchpoints' and different exit locations. The current policy framework on IUU fishing needs to broaden its scope to encompass a whole-of-value-chain approach, and govern all stakeholders. As IUU fishing contains a vast diversity of practices, a critical component to this approach is the need to come up with more precise definitions to better account for what sorts of IUU fishing takes place, with what consequences, and how to effectively address them. 3

For more



IUU fishing in the value chains of live grouper and squid exports: A case study of Palawan, Philippines

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0308597X25002398>

Philippine IUU Fishing Assessment Report 2023

<https://www.bfar.da.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Philippine-IUU-Fishing-Assessment-Report-2023-300dpi.pdf>

Unblock the Artery

Community-led stewardship initiative hopes to arrest the rising environmental degradation, and loss of livelihoods, in the 'dying' Negombo Lagoon

The Negombo Lagoon, one of Sri Lanka's most crucial and productive brackish water ecosystems, is currently undergoing a state of critical decline that threatens both its ecological stability and the survival of the traditional fishing communities that have relied on it for generations. Historically celebrated as a cornerstone of coastal productivity, the lagoon is a complex nursery for aquatic species, sustained by a delicate balance of mangroves and seagrass beds. However, this natural heritage is being systematically threatened by a convergence of rapid urbanisation, unregulated resource harvesting, and a catastrophic failure of municipal waste management.

devastated local livelihoods, forcing an occupational exodus into informal labour.

The physical obstruction of arterial channels is compounded by the chemical impact of untreated sewage, which triggers eutrophication – a process where excessive nutrients lead to algal blooms that deplete dissolved oxygen. The resulting “dead zones” have caused a sharp decline in biodiversity, leaving the lagoon's waters increasingly barren.

Beyond pollution, the lagoon is under siege from the unregulated exploitation of its remaining resources. This is driven largely by outsiders who engage in illegal encroachment and unauthorised harvesting without permits or regulation. These extraction methods, particularly for mussels, lead to the physical destruction of the lagoon bed and indirectly affect water quality. Such activities disrupt reproductive cycles and destroy vital benthic habitats, which further accelerates the collapse of local fish stocks. Exploitation of this kind persists within a governance vacuum; a lack of active monitoring and enforcement has allowed these illegal activities to continue, while traditional fishers who often adhere to sustainable, centuries-old practices are left to bear the heavy consequences.

“We once had traditional fishermen in the lagoon, but now they have left it behind,” a lagoon fisherman noted. “Fish harvest has reduced mainly due to lagoon pollution and illegal fishing gear. It is even a big surprise these days to find a crab in the lagoon. Even after a full day in the water, we can hardly catch enough.”

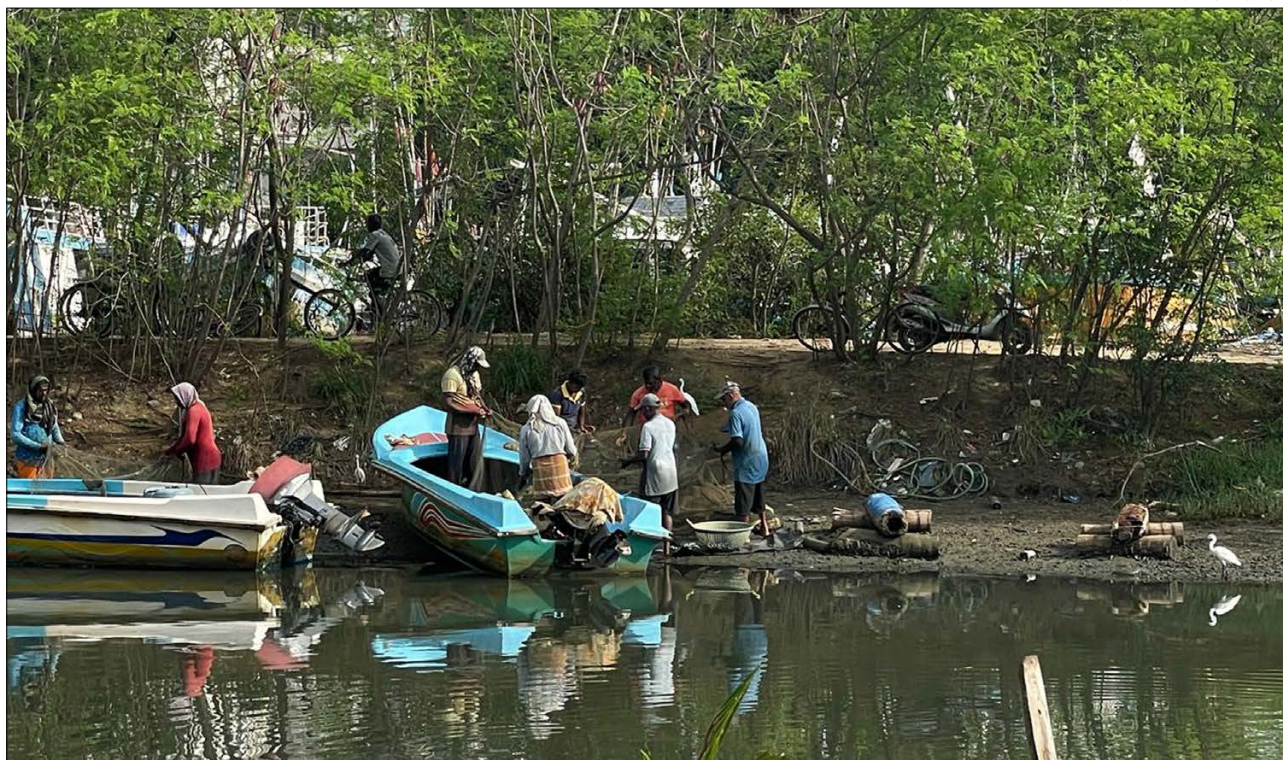
The socio-economic impact of this ecological degeneration is profound. As catch volumes plummet, the economic viability of traditional fishing

Unplanned urban expansion has turned the lagoon into a sink for city refuse, with plastic debris and household waste smothering breeding grounds

The environmental crisis is most visible in the sheer volume of solid waste and untreated sewage that flows into the lagoon's waters. Unplanned urban expansion has effectively turned the lagoon into a sink for city refuse, with plastic debris and household waste clogging arterial canals and smothering the breeding grounds of fish and crustaceans. While urban runoff from nearby towns and cities is a major factor, the surrounding fishing villages also contribute to the crisis. Despite possessing environmental knowledge, these residents are forced into direct disposal practices because the state has failed to provide basic infrastructure, such as functional landfills or adequate municipal collection. This neglect has

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MADUSHA RANULYA JAYASINGHE



Fishermen at work in the Negombo Lagoon, Sri Lanka

has vanished, plunging families into deep poverty. This livelihood collapse has sparked a crisis of culture, as younger generations and experienced fishers alike are forced to abandon their heritage for informal labour in construction or tourism. Furthermore, small-scale fishers lack the capital to modernise or adapt to the changing environment, leaving them financially marginalised and increasingly vulnerable to debt.

Community to the fore

Despite the challenges facing the Negombo Lagoon, a significant shift in internal perception is becoming visible, as the fishing community increasingly accepts responsibility for local conservation. Contrary to the narrative that fishers are indifferent to the lagoon's health, many have begun to publicly acknowledge their own role in waste management and environmental stewardship. There is an emerging consensus among local fishers who are willing to accept that they share responsibility for the garbage within their environment, leading them to take proactive, voluntary steps to address the crisis.

A recent empirical study of 240 fisher respondents across 24 Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions using a stratified random sampling approach highlighted a strong willingness among local fishing communities to pay and invest on the protection of their primary natural resource. Across several lagoon-dependent communities, many fishers expressed a willingness to voluntarily contribute monthly financial support for lagoon cleanup and waste management initiatives. Community members emphasised that maintaining a clean and healthy lagoon is essential for sustaining their livelihoods, enhancing fisheries productivity, and ensuring long-term environmental well-being.

Although the preferred contribution amounts varied across communities, the overall response demonstrated a growing sense of collective responsibility and community-driven environmental stewardship. These findings form part of an ongoing study examining community willingness to support habitat restoration and sustainable lagoon conservation initiatives in fisheries-dependent regions of Sri Lanka.

There is a clear intention for these funds to be managed through their local community associations, reflecting a significant move toward potential self-regulation and community-led conservation. Notably, this enthusiasm for fund collection and environmental protection is evident within women's and youth associations that are positioning themselves as the potential vanguard for the lagoon's restoration. These groups have expressed a willingness to mobilise resources and manpower to ensure the lagoon is conserved for future generations, even as they await the necessary infrastructure to implement these plans.

However, the proactive potential of the community is often stymied by institutional failures and a sharp divide between local willingness and the perceived inaction of state authorities. While fishers are prepared to organize and fund their own waste management, they rightly maintain that the lagoon's decline is worsened by systemic failures in municipal waste systems and upstream industrial discharge. There is a strong belief, nevertheless, that these challenges can be overcome through a robust co-management model and improved inter-agency coordination. By integrating the community's "willingness to pay" with a unified management structure, the fragmented approach of multiple institutions could be transformed into a more supportive framework for community-led environmental action.

Although direct government commitment toward these initiatives was not strongly evident during discussions, fisheries-dependent communities expressed a willingness to cooperate with relevant authorities if practical support and transparent coordination mechanisms were established. Community members emphasised that stronger collaboration between local communities and institutions could help reduce existing negative perceptions toward government involvement while encouraging shared responsibility for lagoon conservation and waste management. The fragmented approach of various government

agencies must be replaced with a supportive framework that provides the necessary infrastructure for community-led initiatives.

Where there is a will...

To prevent the total social and ecological collapse of the Negombo Lagoon, a new model of integrated co-management is required that bridges the divide between local willingness and state inaction. This framework must harness the community's demonstrated "willingness to pay" and their desire for self-governance by establishing a centralised authority where fishers serve as primary stakeholders.

The findings from the ongoing research suggest that the community's expressed willingness to establish voluntary contributions represents a potential pathway for strengthening local environmental governance, rather than a finalised or implemented recommendation at this stage. This interpretation should be understood as exploratory, as the proposed voluntary fund has not yet been established and therefore does not reflect an existing or operational arrangement. If further developed, such voluntary funding mechanisms could enhance community participation in lagoon restoration activities and support more locally driven environmental management approaches. However, their future feasibility would depend on building trust, ensuring transparency, and establishing effective coordination between fisheries-dependent communities and relevant institutions responsible for lagoon management.

These resources can be utilised to finance direct environmental cleanup programmes, particularly for the physical removal of debris and to provide logistical support such as waste collection and transport services, which are currently constrained by limited municipal capacity. However, the associated costs are not fixed and may fluctuate significantly in the Sri Lankan context due to sudden economic changes, including inflationary pressures, fuel price variations, and broader macroeconomic instability. As a result, any cost estimation would need to remain flexible and periodically



Fishing boats at the boat landing centre in the Negombo Lagoon, Sri Lanka

revised based on prevailing economic conditions, operational scale, and local service delivery requirements.

Beyond physical restoration, the funds are intended for knowledge and attitude development, fostering sustainable waste practices through educational workshops that leverage traditional ecological insights. By empowering women's, youth, and fishers' associations as primary stewards, this proposed financial model strengthens locally-driven environmental governance through community-based organizations (CBOs) at the grassroots level. The model introduces a community-managed savings and credit mechanism where members make regular monthly deposits into a shared fund. This proposed fund could be utilised in two ways: either as small loans for members to support environmental conservation activities, or as direct financing for collective conservation actions implemented by the community. This is a recommended model rather than an implemented system.

The fund is conceptualised as fully community-owned and non-profit in nature, with strict emphasis on

collective welfare rather than income generation. Fund management would be handled by a CBO-led committee with clear rules on membership, repayment discipline, and financial accountability. Transparency would be ensured through active member participation and local oversight mechanisms, ensuring trust and shared responsibility. This recommended approach positions CBOs as both financial and environmental stewards, strengthening collective ownership, cooperation, and long-term sustainability in lagoon conservation.

The Negombo Lagoon is at a terminal point, described by its own inhabitants as "dying". Yet, the voluntary financial commitments and conservationist spirit of the fishing community offer a glimmer of hope. The survival of this ecosystem depends on moving away from top-down, reactive management toward a participatory framework that respects the traditional knowledge and financial contributions of local people. Without a coordinated effort to stop the pollution and support these community-led restoration efforts, the lagoon and the thousands of lives it sustains will inevitably be lost. 3

For more



Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. (2013). Fisheries Development and Management Plan of Negombo. Colombo: Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. Retrieved from

<https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/ad43d3db-1347-4093-bd22-50765ff75210/content>

The Rage of a Perfect Storm

<https://icsf.net/samudra/the-rage-of-a-perfect-storm/>

Restoring Past Glory

<https://icsf.net/samudra/restoring-past-glory/>

Where the Shore is the Summit

When fisheries governance frameworks and discourse start favouring policy abstractions over lived realities, they cease being meaningful

When a person harvests fish, he becomes a fisher and the fish become his catch; together, fishers, their catches, and the activities that connect them constitute a fishery. Therefore, fisheries are not merely stocks of fish; they are dynamic systems that emerge from the interaction between ecological processes and human activity: between fish and fishers. This integrated entity,

fishing communities in a reinforcing cycle of vulnerability and poverty. I have observed fishing households struggling to reconcile daily subsistence needs with uncertain and fluctuating returns from fishing; young people entering the sector due to the absence of viable alternatives; and the direct translation of ecological degradation into social and economic hardship. We heard their persistent call for support in securing sustainable livelihoods. Under such conditions, many fishers were compelled to intensify their exploitation of resources, contributing further to ecosystem degradation. The fisheries system thus came under significant stress, with declining resource health and increasingly unsustainable livelihoods. Clearly, the system required reorientation toward a more sustainable trajectory.

The fisheries system is shaped not only by biological processes, but also by the social, economic, and cultural characteristics of fishing communities

the fisheries system, is shaped not only by biological processes, but also by the social, economic, and cultural characteristics of fishing communities. Craft-gear combinations, customary practices, value systems, belief structures, and informal institutions are all integral to its functioning. Yet, much of fisheries science continues to privilege the biological dimension. Fisheries are routinely defined in terms of target species: tuna fisheries, sea-cucumber fisheries, sardine fisheries, while the fishers themselves are relegated to the domain of the social sciences. The latter, however, are 'My Fishers' – the people I have worked with over the years.

I recall working closely with my colleagues in Sri Lanka to address the multiple challenges that rendered our fishers vulnerable. In contexts characterised by open-access, limited livelihood diversification, uneven socio-economic development, increasing fishing pressure, coastal pollution, sea and land tenure issues, and the impacts of climate change have all entrapped

I also recall the sense of optimism that accompanied the global recognition of sustainability following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Brazil in 1992. Sustainability appeared almost as a panacea for planners, policymakers, academics, and researchers seeking pathways to improve the conditions of fishing communities. It introduced the principle of intergenerational equity; it emphasised not only consumption, but also investment; and, in essence, it underscored the need to balance present and future welfare, reconciling exploitation with conservation. Furthermore, it highlighted the importance of guiding technological and institutional change along socially, economically, and ecologically optimal trajectories. This powerful concept rapidly gained prominence and became central to global discourse.

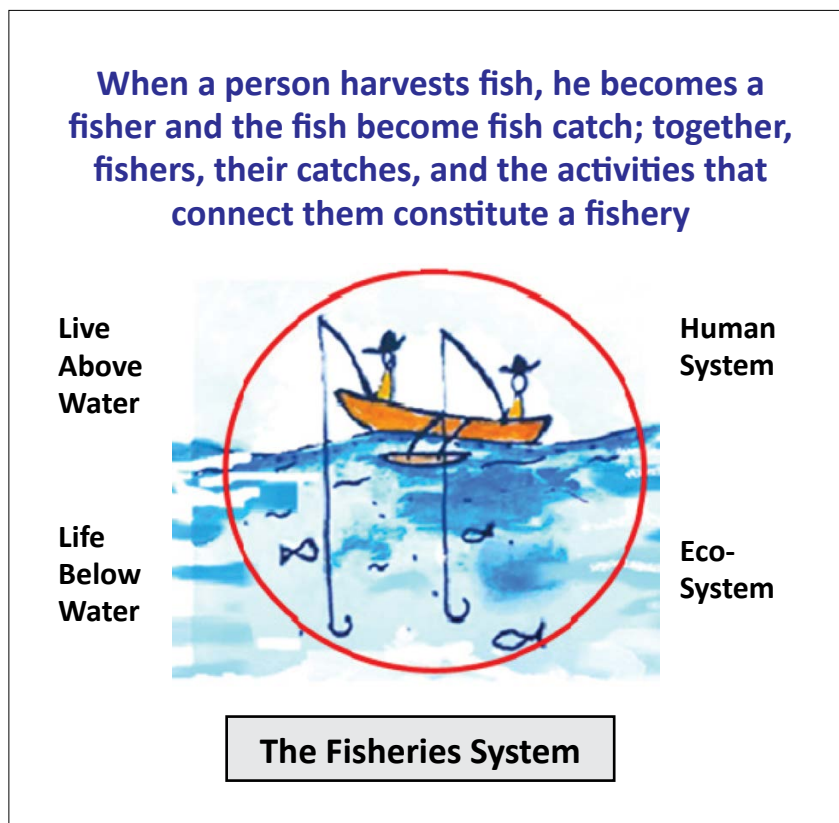
Yet, for many fishers, the concept itself remained unfamiliar. A fisher

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operating a small craft with hook-and-line gear may never have encountered the term “sustainability”, yet his practices often embody its principles. Within fishing communities, unwritten norms govern behaviour; how space is shared at sea, how conflicts are minimised when pursuing the same shoal, and how fishing effort is moderated to safeguard future livelihoods. These practices, though rarely codified in formal policy frameworks, are deeply embedded in social relations. Fishers understand, often intuitively, that marine resources must continue to sustain future generations. In this sense, sustainability lived in practice long before it was articulated as formal theory. I therefore felt little need to introduce the concept explicitly to my fishers; they were already practicing it, even without knowing the terminology.

Rhetoric and response

Global concern over the threats facing fisheries systems subsequently generated a range of institutional responses. The Food and Agriculture Organization's Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (1995) articulated key principles for sustainable and responsible fisheries management, including the precautionary approach, recognising that the absence of full scientific certainty should not delay management action. The subsequent development of the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM) further expanded the scope to include habitats, non-target species, and the human dimensions of fisheries. Meanwhile, small-scale fishers were becoming recognised as a special target group. These frameworks have been reinforced through an extensive network of conferences, workshops, and consultations, generating guidelines, policy recommendations, and vision statements aimed at securing sustainable fisheries. Within these processes, fishers are often invited to participate in management platforms and encouraged to align with externally designed governance frameworks. These fishers are modelled according to prevailing rhetoric, and I refer to them as ‘Your Fishers’ – the fishers viewed by authorities from afar



rather than encountered in their lived realities.

However, a persistent gap remains between global initiatives and local realities. The fishers represented in international forums are often not those who experience the everyday uncertainties of small-scale fisheries. My fishers are not present in conference

The assumption that fishers must be ‘integrated’ into management through externally designed participation mechanisms is fundamentally problematic

halls or seminar rooms; they are at sea; navigating weather variability, fluctuating catches, fuel price volatility, and market dependencies. The assumption that fishers must be “integrated” into management through externally designed participation mechanisms is fundamentally problematic. Fishers are not external to the fisheries system; they are intrinsic to it. If anything, it is the scientist or the fisheries manager who must seek entry

OSCAR AMARASINGHE



Fishers operating small fibre glass boats at Godawaya in southern Sri Lanka

erosion. In many contexts, traditional norms are weakening. Scientific knowledge and policy intervention are therefore essential; however, their effectiveness depends critically on how they are introduced. They must complement, rather than displace, existing social-ecological systems.

Tangible results or improved realities?

The FAO's Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines, 2014) explicitly emphasise participation, equity, and the centrality of fishing communities. Moreover, the Guidelines systematically address the salient concerns and critical vulnerabilities prevalent among fisher populations. Yet implementation often takes place through workshops, training programmes, and consultative processes aimed at "capacity-building". While these activities generate tangible outputs: reports, recommendations, and action plans, their translation into meaningful improvements at the community level remains limited. Governments frequently cite participation in global forums: in Rome, Bangkok, Bali, Chennai, and Rio, as indicators of progress. In practice, however, much of this progress remains rhetorical. The benefits are often more visible within professional and institutional spheres than within fishing communities themselves. Conference outputs acquire significance only when translated into action, yet they too often remain confined to documentation, awaiting subsequent cycles of discussion.

A further concern is that the disconnect is not merely institutional, but also epistemological and legal. Dominant fisheries governance frameworks tend to privilege formal scientific knowledge, while marginalising local knowledge systems. Fishers interpret the marine environment through continuous observation: of changes in water currents, species behaviour, seasonal variability, and ecological signals that seldom appear in formal datasets. Other village realities such as the domination by elites, and the interlinkages between

into this lived social-ecological system. Yet this recognition remains limited. As scientists, we often rely on our analytical frameworks and empirical findings to assert authority, but how many of us have engaged deeply with fishing communities to understand that fishing is not merely an occupation, but a way of life? Observing from a distance, we risk interpreting fishers "not as they are, but as we are".

Scientific knowledge and policy intervention in fisheries must complement, rather than displace, existing social-ecological systems

This is not to romanticise traditional systems. Contemporary fisheries face challenges that extend beyond the capacity of customary practices alone: intensified fishing pressure, climate change, pollution, technological transformation, and institutional

imperfectly-developed credit and product markets and their implications for human wellbeing are poorly recognised by fisheries managers. Concurrently, governmental officials frequently assume a singular legal order, overlooking the reality of legal pluralism, where state regulations coexist with customary norms and community-based rules that have long structured fishing practices. When both knowledge and legal systems are treated as uniform, interventions risk becoming socially disconnected and operationally ineffective. Effective governance therefore requires explicit recognition of this plurality and meaningful engagement with it.

Engage, not incorporate

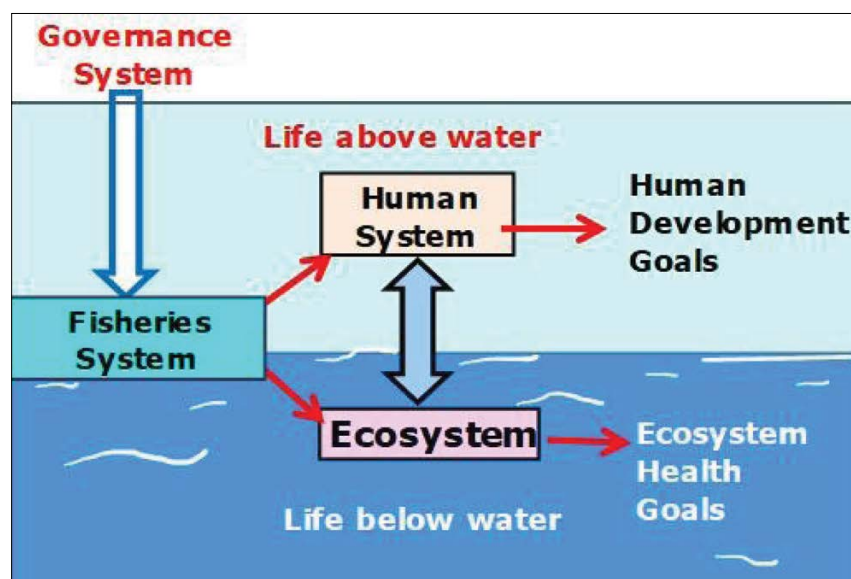
At its core, this situation reflects a series of conceptual limitations. The fisheries system continues to be inadequately understood as an integrated social-ecological entity, with the human dimension often treated as secondary. External actors frequently assume managerial authority, overlooking long-standing systems of community-based governance rooted in customary norms and practices. At the same time, these systems are under increasing strain and require support. The way forward is not to replace them, but to work with them; integrating scientific knowledge, institutional innovation, and policy support in ways that strengthen their foundations. Rather than incorporating fishers into externally constructed frameworks, emphasis should shift toward engaging with communities on their own terms and co-producing knowledge and solutions.

Let me conclude with a more candid reflection. ‘Your fishers’, in many respects, do not exist. They are abstractions; embedded in policy discourse, conference narratives, and institutional frameworks, yet removed from lived coastal realities. These individuals frequently remain transient, with little continuity beyond the lifespan of the event or project. Once such initiatives conclude, these purported participants dissipate, leaving limited trace of sustained engagement. ‘My fishers’ on the other hand are real. They are present along

the coasts – in lagoons, nearshore waters, and offshore fishing grounds – navigating uncertainty on a daily basis. They draw upon experience, social norms, and intimate ecological knowledge to sustain their livelihoods. They have waited long enough for the promises embedded in global frameworks to materialise in their lives.

Bridging this divide is not a matter of producing additional guidelines or convening more conferences. It requires a fundamental shift in orientation. With the extensive body of knowledge already available – including international instruments designed to support small-scale fisheries, the priority must now be implementation. This entails strengthening local institutions such as fisheries cooperatives, fostering leadership within communities, and promoting approaches such as ‘research stewardship’ that enable meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

You bring knowledge, resources, and institutional authority. My fishers bring lived experience, resilience, and legitimacy within the fisheries system. Neither is sufficient in isolation. In fact, it is time to move beyond the dichotomy of “your fishers” and “my fishers”. If fisheries governance is to be meaningful and effective, it must engage with the fishers who actually live along shores and make a living from adjacent waters. 



For more

The FAO's Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines, 2014)

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

Fishing in a Fuzzy Era

https://icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Sam_91_art-8_Fishing-in-a-Fuzzy-Era.pdf

Winning the First Battle: Sri Lanka has incorporated the SSF Guidelines into its remodelled fisheries policy. Now, it needs to put it into action

https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Sam_89_art01_Sri-Lanka_Winning-the-First-Battle.pdf

A Bridge, Not a Pipeline

Can the International Platform for Ocean Sustainability transform small-scale fishers from knowledge contributors into co-authors of ocean governance?

In international ocean policy, knowledge reaches decision-makers through reports, policy briefs, legal analyses, maps, models and recommendations. These are the working languages of governments, multilateral institutions and expert bodies, and they are indispensable for addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, overfishing, pollution and growing conflicts over marine space. Yet a

memory, spirituality and conflict. Through daily interactions with ecosystems and environmental change, these communities generate valuable knowledge. Yet such knowledge rarely enjoys the same legitimacy as formal science, technical expertise or diplomatic discourse. It is within this gap – between evidence-informed governance and unequal recognition of knowledge holders – that IPOS has emerged. The platform seeks to connect knowledge, policy and society in support of implementing international commitments such as SDG 14, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF) and the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement. Its premise is simple: while global commitments are abundant, capacities to translate them into context-specific, actionable and socially legitimate policies remain limited.

IPOS is neither an assessment body like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) or the World Ocean Assessment, nor an implementation agency. Instead, it functions as an interface that mobilises diverse knowledge systems to answer practical policy questions, helping decision-makers navigate implementation pathways, trade-offs, risks and lessons from other contexts.

The initiative responds to a widely-recognised challenge: ocean governance remains fragmented and often dominated by natural sciences, while Indigenous, local and socioeconomic perspectives remain underrepresented. To address this, IPOS offers three complementary services to nation states: 'Action Requests', which support complex policy challenges

IPOS functions as an interface that mobilises diverse knowledge systems to answer practical policy questions, helping decisionmakers navigate implementation pathways, trade-offs, risks and lessons from other contexts

fundamental question persists: whose knowledge reaches decision-making arenas, through which pathways, and with what authority?

As a marine social scientist, I have contributed to the development of the International Platform for Ocean Sustainability (IPOS), an emerging initiative designed to weave together all shades of 'Blue' knowledge, including scientific and traditional knowledge, in support of better ocean policy decisions. Since becoming involved during discussions around the 2022 UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon, I have followed its evolution closely: first as a volunteer, later as a consultant and now as a Knowledge Committee member. Here, I reflect on its potential to strengthen the rights and voices of small-scale fishers in ocean governance.

For millions of small-scale fishers, Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant and other coastal communities, the ocean is not an abstract policy domain, but a territory of life, livelihoods,

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IPOS has been discussed with fisherfolk leaders from Latin America

through knowledge co-production and expert dialogue; ‘Rapid Responses’, which provide expert-reviewed syntheses supported by AI-assisted tools; and ‘Ocean Catalyst’, which creates spaces for exchange among governments, communities, civil society, scientists, youth, Indigenous Peoples and other rights and knowledge holders.

This architecture reflects an ambitious objective: accelerating decision-making while securing inclusion. Yet it also reveals a fundamental tension. Some forms of knowledge cannot be accelerated without loss, some governance challenges cannot be reduced to brief reports, and meaningful participation cannot be achieved through consultation alone.

Where small-scale fisheries become central

If IPOS aims to promote more inclusive ocean governance, how can it avoid treating small-scale fishers merely as “stakeholders” rather than as rightsholders, political actors, and knowledge producers? The distinction

matters. Stakeholders have interests in a process; rightsholders possess rights, territories, livelihoods, and knowledge systems that must be respected from the outset. When fishers are treated only as information sources, their experiences can be extracted and repackaged by others. When recognised as rightsholders and co-producers of knowledge, they help frame questions, interpret evidence, validate findings, and shape responses.

The multilateral system still struggles with this shift. Its procedures, languages, and timelines often favour those already fluent in technical English, institutional processes, and diplomatic culture. Meaningful participation by fishing communities, Indigenous Peoples, and coastal populations requires translation, preparation, facilitation, trust-building, information feedback, free, prior and informed consent, respect for community protocols, safeguards against knowledge misappropriation, and safe spaces for women, youth, and marginalised groups.

UNESCO and other international organizations increasingly recognise

When fishers are treated only as information sources, their experiences can be extracted and repackaged. When recognised as rightsholders and co-producers of knowledge, they help frame questions, interpret evidence, validate findings, and shape responses

that Indigenous and local knowledge can strengthen marine spatial planning and ocean governance by contributing detailed understandings of ecosystems, species, life cycles, culturally significant areas, and sustainable practices. At the same time, they emphasise that such knowledge must be engaged through rights-based approaches, free, prior and informed consent, and processes co-designed with knowledge holders.

Although much of the IPOS coordination team remains based in Paris, efforts are underway to decentralise knowledge co-production. IPOS also appears attentive to emerging standards on the responsible inclusion of Indigenous and local knowledge. Its guiding documents specify that Rapid Responses are suitable for

focuses on enabling a whole-of-society approach to marine spatial planning and biodiversity action in support of the country's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. This type of request tests whether IPOS can move beyond technical synthesis. Marine spatial planning is not only about maps; it involves access, tenure, livelihoods, conservation priorities, industrial development, cultural values and competing visions of the sea. For such processes to be meaningful, small-scale fishers, women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and coastal communities must help shape the problem from the outset, rather than being consulted after key decisions have already been framed.

Another Action Request, in Panama, focuses on regulatory harmonisation for the conservation and sustainable use of mangroves. This is highly relevant to small-scale fishers because mangroves underpin livelihoods, biodiversity, coastal protection and blue carbon initiatives. The case tests whether IPOS can support not only knowledge synthesis, but also legal, technical and participatory tools attentive to rights, local realities and knowledge diversity.

A third example is the IPOS Ocean Catalyst pilot project in Costa Rica, developed with CoopeSoliDar R.L. and the National Network of Responsible Fishing Marine Areas and Marine Territories of Life. Building on longstanding community-led efforts, the initiative brought together fishers, Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant communities, public institutions, academia and civil society to explore more inclusive forms of ocean governance. The resulting Barra del Colorado Declaration demonstrates that inclusion is not merely a principle, but a political practice involving recognition, consent, co-management, protection of traditional knowledge and meaningful influence over decisions.

The Costa Rica government also submitted a Rapid Response request on the implementation of the BBNJ Agreement. This case tests IPOS in a different way: its capacity to provide timely legal and institutional analysis. Rapid synthesis can help identify normative gaps and implementation

literature reviews, methodological analyses, trade-off assessments, and questions supported by large language models tools. Requests requiring substantive integration of Indigenous and local knowledge, however, are not considered appropriate for Rapid Responses, since such knowledge cannot be meaningfully incorporated through AI-driven synthesis alone. In these cases, Action Requests are recommended to allow time for co-production with knowledge holders.

This distinction is fundamental. The issue is not whether one is for or against AI or rapid synthesis, but which tool fits which problem. A preliminary legal analysis of BBNJ implementation may benefit from rapid, expert-reviewed synthesis. Processes involving fishing territories, traditional knowledge, marine conflicts, collective rights, and histories of exclusion require social time, not just technical speed.

Lessons from early IPOS experiences

One example is the Action Request selected in South Africa, which

options, but it also raises a broader question: how will treaty implementation connect with those who depend on the ocean, and how will equity and participation be embedded in domestic processes?

Together, these experiences highlight both the promise and the challenge of IPOS. They suggest that the platform can become more than a mechanism responding to State demands; it can also create spaces for listening, co-production and translation among communities, science, governments and multilateral arenas. Yet meaningful inclusion requires more than inviting representatives to consultations. It requires rethinking who frames questions, defines evidence, interprets results and evaluates impacts.

This is where the complementarity between IPOS services becomes critical. Catalyst processes can surface priorities, rights claims and knowledge concerns that might otherwise remain invisible, while Rapid Responses can translate legal and institutional challenges into actionable policy options. The challenge is to ensure that these tracks inform one another. If community priorities revealed through Catalyst processes can shape the questions addressed by Rapid Responses, IPOS may help connect community-grounded knowledge with high-level implementation without reducing either to the language of the other.

Otherwise, inclusion risks becoming another ritual of ocean governance: communities are invited, acknowledged and thanked, yet remain unable to influence decisions. For this reason, the promise of IPOS should be assessed seriously, but candidly. The platform can fill an important gap by helping States implement international commitments while strengthening the work of local organizations, social movements and civil society coalitions. At the same time, it remains embedded within a multilateral system shaped by funding constraints, diplomatic priorities and institutional notions of efficiency that often privilege more visible actors and more easily codified forms of knowledge.



Discussed with fisherfolk leaders about the process of IPOS

Small-scale fisheries frequently operate under conditions of political vulnerability, territorial conflict, gender inequality and limited access to international arenas. IPOS should therefore not be expected to solve these challenges directly. Its most valuable role may be as an enabling interface that supports, amplifies and connects locally rooted struggles for recognition, rights and knowledge justice.

Methodological and political challenges

For IPOS to be truly relevant to small-scale fishers and Indigenous Peoples, fishing communities must help formulate questions, not merely validate results. Processes involving

LEOPOLDO CAVALERI GERHARDINGER



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Fisherfolk leaders at the IPOS discussion

For more**International Platform for Ocean Sustainability (IPOS)**

<https://ipos.earth/>

UN Ocean Conference

<https://sdgs.un.org/conferences/ocean2025>

Barra de Colorado Declaration about Ocean Science, Ethics, and Small-Scale Fishers' Knowledge. 2025. Drafted at Barra del Colorado, Costa Rica, February 18, 2025. Produced through collaboration between Towards IPOS, CoopeSoliDar R.L., and the Red de Áreas Marinas de Pesca Responsable.

<https://ipos.earth/catalyst-in-costa-rica>

Bridging Shades of Blue: Co-constructing Knowledge with the International Panel for Ocean Sustainability

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08920753.2023.2244082>

Guidance on Dialogue between IOC Programmes and Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK)

<https://oceanexpert.org/document/32324>

traditional knowledge require free, prior and informed consent, protection protocols, transparency about how information will be used, and accessible return of results. Meaningful participation also requires resources – time, translation, transport, connectivity, facilitation and, where appropriate, compensation. Outputs should clearly show how community contributions influenced analyses and recommendations, and engagement whenever possible should continue beyond publication, since knowledge justice does not end with the delivery of a report.

Small-scale fisheries do not simply need to be included in ocean governance; they are constitutive of it. Their knowledge is not a cultural supplement to science, but a situated and historical way of understanding ecosystems, risks, abundance, change and injustice. Fishers have often identified environmental transformations before they became scientific concerns and maintained systems of stewardship long before concepts such as nature-based solutions

or area-based management entered policy discourse. IPOS can help bridge local and global knowledge systems, but meaningful bridges require reciprocity. It is not enough for local knowledge to flow into international reports; recognition, influence and benefits must also return to territories.

The future relevance of IPOS will depend on how it responds to this challenge. If it becomes merely another mechanism for accelerating technical responses to State demands, its impact will be limited. If it can combine agility with justice, synthesis with co-production, AI-assisted analysis with ethical safeguards, and scientific expertise with genuine respect for the peoples of the sea, it may contribute to a more inclusive ocean governance system. In that system, small-scale fishers, Indigenous Peoples and coastal communities help shape the knowledge that informs decisions, rather than merely being consulted about them. 3

Bridging the Circuit

ICSF emphasised the multi-dimensional, reciprocal character of capacity-building at the TBTI World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress 2026

In the international field of small-scale fisheries (SSF) research, the name TBTI – short for Too Big To Ignore – has become increasingly prominent over the past decade. Established in 2012 as a Canadian-funded research network and knowledge-mobilisation hub, TBTI, led by Ratana Chuenpagdee of Memorial University, Canada, brings together academics committed to understanding and addressing the challenges facing small-scale fishers around the world. Its research agenda centres on SSF governance. Today, TBTI Global (www.tbti-global.net) comprises more than 800 members.

The network's principal mandates are to address the marginalisation of small-scale fisheries in national and international policy and to strengthen research and governance capacities to tackle global fisheries challenges. It pursues these objectives through a range of activities and outputs, including maintaining a comprehensive open-access information system on small-scale fisheries, undertaking interdisciplinary research on SSF-related issues, and synthesising and mobilising knowledge to support policy dialogue and capacity development.

One of TBTI's significant achievements has been creating opportunities for skills development and capacity-building, particularly for researchers from developing countries, as well as for women and young people. The network regularly organizes regional and global conferences where participants present research, develop collaborative publications and contribute to edited volumes published by TBTI and other publishers, including Springer through the MARE Publication Series. TBTI also works closely with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and shares a longstanding interface with ICSF

and other like-minded organizations. Several ICSF members regularly participate in TBTI events.

The 5th World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress (WSSF), organized by TBTI, was held in the coastal town of Hua Hin, Thailand, from 27 April to 1 May 2026. The event brought together 400 participants from across the world, including academics, fishers, government representatives and non-governmental organizations, under the themes of 'advancing just harmony, young futures and regenerative wisdom'. It successfully created a space for dialogue among participants from diverse backgrounds.

The network's principal mandates are to address the marginalisation of small-scale fisheries in national and international policy and to strengthen research and governance capacities to tackle global fisheries challenges

From ICSF's perspective, however, future editions of the WSSF would benefit from the participation of more fishers and representatives of fishing communities, enriching discussions by bringing the realities of small-scale fisheries territories more directly into the debate. The TBTI event was geared more towards engaging what might be described as the broader support community surrounding the small-scale fisheries sector.

Four ICSF members collectively participated in the Science Café section, which offered a platform for 12 organizations to present their work to rotating groups of attendees at the event. ICSF presented its capacity-building work with small-scale fisheries organizations at the local, national and regional levels, illustrating the scale

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and scope of its involvement through examples from Thailand, Brazil and Colombia. Despite the short time slots available for presentation and the lively atmosphere that inevitably

However, ICSF sees considerable potential within the TBTI network's activities to address such concerns.

More recently, the network established the TBTI Global Foundation, a registered non-governmental organization headquartered in Bangkok, Thailand, with a global mandate and an organizational structure based on regional hubs. The establishment of these hubs, which are intended to strengthen regionally-focused actions and collaboration, comes at a particularly timely moment in countries where national implementation plans for the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) are being developed. The hubs could provide valuable support to these processes.

ICSF values TBTI as an important ally in advancing the wellbeing of small-scale fishing communities worldwide. Drawing inspiration from the dynamism and inclusiveness of TBTI's work, ICSF looks forward to continuing its dialogue, mutual learning and collaboration with the network.

At the 5th WSSF, ICSF cautioned participants from the academic community to view capacity-building as extending beyond the dissemination of research findings – and as a multi-dimensional and reciprocal process that should involve fishing communities

accompanies such events, the ICSF team felt it was able to communicate its messages effectively.

A central message conveyed by the team was how capacity-building is a multi-dimensional and reciprocal process that should involve fishing communities, but also directed towards public sector officials and scientists who may be unfamiliar with – or not particularly responsive to – the realities faced by, and the pressing concerns of, small-scale fishing communities. The team also cautioned participants from the academic community to view capacity-building as extending beyond the dissemination of research findings.

For more

TBTI Global

www.tbti-global.net

The 5th World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress (WSSF)

<https://www.worldssfcongress.com/>

‘Where is the Sea View room?’

ICARRD+20 highlighted the need to move beyond land-centric agrarian reforms and recognise aquatic territories as living spaces of rights, livelihoods and governance

In February 2026, representatives of governments, international agencies, social movements and civil society organizations gathered in Cartagena, Colombia, for ICARRD+20 – two decades after the first International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2006.

For the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF), participating in ICARRD+20 was not symbolic. It was political. Through the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), together with the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and alongside organizations such as ICSF, fishers came to reaffirm a simple, but still insufficiently recognised, reality: there can be no genuine agrarian reform without aquatic territories.

This was visible from the outset. The conference brought together three interconnected spaces: the People’s Forum of social movements, the official intergovernmental sessions, and a series of thematic side events. The atmosphere was highly political, shaped by strong interventions from peasant movements, Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists and fisher organizations demanding structural reforms rather than rhetorical commitments.

Yet despite progress compared to 20 years ago, fisheries remained largely peripheral within the overall architecture of the discussions. This was not simply an omission. It reflected a deeper and more systemic “land bias” that continues to structure much of the multilateral debate on food systems, territories and reform. The sea remains too often treated as an empty space, a reserve of resources, or a sectoral issue disconnected from territorial rights, social justice and governance.

But for millions of small-scale fishers, aquatic territories are lived territories – spaces of culture, identity, work, transmission, social organization and food production.

Within the WFF delegation, discussions repeatedly returned to the need to move beyond a purely terrestrial vision of reform and to recognise “maritorios”: marine and coastal territories understood not simply as fishing grounds, but as collective living territories. This question is becoming increasingly urgent.

Across the world, coastal communities are facing accelerating forms of ocean grabbing and blue grabbing. Industrial fisheries

At ICARRD+20, fishers came to reaffirm a simple, but still insufficiently recognised, reality: there can be no genuine agrarian reform without aquatic territories

expansion, privatisation of access rights, offshore energy development, extractive industries, industrial aquaculture, tourism pressure and certain conservation policies increasingly compete for marine space. In many cases, these transformations occur without meaningful participation from fishing communities themselves.

The global push toward “30x30” conservation targets illustrates these tensions clearly. Marine Protected Areas can play an important ecological role, but when designed without co-governance or social justice safeguards, they risk reproducing exclusionary conservation models in which communities lose access to territories they have historically managed and depended upon.

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VIRGINIE LAGARDE



ICARRD+20 was held from 24-28 February 2026 in Cartagena, Colombia

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For many fisher organizations present in Cartagena, the issue was therefore not only access to fish, but access to territories, landing sites, water quality, ecosystems and decision-making processes themselves.

These ecological dimensions were often still insufficiently integrated into the debates. Discussions around agrarian reform continue to focus primarily on land tenure and

Agrarian reform discussions continue to focus primarily on land tenure and agricultural production systems, while aquatic ecosystems are approached separately through technical or environmental frameworks

agricultural production systems, while aquatic ecosystems are too frequently approached separately through technical or environmental frameworks.

But aquatic food systems cannot be separated from ecological realities. Water quality, pollution, climate change, trophic dynamics and plankton productivity directly shape the future

of fisheries and coastal livelihoods. Plankton – the invisible foundation of marine food webs – remains almost absent from global political discussions, despite its central role in ocean productivity, biodiversity and climate regulation.

For fishers, these are not abstract scientific issues. They are daily realities observed at sea: changing species distributions, altered reproductive cycles, ecosystem instability, harmful algal blooms and growing uncertainty linked to climate change.

One important debate throughout ICARRD+20 concerned the implementation gap between international recognition and practical transformation. Over the last two decades, important normative tools have emerged. The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT), the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) all represent significant political achievements.

But many social movements acknowledged a difficult reality: voluntary recognition alone is not enough. Too often, these instruments remain disconnected from implementation mechanisms. National roadmaps are absent or incomplete. Monitoring systems are weak. Indicators are lacking. Accountability mechanisms remain limited. Funding is insufficient. In some cases, the tools exist politically, but their operational translation never truly occurs. This is one of the central lessons emerging from Cartagena. The challenge today is no longer simply recognition. It is implementation.

For small-scale fisheries, this means moving toward concrete national commitments capable of translating principles into public policies, territorial governance mechanisms, budgetary priorities and measurable objectives. Without this, rights remain fragile in the face of economic concentration, financialisation and competing political interests.



Although challenges remain, ICARRD+20 showed how important political bridges are emerging between peasant struggles, pastoralist movements, Indigenous Peoples and fishing communities around shared concerns

The discussions in Cartagena also connected directly with broader food sovereignty processes, including the Nyéléni process and ongoing mobilisations within the IPC. These spaces increasingly recognise that aquatic territories cannot remain marginal within global food sovereignty debates. Fishers are not external observers of agrarian reform. They are part of it.

This evolution remains incomplete, but important political bridges are emerging between peasant struggles, pastoralist movements, Indigenous Peoples and fishing communities around common questions: collective rights, territories, access to resources, ecological sustainability and democratic governance.

In this sense, ICARRD+20 did not provide all the answers. Important frustrations remained, including the limited visibility of fisheries in final political outcomes. Yet the conference also confirmed that fisher organizations are increasingly organized, connected and determined to ensure that aquatic territories are fully integrated into future reforms. The next major political opportunity may come at COFI 2026.

If states and international organizations are serious about transforming aquatic food systems, they will need to move beyond declarations and address implementation directly: stronger accountability mechanisms, national roadmaps, participatory governance, recognition of customary aquatic tenure systems, protection against ocean grabbing, and integration of ecological realities – including water quality and marine ecosystem functioning – into fisheries governance itself.

Because bringing the sea back into agrarian reform is not only about fisheries. It is about recognising that food systems, territories and ecosystems are inseparable.

For more

ICARRD+20

<https://landportal.org/event/2026/02/icarrd20-panel-making-land-data-work-people-and-policy>

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP)

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1650694?ln=en&v=pdf>

The FAO's Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication

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

Movements in Sea Major

At the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum, the message from fishers was clear: there can be no food sovereignty without sovereignty over aquatic resources

In September 2025, the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum in Sri Lanka, brought together more than 700 participants from 102 countries and Indigenous Territories, with the aim of strengthening the alliances between the food sovereignty movement and other social justice movements, building the largest global convergence of grassroots movements for systemic transformation. The two global fisher

in 2007. The name Nyéléni comes from a legendary Malian peasant woman, remembered for her strength, wisdom and deep connection with the land. She symbolises the knowledge, resilience and autonomy of food producers – women, in particular – who nourish communities and defend their territories. In 2007, hundreds of movements and organizations gathered in Selingué, Mali, for the first Nyéléni Global Forum for Food Sovereignty. It was there that the Nyéléni Declaration was born - defining food sovereignty as “the right of peoples to define their own food and agricultural systems”.

That historic gathering united peasants, Indigenous Peoples, fishers, pastoralists, agricultural workers, women, and consumers, birthing a shared global framework – the six pillars of food sovereignty – that continues to guide the food sovereignty movement. Today, the food sovereignty movement is coordinated by the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty

In 2015, movements returned to Selingué for the second Nyéléni Global Forum, where the peoples’ principles of agroecology were articulated – affirming agroecology not just as a farming method, but as a political, social, and cultural practice rooted in people’s autonomy and collective rights.

The 3rd Global Nyéléni Forum at Kandy, Sri Lanka

The 3rd Global Nyéléni Forum was conducted from 6 to 14 September 2025 at Kandy, Sri Lanka. The aim of the Forum was to strengthen alliances between the food sovereignty movement and other global social movements in recognition of the fact that transforming the global food system required a broader struggle for

The Forum aimed to strengthen alliances between the food sovereignty movement and other global social movements in recognition of the fact that transforming the global food system required a broader struggle for global social justice

movements, World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF) were represented by 34 delegates representing grassroots movements of small-scale food producers and Indigenous Peoples from coastal and riverine communities, artisanal fishers and shellfish harvesters from rivers, lakes, mangroves and seas. For the fisher movements and their supporters, participation in the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum provided a valuable opportunity to integrate small-scale fisheries and aquatic-based livelihoods and food systems into the vision-building and strategy of the food sovereignty movement and to have their struggles reflected in the Shared Political Action Agenda.

Introducing the Nyéléni Global Forum, history of the Food Sovereignty movement

The history of the food sovereignty movement can be traced back to the First Nyéléni Global Forum at Mali

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Fisheries delegation at the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum in Kandy, Sri Lanka

global social justice. The Forum was represented by delegations from six world regions and 13 global movements. It was the culmination of more than two years of regional consultations, national assemblies, and sectoral dialogues, uniting voices – across 18 languages – from every continent in a shared journey. Some 700 participants gathered at the National Institute of Cooperative & Development (NICD) located in Polgolla, Kandy, Sri Lanka – not only to exchange experiences and ideas, but to agree on a joint Common Political Action Agenda (CPAA) in order to strengthen a collective vision for transforming the food system based on extractive capitalism and neo-colonialism and advancing ecological sustainability and social equality, dignity and wellbeing of all.

For the first time in the Nyéléni process, more than 60 percent of delegates were women and gender-diverse people, while one third were youth, marking a clear step towards inclusion and intergenerational dialogue. The slots were defined constituency-wise to include both historical actors and new ones –

small-scale farmers, fisherfolk, agricultural and food workers, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, food artisans, urban food-insecure people, consumers, researchers, climate justice activists, feminists, racialised groups and ethnic minorities, social and solidarity economy representatives, human rights defenders, peace

Fisherfolk constituted approximately 8 percent of the total Forum delegation, ensuring the representation of small-scale fisheries and recognition of aquatic food systems within the broader food sovereignty movement

movement and anti-war advocates, health professionals, artists, while also incorporating intersectional criteria for women, gender and sexual diversities, youth, and people with disabilities, with allocated quotas per region to ensure respect and balance among the regions. Within this framework, fisherfolk constituted approximately 8 percent of the total Forum delegation, ensuring the representation of small-scale fisheries and recognition of

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aquatic food systems within the broader food sovereignty movement.

Discussions focused on building consensus around the CPAA for systemic transformation. Six priority areas for convergence structured the deliberations:

1. People's democracy, peace and international solidarity,
2. People's economy,
3. Food sovereignty and agroecology,
4. Land, territories and agrarian reform,
5. Health for all,
6. Climate justice and energy sovereignty

The Forum began with Regional Meetings. In parallel, 13 global organizations convened three dedicated meetings throughout the Forum. These preparatory spaces enabled delegates from different

the Nirdigantha progressive theater group, offered a moving reflection on resistance, dignity, and collective struggle, reinforcing culture as a vital force in political mobilisation.

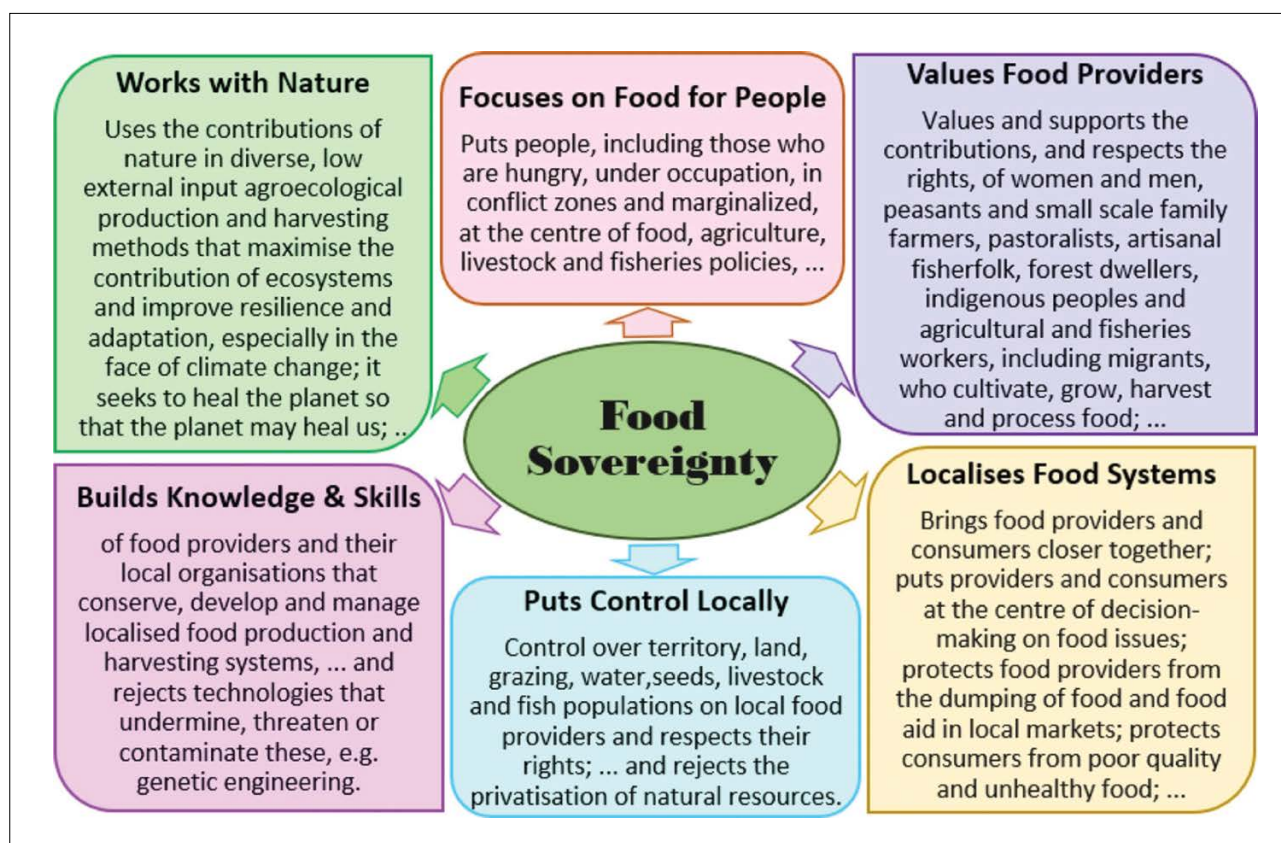
During the Forum, the NICD campus hosted a vibrant 'Agroecology Fair' that brought together more than 40 cooperatives and collectives of small-scale food producers, farmers, fisherfolk, artisans, craftspeople, and traditional artists from across Sri Lanka, including from coastal and Indigenous communities. Showcasing diverse seeds, traditional rice varieties, organic produce, medicinal herbs, handmade crafts, and local foods, the fair highlighted the diversity, resilience, and cultural richness of community-led food systems.

Across the NICD campus, walls, corridors, and open spaces were transformed into a living canvas of resistance and hope through the 'Art for Convergence' initiative. Murals, banners, installations, and performances reflected collective memories, struggles, resilience, and visions for justice, turning the Forum into a vibrant space of political and cultural expression. Rooted in the spirit of Nyéléni, the artistic interventions celebrated people's economies, people's democracy, international solidarity, food sovereignty, climate justice, and health for all. The Forum also held a dedicated Global Solidarity Day with Palestine, denouncing the Genocide, siege and occupation actions in Gaza, and condemning the inaction of governments and multilateral institutions.

On September 12, participants joined field visits across Sri Lanka, visiting various grassroots initiatives advancing resilient food systems and social justice and engaging directly with organizations of farmers, fisherfolk, plantation workers, women, Indigenous communities. After days of intense political engagement and collective reflection, the Forum concluded on September 13 with a closing ceremony organized by the Sri Lanka Steering Committee (SLSC). A moving mistica and vibrant cultural performances marked the culmination of the gathering, which was rooted

constituencies to collectively review and strengthen the draft CPAA and finally to validate the near-final versions of both the CPAA and the Kandy Declaration. Dedicated assemblies, including the 'Women's Assembly', 'Youth Assembly', the 'Assembly of Gender and Sexual Diversities and Allies', and a meeting of Indigenous community representatives – ensured that historically marginalised voices were central to the process. The Forum also included dialogues with researchers, trade unions, and philanthropy actors, strengthening cross-sector engagement.

The Forum was officially inaugurated in the presence of Hon. Wasantha Samarasinghe, Minister of Trade, Commerce, Food Security & Co-operative Development, and Hon. K.V. Samantha Viddyaratna, Minister of Plantation & Community Infrastructure. That evening, a powerful cultural presentation led by Indian actor and activist Prakash Raj, including a poetry performance by



The six pillars or approaches of food security

Source: Illustration from the article 'Climate Change and food security in Sri Lanka: towards food sovereignty' by Mahinda Gunaratne, Shamila Rathnasooriya & Radin Firdaus

in gratitude, solidarity, and renewed commitment towards systemic transformation. The Forum led to the identification of shared global campaigns (CPAA), the strategies for implementation of which would later be further developed by the Steering Committee. On the last day of the Forum, a collective declaration, termed the Kandy Declaration, was drafted and read out.

Inclusion of fisher movements in the Nyéléni process

Under the coordination of the WFFP and WFF, the Forum witnessed the participation of a wide range of fisher and fishworkers organizations and allied actors from across all regions. The Fishers' constituency was further strengthened by the participation of solidarity and support organizations, such as ICSF, FIAN International, the Transnational Institute (TNI), and several others, contributing research, advocacy, and facilitation support to the process. For fisher organizations,

engagement with the Nyéléni process, and inclusion in the food sovereignty movement, has been of great political importance – while also presenting important challenges.

At present, fish is rarely considered in global food systems analyses and as a result is underrepresented in major food and nutrition security initiatives

Organized globally through WFFP and WFF, small-scale fishers and fishworkers have consistently challenged dominant frameworks that marginalise fisheries or reduce them to mere economic sectors. At present, fish is rarely considered in global food systems analyses and as a result is underrepresented in major food and nutrition security initiatives. Fisher movements have argued that small-scale fisheries are an indispensable

part of food systems as they provide food, livelihoods, employment, culture and support local economies, whilst also embodying ecological knowledge passed down from generations and on customary governance. Through their organized engagement within the IPC for Food Sovereignty, fisher movements have worked to broaden the political and conceptual scope of food sovereignty to include aquatic territories and food systems and the struggles of the fishing communities as integral to the broader food sovereignty agenda.

Fisheries and food sovereignty: Challenges and opportunities

For decades, food sovereignty debates have been shaped by agrarian struggles, land-based narratives and the agroecology framework. While

of the perspectives and contributions of fishers (and also pastoralists). Several fisher participants therefore insisted that Aqua Ecology should also be included in the conceptual framework and vision of the food sovereignty movement.

Fishers and fishworkers argued that a 'fish as food' lens embedded in food sovereignty is one way to support people's rights to gain control over their food and fisheries systems. Small-scale fisheries are essential food systems that support millions – providing nutrition and livelihoods – and depend fundamentally on secure and equitable access and governance of aquatic territories and commons by local fisher communities and Indigenous Peoples. The protection of plankton in oceans and inland waters as a crucial source of life on Earth was also emphasised. The key political contribution of the fisher movements was their critique of the dominant Blue Economy narratives, as these often prioritise large-scale investment, technological intensification, carbon markets, and ocean-based growth, while sidelining social justice and community rights.

Yet customary tenure systems and Indigenous Peoples- and community-based governance are increasingly undermined by industrial fleets, large scale aquaculture, coastal infrastructure projects, mass tourism, exclusionary conservation models, and the growing financialisation of marine resources. In addition, there is the worsening problem of pollution from hazardous substances and climate change, which are threatening aquatic ecosystems. Such processes erode not only livelihoods, but also community-based governance systems that have sustained aquatic ecosystems and food systems for generations. Women fishworkers, who play critical roles across the fisheries value chain, in household food security and in community cohesion, are often among the worst impacted by these developments. Their labour and roles remain systematically undervalued in fisheries governance, even as they underpin local food systems.

By foregrounding lived experiences of criminalisation,

Fishers and fishworkers argued that a 'fish as food' lens embedded in food sovereignty is one way to support people's rights to gain control over their food and fisheries systems

these remain foundational, global fisher movements have continued to insist that oceans, coasts, rivers, lakes, and wetlands and their respective aquatic resources, in particular fish, are equally central to food systems.

Agroecology as a conceptual framework received a lot of attention during the Forum as a solution to the climate and food crisis, a pathway to food sovereignty and also as a social movement and a way of living, a "weaver of collective identity across peasants, Indigenous Peoples, small scale fisheries, pastoralists, and consumers worldwide". Without underestimating the importance of agroecology, the fisher representatives participating in the Forum made it clear that the framework has significant limitations for fisheries and aquatic food systems. Its focus on land and crop-based closed systems risks an overlooking of the diversity of food production systems that do not fit neatly into the farm plot model – thereby risking the exclusion

JIBIN ROBIN



Mural at the venue curated by the Fearless Collective, a women's artist group from Puttalam, Sri Lanka

cross-border conflicts, labour precarity, and climate vulnerability, fishworkers organizations brought a grounded political clarity to the Forum's deliberations. In contrast to Blue Economy narratives, the fisher movements advanced an alternative narrative rooted in commons-based governance, aquatic territorial rights, ecological sustainability, equity and gender justice. For the fisher movements and their allies, participation in the 3rd Nyéléni Forum offered a valuable opportunity to integrate small-scale fisheries and aquatic-based livelihoods and food systems into the dialogue on the convergence of the food sovereignty movement and also to ensure that their struggles were reflected into the CPAA.

Integration into the Declaration of the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum

The collectively-developed Kandy Declaration, which was later carried to the People's Summit, held as part of the UNFCCC COP30 in Belém, Brazil, reinforces food sovereignty as a struggle grounded in rights, collective governance and resistance to corporate enclosure.

The Declaration stands as a common political compass for the

social movements of the world – guiding struggles for food sovereignty, health for all, social and solidarity economy, climate and gender justice, and peoples' rights. It denounces the systems of capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism that drive hunger, war, and ecological collapse, while affirming the power of peoples to build economies of care, solidarity, and self-determination. The Kandy Declaration calls on movements everywhere to act in unity, defend the commons, and

The collectively-developed Kandy Declaration was carried to the People's Summit, part of the UNFCCC COP30 in Belém, Brazil. It reinforces food sovereignty as a struggle grounded in rights, collective governance and resistance to corporate enclosure

transform global governance so that it serves people, not profit.

Integration of the voices of the fisher movements into the declaration of the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum was seen to be crucial to achieving convergence and strengthening alliances. Due to the efforts and contributions of the fisher constituency, the declaration has been drafted to advance justice for the diversity of food-producing

communities – by including fishers’ and fishworkers’ perspectives and issues.

The Kandy Declaration states:

- “With our diverse knowledges, convictions and actions, we feed the world, nurture and sustain life, defend our territories and Mother Earth, and ensure the health of all living beings.”
- “From the rivers and lakes, across our lands to the wetlands and sea, based on agroecology, aquaecology, and the ancestral knowledges of our peoples, we will fight for universal access to healthy and culturally appropriate food – produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods for all.”
- “Land, water, seeds, forests, and knowledge belong to the people who care for them—not to corporations, states, or algorithms.”

Although the Kandy Declaration includes important concerns of the global fisher movements, it is regrettable that recognition of the rights to aquatic resources essential for the food sovereignty of fisher communities and Indigenous Peoples, was not incorporated

- “We will defend our bodies, lands, seeds, breeds, water bodies, territories, ecosystems and all public, traditional and intercultural health systems. These are our commons, which we will protect and reclaim.”
- “We will defend collective, customary, and traditional rights to land. We assert the rights of Indigenous Peoples to their lands and ancestral domains, and we call for land back for Indigenous communities and displaced traditional custodians.”

Even though that last point (listed above) of the Declaration is of essential importance, it is regrettable that recognition of the rights to aquatic resources essential for the food sovereignty of fisher communities and Indigenous Peoples, was not included. Despite this unfortunate shortcoming, the Declaration includes important concerns of the global fisher movements:

- “The agro-industrial model systematically undermines the Right to Food and health through monocultures, industrial aquaculture, pollution, so-called ‘blue foods’, genetically modified and gene-edited organisms, agrotoxins, chemical fertilizers, and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) dependent on massive use of antibiotics and antivirals. The increasing consumption of ultra-processed products is fuelling a global pandemic of non-communicable diseases.”

The Declaration also spells out concrete collective actions and campaigns towards “resisting corporate monopolies over vital resources – land, water, seeds, animals, genetic materials, and territories – and opposing the commodification of life in all its forms”. It notes:

- “Our actions will focus on reclaiming territories, advancing popular, inclusive, and comprehensive agrarian reform, and defending the commons from industrial exploitation. This includes halting industrial aquaculture and fishing, the blue economy, privatization of oceans, as well as industrial and factory farming. We will strengthen pastoralist rights and movements worldwide, united in confronting the impunity and power of transnational corporations and other exploitative actors.”

The Declaration also focuses on the need for transformation and strengthening of multilateral systems such as the United Nations highlighting the importance of such missions. It states:

- “We will defend and fight to transform the multilateral system of the United Nations (UN) so that it serves the people, not corporations[...] In this regard, we are committed to ensuring that UN instruments – shaped through decades of our struggles, activism and engagement – are properly implemented.”

Among these UN instruments, which are the result of a longstanding people’s engagement and struggle,



Members of the Global Steering Committee for the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum

are the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP). The Declaration also calls for making the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) legally-binding. It also supports movements that campaign at international forums on issues of biodiversity, genetic resources and traditional knowledge, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). As well, it advocates leveraging the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the CFS Gender Guidelines on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls to demand concrete action on gender- and sexual-based violence. The Declaration supports the official recognition of November 5 as the Global Day of Fisherwomen, acknowledging the indispensable role of women across harvesting, processing, vending and sustaining household food security, while challenging their invisibilisation within fisheries governance.

Continued inclusion: Future of the movement

Global fisher movements and their support organizations found their

participation in the 3rd Global Nyéléni Forum, and the dialogue with other social movements, both inspiring and encouraging. Their inclusion in the food sovereignty movement was recognised as politically significant and as an important space for continuously challenging dominant assumptions. In addition to having their concerns integrated into the Declaration, the fisher movements have secured a permanent role in the governance of

The commitments of fisher peoples and fishworkers reflected in the Kandy Declaration of the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum have been further consolidated in the Common Political Action Agenda (CPAA), released in June 2026

the Nyéléni process. The participation of the WFFP in the Global Steering Committee (GSC) is intended to ensure that the perspectives of small-scale fisheries are safeguarded in the implementation of the CPAA. WFFP's role in the GSC is not merely symbolic, but rather a lasting contribution to shaping the strategic direction of the global food sovereignty movement to include fisher peoples' rights to control their food and fisheries systems. Defending aquatic territories and resources, securing collective tenure, resisting extractive

Why host the Forum in Sri Lanka?

Holding the 3rd Global Nyéléni Forum in Sri Lanka was both symbolic and strategic. The country reflects many of today's interconnected economic, ecological, and political crises, while also carrying a long history of resistance, repression, and renewed struggle. For more than four decades, Sri Lanka endured highly repressive governance, alongside a devastating civil war that deeply affected social movements and civic life. Although women's movements and peasant struggles, including resistance against sugar plantations by foreign companies in the 1980s, were present, a strong national peasant and fisher movement was unable to fully emerge due to State repression and violence from militant actors. This history is also marked by persistent violations of human and democratic rights. It is only in recent years that peasant and fisher movements have begun to re-emerge more visibly and coherently. Against this backdrop, fisherfolk, small farmers, women, and rural communities continue to defend their lands, coasts, and commons against privatisation, displacement, debt, and environmental degradation.

By convening in Kandy, the Forum highlighted both the struggles and the revival of grassroots organizing in Sri Lanka – culminating in the popular 'Aragalaya' people's democratic movement of 2022, while also connecting them to broader South Asian and Global South struggles against neoliberal reforms, climate change, and deepening food insecurity. The gathering strengthened international solidarity, amplified emerging local movements on a global stage, and reaffirmed the central role of the Asia-Pacific region in advancing food sovereignty, with regional networks actively shaping the Forum's preparation and direction.

The Sri Lanka Steering Committee (SLSC)

The SLSC played a central role as host and national organizer of the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum. When political circumstances prevented the Forum from taking place in India as originally planned, Sri Lanka stepped forward in an important act of regional solidarity and leadership. Despite limited preparation time, the SLSC ensured that the Forum remained grounded in the lived realities and aspirations of Sri Lankan communities, linking global participants with stories of struggle and resilience from coasts, villages, and farming areas. The SLSC brought together several leading Sri Lankan social justice and grassroots organizations, including:

- Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR)
- National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO)
- Centre for Environmental Justice (CEJ)
- People's Health Movement (PHM)
- Community Education Centre (CEC)
- Lanka Organic Agricultural Movement (LOAM)
- Women's Centre (WC)

These organizations are connected to major international movements and networks, including La Via Campesina, World Forum of Fisher Peoples, Friends of the Earth International, People's Health Movement, International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements, FIAN International, and World March of Women, ensuring that Sri Lankan realities were firmly embedded in the global agenda. MONLAR served as the local secretariat in close coordination with the IPC Asia Pacific Secretariat, which provided essential regional support.

For more

International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC)

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

3rd Nyéléni Global Forum

<https://nyeleniglobalforum.org/>

Kandy Declaration: From the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum, Sri Lanka, September 2025

<https://icsf.net/resources/kandy-declaration-from-the-3rd-nyeleni-global-forum-sri-lanka-september-2025/>

The Nyéléni Common Political Action Agenda (CPAA)

<https://nyeleniglobalforum.org/2026/05/27/the-nyeleni-common-political-action-agenda-is-finally-out/>

Blue Economy models, and upholding international rights frameworks are not sectoral issues alone, but foundational to the future of food sovereignty itself.

Postscript

The commitments of fisher peoples and fishworkers articulated throughout the Nyéléni process and reflected in the Declaration of the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum have been further consolidated in the Common Political Action Agenda (CPAA), released in June 2026. The CPAA reaffirms the centrality of small-scale fisheries to food sovereignty and commits to intensifying efforts to secure sustainable small-scale fisheries, protect aquatic territories

and customary rights, defend the livelihoods of fishing communities, and advance the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. It advocates for decent working conditions, safety at sea, and comprehensive social protection for fishers in both marine and inland waters. It also calls for stronger action against industrial aquaculture, destructive extractivism, and the privatisation of aquatic commons, while strengthening fisher movements' engagement in global policy spaces such as the SSF Global Strategic Framework (SSF-GSF), the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI), and advocacy for the ratification and implementation of ILO Convention 188 (Work in Fishing). 3

Land and Sea: Ever the twain shall meet

Finding common ground between the SSF Guidelines and UNDROP to extend human rights protections to fisher peoples and aquatic territories

The adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) in 2018 marked a historic milestone for rural justice. However, to date, its development and implementation have largely focused on peasants. It is essential to remember that the rights enshrined in UNDROP are fully applicable to other peoples who live and work in rural and aquatic territories, including fisher peoples. Article 1, paragraph 2 of UNDROP is very clear in this regard: “This Declaration applies to any person engaged in artisanal or small-scale agriculture, crop planting, livestock raising, pastoralism, fishing, forestry, hunting or gathering, as well as handicrafts related to agriculture or other related occupations in a rural area.” To this end, it is crucial to continue advocating for the expansion of UNDROP to the various constituencies covered by its definition, including fisher peoples, by strengthening their understanding of the Declaration and promoting their visibility as full rights-holders.

For decades, campaigns for territorial rights have been waged almost exclusively in terms of land-based struggles. Nevertheless, when discussing territories in the context of small-scale fisheries (SSF), it is imperative to highlight the interdependence between water and land for the livelihoods, food sovereignty, and cultural identity of these communities. The coast and inland water bodies represent a complete living environment where daily life, livelihoods, and culture intersect; where the land ends, the territory continues into the water. In

this spirit, an important contribution that artisanal fisheries can provide to the interpretation of UNDROP is the use of paradigmatic concepts emerging from the social sciences and social movements in Latin America and the Caribbean, such as ‘Maritorio (Maritory) or Territory of Life’. This concept recognises coastal and marine areas as collectively used spaces of food sovereignty shaped by the people who traditionally inhabit them; places understood as spiritual and intercultural spaces of “affection

“And first was the water...

Still the earth did not peek through the waves,

still the earth was only a soft and trembling mud...

There were no flower moons nor clusters of islands...

In the womb of the young water, continents were being gestated...”

— Dulce María Loynaz, *Creación* (Author’s translation)

with nature and ancestry”, rather than merely extraction zones.

In turn, this vision expands toward the concept of ‘Acuatorio (Aquatory)’, a term that allows for the understanding of the “amphibious territorialities” of the communities that inhabit these spaces. This perspective recognises that the protection of artisanal fisheries requires an approach that treats all aquatic ecosystems – rivers, lagoons and wetlands – equally, as indivisible territories of land and water. Consequently, the right to land enshrined in Article 17 of the UNDROP must be interpreted as a framework that encompasses the complex relationships fishing communities maintain with their aquatic environments, reaffirming that water and land constitute inseparable dimensions of this right.

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JANUARY NDAGALA



Women sardine traders waiting for fishing vessels to dock in Tanga, Tanzania

The defensive triad: UNDROP, SSF Guidelines, and Tenure

The strength of UNDROP for fisher peoples lies in its capacity to dialogue with other international instruments. For protection to be effective, the Declaration must be read in light of the SSF Guidelines and the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT). While the SSF Guidelines and the VGGT provide the technical roadmap for responsible governance, UNDROP elevates these recommendations to the status of human rights. Together, they form a legal framework that enables fisher peoples to demand and struggle for the redistribution of land/water, preferential access to fishing zones and resources, and the collective management of their aquatic territories – both coastal and inland – as well as protection against all arbitrary and illegal displacement or eviction. Furthermore, this framework sustains the guarantee of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and the implementation of territorial impact assessments regarding large-scale Blue Economy projects.

UNDROP also recognises the right to water as an essential pillar for a dignified life for small-scale fishers, and as the foundation of their livelihoods. This right is understood to cover not only human consumption, but also extend to food production and, by extension, fishing. Likewise, by recognising community management systems, this right reinforces the autonomy of fishing communities in the governance of their territories, where traditional knowledge plays a key role. Finally, the Declaration also establishes provisions for States to protect communities against third parties, which is crucial in the face of extractive or polluting activities that threaten both access to aquatic territories and the integrity of ecosystems.

Women at the heart of fisheries

If UNDROP is to be used as a shield for fisher peoples, its protection must be particularly robust for women, who sustain the life and the economic fabric of their communities, yet face systemic and legal invisibility. In artisanal fisheries, as in other rural sectors, the relationship with territory is deeply

Threats: “Ocean Grabbing” and the Blue Economy

Today, fisheries territories face an unprecedented onslaught of threats to their lives and livelihoods. Under the guise of development and sustainability, luxury tourism projects, offshore energy, industrial aquaculture and fisheries, and deep-sea mining exploration are destroying marine ecosystems and capturing fishing grounds and landing sites. This is known as ‘Ocean Grabbing’ or ‘Blue Grabbing’.

Some approaches to environmental conservation, when applied under the “Fortress” model – meaning protected areas that are closed-off and exclude traditional inhabitants – have also become a threat. UNDROP, in dialogue with the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines), must be used to reclaim the important role of fisherfolk – who have inhabited these territories for centuries – as the true guardians of biodiversity and ecosystems. As established by the SSF Guidelines, conservation must not be carried out at the expense of communities, but in collaboration with them. Therefore, the protection of their tenure rights and the recognition of their traditional practices and knowledge is in itself a conservation strategy.

marked by a gender dimension: while men are usually out on the water, women's productive and vital space is the shoreline and the coastal strip. It is there that they process, dry, and market the fish; consequently, they are disproportionately affected by land and ocean grabbing and the advance of the Blue Economy. This differentiated impact has been explicitly recognised by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in its General Recommendation No. 34 (2016), noting that rural women – including fisherwomen – are not a homogeneous group and suffer from intersecting forms of discrimination. This intersectional perspective has been reinforced by the landmark 2021 Inter-American Court of Human Rights Advisory Opinion OC-27/21, which establishes that women who depend on natural resources face “aggravated vulnerability” when their environment is destroyed as it breaks not only their source of income, but also their fabric of care and community life.

Therefore, under a logic of comprehensive protection, the UNDROP cannot be interpreted in isolation, but must be understood in dialogue with CEDAW and the SSF Guidelines – particularly Chapter 8. This normative articulation constitutes the basis for demanding that States fully recognise women's work in fisheries, respect their knowledge regarding the sustainable use of resources, and guarantee tenure security for land adjacent to the water. This, in turn, is essential for fisherwomen to stop being invisibilised and to act as stakeholders, responsible decision-makers, and beneficiaries.

To this end, Article 4 of UNDROP establishes provisions for States to adopt measures to eliminate discrimination against fisherwomen and guarantee their full and effective participation in all decision-making processes. It also recognises their right to access productive resources, services, and social protection on an equal footing, addressing the structural inequalities they face. Thus, Article 4 not only complements CEDAW standards, but also consolidates a transformative approach that demands public policies with a gender perspective in artisanal fisheries.

From recognition to realisation: UNDROP as a living instrument for small-scale fisheries

Although the term “peasant” shapes much of UNDROP's language, its scope is unequivocal: small-scale fishers and fishworkers are full rightsholders under this instrument. ICSF recently argued before the UN Working Group on UNDROP, the challenge is no longer one of recognition, but of realisation. It is time to definitively break down the “invisible frontier” that has historically excluded the sea from agrarian debates and ensure that fishing communities take ownership of the Declaration as their own shield.

From this perspective, making UNDROP meaningful in the lives of fisher peoples requires moving beyond a purely declaratory reading of rights. The Declaration must be mobilised in tandem with the SSF Guidelines and the VGGT, not only as complementary instruments, but as part of a coherent architecture for rights-based fisheries governance. In this framework, human rights cease to be abstract guarantees and become tools for action, rooted in the lived experiences, knowledge systems, and collective organization of the communities.

Ultimately, transforming UNDROP into an operational tool is both a political and a collective process. It depends on strengthening the capacities of small-scale fisheries organizations, their active participation in decision-making spaces, and the reinforcement of the strategic alliances that sustain their struggles. Historical experience demonstrates that durable change emerges from this interplay between community-based resistance and a sustained technical and political presence in global governance arenas. UNDROP can serve as a vital compass, but only if it is actively steered by the very communities it seeks to protect. The task ahead is to ensure that fisher peoples not only see themselves reflected in this Declaration, but use it as a tool to protect the futures of their territories, their livelihoods, and their rights.

This analysis has been reproduced with edits from the author's article, titled 'UNDROP as a Shield for Fisher Peoples', published on May 6, 2026, by Defending Peasants Rights (<https://defendingpeasantsrights.org/en/undrop-as-a-shield-for-fisher-peoples/>) 3

For more



UNDROP as a Shield for Fisher Peoples

<https://defendingpeasantsrights.org/en/undrop-as-a-shield-for-fisher-peoples/>

Cartagena Declaration: International Academic Conference for Land, Life & Society, ICARRD+20, 24–28 February 2026 in Cartagena, Colombia

<https://icsf.net/resources/cartagena-declaration-international-academic-conference-for-land-life-society/>

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP)

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1650694?ln=en&v=pdf>

General recommendation No. 34 (2016) on the rights of rural women UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

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The Rudder and the Reef

The SSF Guidelines as a practical guide for navigating the global biodiversity agenda

The global biodiversity agenda is moving at a breakneck pace, and for the world's small-scale fishers (SSF), the stakes have never been higher. Its harmonisation with the climate change agenda is expected to further strengthen its influence at both international and national levels. Yet the work of securing sustainable small-scale fisheries does not begin or end at the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The Voluntary

reality: while NBSAPs are being drafted or updated, small-scale fishers are being left out and their concerns treated as an 'add-on' rather than an integral component of biodiversity targets.

Depending on the focus of conservation work under each NBSAP, advances made by the sector to protect SSF communities' way of life and livelihoods – covered in Chapter 6 and 7 of the SSF Guidelines – can be set back if SSF actors continue to be excluded or if SSF organizations refuse to take the initiative to influence their implementation in their respective territories. The SSF Guidelines is a landmark document, but remains bounded by its voluntary nature. Its implementation will benefit more from integration into, and by informing, other instruments that target the domain of SSF communities: inland, coastal and marine territories.

The SSF movement and representatives from their support organizations – the late Chandrika Sharma among them – have worked for over two decades inside the Women's Caucus, the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity and predecessor caucuses for the work on traditional knowledge, the Global Youth Biodiversity Network, the CBD Alliance, and with the CBD Secretariat itself through initiatives such as the Sustainable Ocean Initiative. The human rights-based language now ensconced within KM-GBF Target 22, and the references to traditional knowledge and customary tenure in Target 21, are the product of years of caucus-level negotiation, side-event work, and press advocacy at successive Conference of the Parties (COPs) meetings.

Target 3 of the KM-GBF further makes the stakes explicit. It calls on Parties to: "Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 percent of terrestrial,

While NBSAPs are being drafted or updated, small-scale fishers are being left out and their concerns treated as an 'add-on' rather than an integral component of biodiversity targets

Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) was built on a multi-actor consensus that must be carried forward by SSF organizations themselves and integrated into the biodiversity process from the international, down to the regional and national levels.

The SSF Guidelines provides SSF actors with more than just a set of principles. It should serve as a navigational chart for the evolving waters of international environmental agreements (IEAs). While the CBD and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF) sets global targets, the real battle for SSF livelihoods is being fought at the national level and is influenced by National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) as CBD's domestic mechanism. The regional consultations held by ICSF in November 2025 with representatives from SSF networks across Africa, Asia, and Latin America revealed a sobering

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RONALD B. RODRIGUEZ



SSF Leader (Zoila Bustamante Cardena) meeting Chile's Government Representative at CBD COP16 in Cali, Colombia

inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, recognising indigenous and traditional territories where applicable, and integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean, while ensuring that any sustainable use, where appropriate in such areas, is fully consistent with conservation outcomes, recognising and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, including over their traditional territories.”

Target 3 is therefore not just an area-based target. It is a human rights mandate consistent with the SSF Guidelines. The first task of SSF leaders is thus to insist on the totality of Target 3, in the same way Indigenous Peoples are now insisting that the framework must recognise their sovereignty over their territories, not merely consult them within pre-defined conservation architectures. The 30x30 goal overlaps directly with the responsible governance of tenure and resource management principles set forth in Chapter 5 of the SSF Guidelines. But as separate

declarations and decisions made under the CBD, this feels like a familiar storm for many SSF communities: a top-down conservation mandate that threatens to exclude those who have been the sea's most faithful stewards. But as the SSF movement has learned through decades of advocacy, its role is not to stand on the shore and watch the tide go out. SSF communities are people of action.

The KM-GBF's targets that were influenced by SSF movements' decades of work are not just environmental mandates, they are legal and moral hooks that demand “full, equitable, inclusive, and effective representation”.

KM-GBF Target 3, the 30x30 goal, is not just an area-based target. It is a human rights mandate consistent with the SSF Guidelines. SSF leaders must insist on its implementation in toto

By aligning the human rights-based approach of the SSF Guidelines with these biodiversity targets, SSF leaders can move from being passive subjects of conservation to stewards of inland, coastal, and marine environments.

Advocacy to action

To secure SSF's future, we must recognise that advocacy is not an end

in itself. Advocacy should be treated as a process designed to secure opportunities for negotiation. SSF organizations have made significant progress on making recommendations or asking for inclusion. However, effective influence requires a shift toward lobbying as a strategy for direct engagement with decision-makers to present an actionable request. This shift reframes approaching an environment minister or a CBD focal point, from presenting a grievance – either for being excluded in the process or being displaced by conservation projects – to initiating negotiation. An opportunity for biodiversity negotiation for SSF organizations has already been presented through the NBSAP, which should be aligned with the KM-GBF.

There is a need to demonstrate that SSF communities are unified and capable of implementing the conservation strategies being proposed – and able to make credible promises and threats

To be powerful negotiators, SSF organizations must develop the capacity to issue observable and credible strategic moves. In the world of policymaking, a move is only effective if government representatives and other actors believe you have the capacity and will to follow through. This requires building three specific types of organizational capacity:

First, SSF organizations need to build the capacity to make observable commitment. An SSF actor's capacity to bind a government to a decision depends on its capacity to bind itself. There is a need to demonstrate that SSF communities are unified and capable of implementing the conservation strategies being proposed. If a government cannot observe that SSF actors are contributing significantly to both food security and conservation – leveraging tools like the Illuminating Hidden Harvests report which assigns numbers to the critical role and contributions of SSF ecosystems and economies that depend on it – they will not deliver on promised

management rights. For governments that have already adopted the KM-GBF, their expressed commitment to the international community should be met with a commitment from the subsector based on its terms of engagement in biodiversity issues.

Second, SSF organizations need to be able to make credible promises. This calls for a stable internal coalition to ensure that SSF movement members present a unified front. By showing that we can deliver sustainable resource management across an entire coastline and across different territories, we offer governments an incentive for collaborating with SSF communities that is more stable and less costly than top-down enforcement. This will also require making information on SSF communities' contributions more accessible and widely available for government representatives.

Third, SSF organizations must be able to make credible threats. Negotiation also requires the ability to raise the cost for those who ignore SSF. This does not always mean conflict. It means using available legal mechanisms, leveraging voter blocks, and international human rights mechanisms to ensure that ignoring SSF leads to a political or legal cost that governments would rather avoid.

Turning Global Targets into local power

Engagement is a persistent tactical struggle. As governments rush to update their NBSAPs to meet the 2030 deadline, SSF leaders can leverage four specific 'hooks' found within the intersection of the SSF Guidelines, the KM-GBF and the NBSAPs. While the SSF Guidelines is a voluntary document, the NBSAPs – expected to be aligned with the 23 Targets of the KM-GBF – as high-level national policy documents are more effective drivers of national environmental policies and can provide an impetus to intensify conservation programmes that could displace SSF communities from their territories.

Legal hook: Mandated representation

Target 22 of the KM-GBF provides the sharpest hook point. It explicitly requires states to ensure the "full,



SSF Delegation making their presence known at CBD COP16 in Cali, Colombia

equitable, inclusive, effective and gender-responsive representation” of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in biodiversity decision-making. If an environment ministry is drafting marine conservation plans without the formal involvement of SSF organizations, they are in breach of this international commitment. We must present the SSF Guidelines as the gold standard for how this representation should be structured, citing the fact that they were built on the consensus from more than 4,000 participants representing governments, small-scale fishers, fishworkers, regional organizations, researchers, development partners from over 120 countries and has continued to gather support and commitments to its implementation through the National Plan of Action for Small-Scale Fisheries (NPOA-SSF) framework.

Spatial hook: Recognising SSF territories on their own terms

The 30x30 target, devoid of its human rights component, presents the threat

of displacement. However, the 30x30 target in its full form also presents a strategic opportunity. Rather than simply allowing the government to implement “no-take” Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), leaders can negotiate

The 30x30 target, devoid of its human rights component, presents the threat of displacement. Taken in its entirety, it presents a strategic opportunity

for their community-managed areas to be recognised under Target 3 – noting that such recognition is the preferable approach to Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs). However, this must be done conscientiously to prevent traditional marine territories from being re-labeled as an OECM detached from Target 21 and Target 22, which respectively recognise traditional knowledge and its translation to management, requiring the recognition of the rights of SSF communities and their participation

in conservation efforts. This should shift the narrative from ‘protecting the inland, coastal and marine biodiversity from fishers’ to ‘protecting inland, coastal and marine biodiversity with fishers.’

Evidence hook: Traditional knowledge

A common tactic used to exclude SSF from decision-making and targeting is the claim that the sector is data-poor. Target 21 of the KM-GBF counters this by mandating that traditional knowledge be used as a primary source

approach. For instance, a biodiversity strategy that undermines food security is a failed strategy. Similarly, a food security programme implementation that is devoid of the rights of fishworkers becomes unsustainable. Demanding a joint task force ensures that fishworker rights are protected across all government agendas.

The Gender-responsive negotiator

We cannot talk about inclusive representation without addressing the specific rights of women in the SSF subsector. Target 23 of the KM-GBF focuses on gender-responsive implementation and aligns well with Chapter 8 of the SSF Guidelines on gender equality and equity. Women continue to dominate the post-harvest and processing roles, but are often the first to be excluded from conservation discussions. SSF leaders must negotiate for the inclusion of women’s organizations in the NBSAP process.

KM-GBF Target 23 focuses on gender-responsive implementation and aligns well with Chapter 8 of the SSF Guidelines on gender equality and equity. Women continue to dominate the post-harvest and processing roles, but are often the first to be excluded from conservation discussions

Continuity beyond the Closing Plenary

The KM-GBF and the NBSAPs are not just documents for technocrats. They are spaces for engagement and negotiation. While the plans may have already been drafted, completed and submitted without SSF involvement, its implementation and review remain an open process. SSF continues to gain recognition in global spaces. Now, the challenge is to turn that recognition into a series of actionable requests within national borders where SSF communities truly feel the impact of decisions made without them.

Similarly, the SSF Guidelines is not just a document on a shelf. It is the rudder that guides the subsector into strategic spaces within the global and local biodiversity agenda. The efforts of the SSF movement towards the implementation of the SSF Guidelines are not separate and independent from its contributions to biodiversity conservation. By bringing these specific targets and our observable commitments to the negotiating table, we ensure that 30x30 does not mean the exclusion of fishers, but the protection of the ecosystems and the people who depend on them. 

for decision-making, provided it is accessed with Free, Prior, and Informed Consent. SSF leaders should position their Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as a critical scientific asset. This is one of the key intersections between the SSF Guidelines and the KM-GBF and means that efforts made through the implementation of the SSF Guidelines can be translated into efforts towards contributing to the global biodiversity targets. By mapping SSF customary territories, we can provide the socio-cultural assessments that international agreements now increasingly require before any industrial or conservation project can proceed.

Coherence hook: Inter-sectoral coordination

During ICSF’s regional workshops in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the ‘silo effect’ was identified as a major barrier, wherein environment and fisheries ministries do not coordinate with each other. This is particularly challenging for countries with separate ministries for conservation work and fisheries. Chapter 10 of the SSF Guidelines demands policy coherence and therefore the coordination of different sectors and respective ministries. This is mirrored in the KM-GBF’s whole-of-society and whole-of-government

For more

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Breaking the Ice

At COFI:FM, small-scale fisheries voices issued calls for inclusive governance and meaningful implementation of the SSF Guidelines

The second session of the Committee on Fisheries Sub-Committee on Fisheries Management (COFI:FM) was held in Reykjavik, Iceland from 23-27 February 2026. ICSF participated in support of the IPC Fisheries Working Group (IPCFWG) in this first in-person session of the Sub-Committee, after its inaugural session took place virtually in January 2024. The snowy coastal setting for this meeting was fitting, as Iceland is an island with fishing deeply rooted in its historical and cultural fabric. Our Icelandic hosts provided us with a warm welcome, and organized several cultural events alongside the official working sessions of the COFI:FM. This included an evening reception and musical performance by an Icelandic men's choir, hosted by Brim, one of Iceland's largest publicly-traded industrial fishing and seafood processing companies; and a visit to Grindavik, a once 3,700-strong fishing community on the South coast that has been largely vacated since a nearby volcanic eruption severely damaged the town in 2024.

The COFI:FM was established during COFI's 35th Session in 2022, and is open to all UN Member Nations. COFI observers are also able to participate in sessions, and make statements in the plenary when called upon by the Chairperson. The COFI:FM, which collaborates closely with the Sub-Committees on Aquaculture and Trade, primarily exists to provide technical and policy guidance on fisheries governance and management, with the overall aim of advancing the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries. It also focuses on global issues and trends in fisheries management and sustainable development, and offers suitable guidance and recommendations for addressing urgent issues as required. The outcomes of the COFI:FM sessions

are shared with, and discussed by, the full COFI plenary in its biennial sessions.

Plenary discussions and SSF side event

The agenda for the second session focused on five key themes: improving the conservation and sustainable use of fish stocks; assessing and managing multispecies fisheries with emphasis on data and capacity-limited situations; managing fishing fleet capacity: status and way forward; addressing the social dimensions of fisheries management; and regional fisheries management. All of these themes involved discussions of relevance to small-scale fisheries, and due to sufficient time being available

At COFI:FM, ICSF and the IPCFWG delegation made several strong statements in the plenary sessions, co-organized a well-received side event on the SSF Guidelines, and had productive bilateral discussions with a dozen national governments

during plenary discussions, COFI:FM Chair, Stefán Ásmundsson from Iceland, ensured observers were consistently able to take the floor to contribute to the discussion. IPC made plenary statements on the sustainable use of fish stocks, managing multispecies fisheries, addressing social dimensions of fisheries, and regional fisheries management. ICSF delivered written statements on the sustainable use of fish stocks, and the social dimensions of fisheries – both of which can be read this issue of the SAMUDRA Report.

ICSF and the IPC delegation met with, and expressed appreciation to, the COFI:FM Chair for his respect for observers during the session, and for repeatedly encouraging governments to take account of, and respond to, observer statements. In this first in-

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The COFI:FM plenary hall at Harpa Conference Centre in Reykjavik, Iceland

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person session of the COFI:FM, Mr. Ásmundsson has set a very positive precedent for continuing this participatory and open approach in future meetings of the Sub-Committee.

The side event was also a call to governments to actively participate in both the SSF-GSF and the upcoming SSF Summit III in order to ensure SSF Guidelines implementation is a truly participatory, well-informed and effective process globally

ICSF and the Advisory Group of the Global Strategic Framework for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines (SSF-GSF) also contributed to co-organizing a side event on 'Managing marine and inland fisheries for sustainability and equitable livelihoods: Lessons from the implementation of the SSF Guidelines'. This side event included discussions on several themes connected with the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication

(SSF Guidelines), including an overview of the Guidelines; the participatory National Plan of Action (NPOA-SSF) process in the Philippines; Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and inland fisheries; positive co-management experiences in Cambodia; social protection as an enabler for effective fisheries management; and how the SSF-GSF and SSF Summit foster collaboration for sustainable fisheries. This was an important opportunity for the SSF-GSF Advisory Group to remind COFI:FM participants about COFI Members' endorsement of the SSF-GSF's creation during COFI's 32nd Session in 2016. It was also a call to governments to actively participate in both the SSF-GSF and the upcoming SSF Summit III in September 2026 in order to ensure SSF Guidelines implementation is a truly participatory, well-informed and effective process globally.

Key messages from the SSF Delegation

Together, ICSF and the IPC delegation established two key messages which

were at the core of our advocacy work in Reykjavik. The first is that the SSF Guidelines continue to be a crucial tool for small-scale fisheries governance and management around the world, and the only truly inclusive one of its kind. We urged governments to implement the SSF Guidelines and integrate their core human rights principles into national fisheries policies in a manner that fits the particular contexts of their fisheries and needs of their fishers. Implementation of the SSF Guidelines is crucial for fair and equitable fisheries management, in which an inclusionary, participatory, intergenerational, intercultural and ecosystem approach are all encapsulated within a human rights framework.

The second message is that the SSF-GSF is a unique participatory mechanism in which SSF organizations, governments, FAO, NGOs and researchers come together to coordinate governance, share best practices, and discuss national level experiences. This mechanism allows us to bridge the gap and better connect local experiences, national and regional priorities, and international policy processes. We encouraged governments to join us in this space, and to participate in the upcoming SSF Summit, in order to actively engage with fishers and other fisheries actors, and play a central role in planning for and concretely implementing the SSF Guidelines around the world.

Moving toward SSF Summit III and COFI37

Overall, ICSF and the IPCFWG delegation found the first in-person COFI:FM session to be a productive and positive experience, and we engaged in the meeting in a unified and strategic way. The group made several strong statements in the plenary sessions, co-organized a side event on the SSF Guidelines, and had productive bilateral discussions with a dozen national governments. There were numerous discussions on small-scale fisheries around the world, and particularly the importance of taking social dimensions into account when developing and implementing management approaches. We found the COFI:FM to be a useful space for



In front of the Maritime Museum, Reykjavik Harbour, Iceland

advocacy and engagement, which allowed for direct interaction with, and between, governments and observers. We look forward to continuing our dialogue with governments on the SSF Guidelines and the SSF-GSF, and finding ways to work more closely together on tackling common challenges at the national and international levels.

The third edition of the SSF Summit and COFI's 37th Session, to be held back-to-back in Rome in September 2026, are important interlinked spaces in which we can bring experiences from SSF communities to international fisheries governance processes. The SSF Summit in particular is a crucial space for strengthening unity and strategic alignment between SSF organizations, as well as building close collaboration with governments, FAO and civil society actors in fisheries governance globally. These two events will be the next important international meetings where ICSF and IPC will be actively engaging, and continuing our collective efforts to ensure the SSF Guidelines are concretely implemented in a way that ensures positive change in fishing communities in every corner of the globe.

For more



Second Session of the Sub-Committee on Fisheries Management – from 23 to 27 February 2026, Reykjavik, Iceland
<https://www.fao.org/cofi/fish-management/en>

Report of the Second Session of the Sub-Committee on Fisheries Management
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Statement I

ICSF's Intervention at the Second Session of the FAO Sub-Committee on Fisheries Management on Agenda Item 5: Addressing the Social Dimensions of Fisheries Management

The International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) welcomes the Sub-Committee on Fisheries Management document addressing the social dimensions in the small-scale fisheries sector, and recognizing the importance of advancing discussions on how social protection systems can respond to the specific realities and living and working conditions in small-scale fisheries.

We underline that social protection in fisheries must be approached through a **human rights-based framework**, as articulated in the Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines). Social protection should not be understood as a temporary or residual safety net, but as an essential component of States' obligations to ensure dignity, equality, non-discrimination and secure livelihoods for small-scale fishers, fishworkers and Indigenous Peoples.

We urge Governments to **formally recognize small-scale fishers, fishworkers and Indigenous Peoples**, as such recognition constitutes a necessary condition for their effective inclusion in labour rights regimes, social protection systems and insurance mechanisms. When formal recognition exists, small-scale fishers and fishworkers are most often classified as **independent or self-employed workers**, which leads to their systematic exclusion from labour protection and social security schemes. This structural exclusion significantly increases their exposure to exploitation, repression, income insecurity and climate-related hazards and disasters. Social protection policies must therefore be adapted to the realities of informal, seasonal and collective forms of work in small-scale fisheries.

The **recognition of the contributions of small-scale fisheries and the guarantee of decent work** are central to effective social protection. Social protection measures must be linked to policies that ensure safe working conditions, income security and dignity for fishers and fishworkers, including women engaged in pre and post-harvest activities.

We appreciate the attention given to the **gender dimension of social protection** in small-scale fisheries. Women in small-scale fisheries are often concentrated in informal segments of the value chain and face compounded barriers to accessing social security.

Social protection systems must therefore explicitly recognize women's work and roles and address structural inequalities that limit their access to health care, maternity leave, pensions and income support in the sector.

Small-scale fishers and fishworkers must have **access to adequate and inclusive social protection and insurance mechanisms**, enabling secure livelihoods throughout the fisheries value chain. Particular attention should be given to ensuring coverage during closed seasons, climate-related disruptions, health emergencies and accidents at sea or inland waters.

We emphasize the importance of addressing **socio-economic welfare through fair and equitable mechanisms**. In this context, the redistribution of benefits generated from fisheries may support the financing and sustainability of social protection schemes targeting small-scale fisheries, particularly in contexts where public resources are limited. The establishment of **Fisheries Levy tax systems**, along with collective management of the SSF-related market by SSF organizations, is crucial for the equitable and sustainable development of this sector.

We highlight the importance of **generational renewal** within small-scale fisheries in the context of social protection. Young people often face limited access to employment rights, training opportunities and social security, which discourages them from remaining in the sector. Social protection policies should therefore include targeted measures for youth, such as training, mentoring and leadership development, so that fisheries can represent a viable and dignified livelihood choice.

We reiterate the need to **recognize the intrinsic value of traditional knowledge and practices**. Traditional knowledge contributes to community resilience, sustainable resource use and culturally appropriate responses to risks and crises, and its recognition is therefore directly relevant to the design of effective and context-specific social protection measures.

We welcome the emphasis placed on **customary tenure rights** and practices in relation to social protection mechanisms for small-scale fisheries. We underline that social protection cannot be effective where fishing communities face insecurity of access to resources. **Recognized and secure tenure rights, in combination with protection against forced evictions**, are therefore closely linked to social protection outcomes, as the loss of access to fishing grounds, coastal lands and inland waters directly undermines income security, livelihood stability and community wellbeing. This understanding is grounded in the recognition that territory and customary tenure rights extend beyond resource access alone. They are fundamental to the protection of **livelihoods, food systems, cultural identity and intergenerational continuity**, all of which constitute essential foundations for meaningful and sustainable social protection.

Models of **co-management** in which governments recognize and support customary tenure systems and traditional knowledge have demonstrated their potential to enhance equity and social inclusion, while giving voice to small-scale fishers and Indigenous Peoples who are often marginalized within top-down governance frameworks. Integrating customary tenure into fisheries governance strengthens legitimacy, cultural relevance and social cohesion, thereby reinforcing the effectiveness of social protection measures.

States must therefore ensure robust consultation processes and **safeguards to prevent displacement, dispossession and forced evictions**, which would otherwise nullify the benefits of social protection interventions. This includes the recognition and protection of both statutory and customary tenure rights in law, policy and practice, in accordance with the SSF Guidelines, the Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests (VGGT), and international human rights frameworks.

We highlight that social protection measures must be designed through **inclusive and participatory processes**, ensuring that small-scale fishers and fishworkers and their organizations are actively involved from the outset in shaping policies that affect their livelihoods. Participation is essential to ensuring that social protection systems respond to real needs and are accessible in practice. In this regard, we emphasize the role of the **Small-Scale Fisheries Global Strategic Framework (SSF-GSF)** as a partnership mechanism giving small-scale fishery actors, government representatives and other stakeholders a space to collaborate and share experiences and good practices at a global level. The SSF-GSF should be meaningfully engaged in discussions related to the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, including the design, assessment and improvement of social protection measures for small-scale fisheries.

This engagement should take place in close connection with **Regional and National Plans of Action (R/NPOAs)** for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, as key instruments for translating global commitments into concrete regional and national policies developed through inclusive, participatory and people-centred approaches.

Source: <https://icsf.net/resources/icsfs-statement-at-second-session-of-fao-sub-committee-on-fisheries-management-on-agenda-item-5-addressing-the-social-dimensions-of-fisheries-management/>

Statement II

ICSF's Statement at Second Session of FAO Sub-Committee on Fisheries Management on Agenda Item 2: Improving the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Fish Stocks: Lessons from Effective Management

The International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) urges fisheries management authorities to recognize that small-scale fishers and Indigenous Peoples are not only resource users, but essential food providers, knowledge holders, and stewards of aquatic ecosystems. Through their diverse and ancestral knowledge systems and practices, they sustain life, are custodians of their territories and natural ecosystems, and contribute directly to the conservation and sustainable management of inland, coastal and marine resources – helping maintain healthy fish stocks for present and future generations.

In line with the Sub-Committee on Fisheries Management's commitment to strengthening stakeholder participation, small-scale fishing communities must be meaningfully involved in data collection and stock assessment processes. This requires not only their inclusion, but also the provision of adequate technical support and capacity-building to ensure their effective and informed participation.

We strongly support improved access for small-scale fishing communities to high-quality, cost-effective data and information systems. This includes strengthening capacities for participatory data collection, storage and management, as well as enhancing skills for analysis, interpretation and integration of data into fisheries management decisions. These elements are essential to ensuring inclusive, evidence-based management in small-scale fisheries. At the same time, where data systems and institutional capacities remain weak, precautionary management approaches and targets must be applied to safeguard both livelihoods and fish stocks. Evidence further demonstrates that co-management models – in which governments formally recognize and support customary tenure systems and traditional knowledge – can strengthen local cooperation, improve compliance with regulations, and promote the sustainable and equitable use of aquatic resources.

Fisheries management authorities must promote and integrate information systems that reflect the realities of small-scale fisheries and their local contexts. This includes generating and using multidimensional data (i.e. economic, nutritional and gender-disaggregated) that are critical for enabling communities to understand and engage with the trade-offs arising from competing management objectives. Such efforts must align with the need to strengthen gender-sensitive data collection and transparent dissemination of information across the sector. Improving the visibility of the

contributions of small-scale fisheries — particularly those of women — to food security, livelihoods and the sustainable use of marine resources is essential for informed, equitable and effective fisheries governance.

National-level reporting through the SDG 14.4.1 questionnaire should be maintained and strengthened by incorporating information on small-scale fisheries, including country-specific criteria used for their classification. This would better reflect national contexts and generate more nuanced insights into fishery characteristics and management practices. Such reporting should also be harmonized with the targets set under National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), ensuring that the contributions of small-scale fisheries are fully recognized within a Whole-of-Society approach.

The implementation of harvest strategies that incorporate empirical or model-based harvest control rules tailored to small-scale fisheries is essential. In data-limited contexts, empirical rules grounded in historical observations and local knowledge provide practical and accessible foundations for informed decision-making. Where feasible, model-based rules can offer quantitative tools to help balance exploitation with conservation objectives. These approaches should be aligned with the priorities of small-scale fishing communities, including the development of targeted policies and plans for climate change adaptation and mitigation. They should also support community-led restoration initiatives to maintain healthy marine ecosystems, while strengthening disaster risk reduction and emergency response measures to enhance resilience.

Fisheries management systems and measures for small-scale fisheries must be context-specific and fit for purpose. In multispecies fisheries, or in contexts where monitoring and enforcement capacities are limited, the establishment of Total Allowable Catch (TAC) limits is unlikely to be effective. Management approaches should instead be grounded in local fishery objectives and implementation capacities. This requires governments to secure small-scale fishers' tenure rights and access to fishing resources, and to guarantee the meaningful participation of SSF women and men in decision-making processes that affect their livelihoods. Such approaches may include community-led co-management systems in coastal and inland areas, supported by clear legal frameworks that define the respective roles and responsibilities of authorities, small-scale fishers and Indigenous Peoples.

Fisheries management objectives must extend beyond achieving biological maximum sustainable yield (MSY) levels to encompass conservation, socioeconomic and cultural priorities within holistic frameworks, such as the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF). Recognising this broader scope is essential to ensuring long-term sustainability and advancing wider societal goals in small-scale fisheries. Such an approach must also be grounded in a Human Rights-Based Approach, which promotes the accountability of duty bearers in fulfilling their obligations and safeguards the rights and livelihoods of small-scale fishing communities.

Small-scale fishers and Indigenous Peoples' traditional knowledge must be formally recognized as a legitimate and valued source of data and information, and its use must respect the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). Such knowledge should meaningfully inform fisheries management decisions, particularly in data-limited contexts where conventional scientific information may be insufficient to guide timely action. Integrating fishers' observations, experiences and lived realities strengthens evidence-based decision-making and enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of management measures.

In developing and implementing conservation measures based on results of monitoring and assessments, States must ensure robust inclusive consultation processes and effective safeguards to prevent displacement, dispossession and forced evictions. This includes the formal recognition and protection of both statutory and customary tenure rights in law, policy and practice, in accordance with the Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines) and the Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests (VGGT).

Community-based coastal resource management initiatives play a critical role in designing and implementing integrated coastal management plans. These approaches can strengthen catch documentation and traceability systems, while reinforcing collective efforts to combat Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing. To be effective, such initiatives require sustained capacity-building and skills development for small-scale fishing communities and their organizations. This includes training on participatory research methods, data collection and management, analysis and interpretation of information, knowledge sharing systems, and the use of data to inform policy development and decision-making.

The long-term sustainability of fisheries management and the conservation of fish stocks — and the habitats on which they depend — require the sustained support and meaningful participation of small-scale fishing communities. This must be ensured through regular, inclusive and effective consultation processes. Sustainability also depends on the provision of adequate technical assistance and resources to ensure that the benefits of management and conservation measures are equitably shared and reach the communities themselves.

Source: <https://icsf.net/resources/icsfs-statement-at-second-session-of-fao-sub-committee-on-fisheries-management-on-agenda-item-2/>

In the Rising Tide

Small-scale fishers and Indigenous communities put tenure rights and climate justice at the heart of the world's most important climate conference

COP30 – the 30th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – was held in Belém, Brazil, from 10 – 22 November 2025. Conducted in the heart of the Amazon, it was the first COP to be hosted in a tropical country in more than two decades, and one of the most politically charged in the history of climate negotiations. For small-scale fishers and fishworkers, the conference represented a rare convergence of events: a global stage set in a country where artisanal fishing communities are on the frontlines of a climate crisis they did not create.

ICSF followed the entire process closely, supporting the engagement of small-scale fisheries (SSF) actors across all major spaces in Belém – from the People's Summit and the Green Zone to the Blue Zone's official negotiation arena and more than 40 parallel events that defined the contours of a broader climate justice agenda.

A sea of people – and a river of boats

The People's Summit opened on November 12 with an extraordinary act of collective presence: a 'barqueata', a river mobilisation, in Guajará Bay, with more than 5,000 people from 62 countries aboard approximately 200 boats. Indigenous Peoples, quilombola communities, riverine populations, and artisanal fishers occupied the waters of Belém to denounce oil exploration, infrastructure megaprojects, and agribusiness expansion threatening their territories. It was a powerful opening declaration: the peoples of the waters were not on the margins of COP30 – they were at its heart.

Over the course of the Summit, SSF actors organized and participated in several landmark moments. On November 13, MPP (the National

Movement of Artisanal Fishers), CONFREM (the National Commission for Strengthening Coastal and Marine Extractive Reserves), and the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) organized the event 'Without Territory, There is No Artisanal Fisheries', during which WFFP released a new report documenting the impacts of climate change on fishing communities worldwide – rising water temperatures, declining fish stocks, flooding, housing collapse, and forced displacement. The MPP also held a self-managed activity in Limoeiro do Ajuru (Pará state), advancing the proposal for a Permanent Tribunal of the Peoples of the Waters

The People's Summit issued a powerful opening declaration: the peoples of the waters were not on the margins of COP30 – they were at its heart

as a mechanism for accountability and political visibility.

The Summit's closing days saw the launch of the Kandy Declaration, a collective document built during the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum (Sri Lanka, September 2025), affirming food sovereignty, gender justice, and peoples' self-determination as structural responses to the climate and socio-environmental crisis – situating the struggles of small-scale fishers within a broader global movement for systemic transformation.

Taking to the streets

On November 15, the Global Climate March brought approximately 70,000 people to the avenues of Belém. Small-scale fishers marched in force alongside Indigenous Peoples,

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TAYNÁ DE OLIVEIRA PINTO / CONFREM



A specific contingent of fisherfolk participated in the Climate March at COP30

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traditional communities, and social movements, forming a visible and broadly representative bloc that put SSF demands squarely before the public. The march was not merely symbolic: artisanal fishing organizations – including MPP, CONFREM, CPP, and the WFFP – carried concrete demands for legislative recognition of fishing territories (maretórios) through pending legislation, the right to free, prior, and informed consultation over offshore energy projects, and an end to oil exploration at the mouth of the Amazon. The same day saw the launch of the ‘Grito do Mangue pelo Clima’ (Mangrove Cry for Climate), a political document developed collectively by coastal and Amazonian communities facing extractivism that denounced the exclusion of traditional peoples from climate decision-making and called for the protection of fishers’ tenure rights as a prerequisite for any just climate response.

SSF food systems: from the sea to the table

One of the most important contributions to the broader SSF agenda in Belém was bringing the small-scale fisheries food

system narrative into a conference still dominated by industrial food system actors. On November 19, the dialogue ‘The Artisanal Fisheries Food System: Solutions from the Amazon and the Atlantic Forest for a Balanced Ocean’ – organized by Instituto Linha D’Água with the support of Instituto Arapyaú at the Cas’Amazônia space – gathered community leaders, researchers, cooperatives, and women fishworkers from across Brazil to address what official COP spaces had largely ignored: the role of small-scale fisheries in food security, adaptation, and sociobiodiversity. The message was clear: climate justice is also built with fish on the table and with secure tenure rights for those who live from the sea. SSF is not a marginal issue in food systems debates – it is a pillar of food sovereignty for millions of people along the world’s coasts, rivers, and estuaries.

Fishing territories as climate solutions

In the Green Zone, SSF representatives engaged in strategic public advocacy through testimonies, thematic panels, and policy dialogues. On November 17, the event ‘Living Solutions for

Climate’ – co-organized by CONFREM and MPP, with support from the High-Level Climate Champions – centered on the recognition of coastal and marine territories (maretórios) as living territories: places whose protection is inseparable from securing communities’ tenure rights, food systems, and climate resilience. ICSF closely monitored and supported the SSF engagement across this event, and other Green Zone sessions throughout the second week of the conference.

Three days later, on November 20 at the Auditório Jandaíra, leaders from CPP, MPP, and CONFREM delivered sobering evidence during the session titled ‘The Impact of Climate Change, Environmental Racism, and the Loss of Constitutional Rights on Artisanal Fisheries’: how 97 percent of Brazilian fishing communities are already affected by climate change. The session denounced “false solutions” – large-scale energy and infrastructure projects advancing over mangroves and traditional fishing grounds without free, prior, and informed consultation, and without securing tenure rights and territorial permanence for fishing communities.

A historic milestone came on November 19, when the ‘Carta Aberta dos Povos do Mar e das Águas’ (Open Letter of the Peoples of the Sea and Waters) was officially launched and delivered, bearing the signatures of 168 organizations. Under the banner ‘Nada sobre nós, sem nós’ (Nothing about us, without us), the letter denounced false market-based solutions, contested the current Marine Spatial Planning model in Brazil, and called for genuine inclusion of coastal and marine communities in climate decision-making.

Inside the negotiations: presence and limits

Within the Blue Zone, the official launch of the Global Forum of Local Communities on Climate Change marked an important institutional step toward formalising the participation of local communities in UNFCCC processes – including negotiation, implementation, and monitoring of climate policies. For many SSF actors, who fall within the ‘local communities’ constituency under the UNFCCC framework, this

development opens a potential pathway to more structured engagement.

At the same time, debates around the Climate Action Agenda – particularly the emerging ‘People of the Oceans Breakthrough’ being developed under the High-Level Climate Champions – revealed both promise and challenges. While ocean-based climate action has gained prominence, the historical engagement of SSF movements in shaping these initiatives remains insufficient. Early framings that draw on ‘sustainable Blue Economy’ language do not necessarily reflect the positions that SSF movements have consistently advanced in other international spaces. Meaningful inclusion will require co-creation processes that embed SSF tenure rights and community governance as foundational, and never peripheral, components of ocean climate action.

What COP30 showed – and what it demands

The organized presence of over 450 SSF representatives from across Brazil, with international participation from WFFP, ULAPA, and allied movements, demonstrated that small-scale fishers are not passive victims of climate change. They are rights-holders, knowledge-holders, and solution-providers – willing and able to engage in complex international governance spaces when adequately supported. ICSF’s engagement across 43 events and 12 distinct spaces in Belém – spanning the People’s Summit, the Green Zone, the Blue Zone, and parallel civil society arenas – made it possible to track these processes in real time, support strategic coordination, and strengthen the articulation between grassroots movements and global advocacy.

The experience reinforced a lesson the SSF sector has long known: being present matters, but it must be sustained, politically informed, and connected to the organizing processes back in fishing communities themselves. COP30 offered a powerful moment. What comes next depends on whether governments, institutions, and funders will honour the demands placed before them – or leave fisher peoples, once again, to navigate uncertain waters alone. 

For more



COP30 – the 30th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – was held in Belém, Brazil, from 10 – 22 November 2025

<https://unfccc.int/cop30>

Participation of small-scale fisheries (SSF) delegations in COP30, Belém, Brazil by Henrique Kefalas

<https://icsf.net/resources/participation-of-small-scale-fisheries-ssf-delegations-in-cop30-belem-brazil-by-henrique-kefalas/>

WFFP Climate Crises and Fisher Peoples report

<https://wffp-web.org/climate-crisis-and-struggles-of-fisher-peoples-report/>

At the Confluence

How a bottom-up preparatory process is building momentum for an active SSF-GSF and stronger engagement at COFI

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The Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF) Summit was initiated by the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty Working Group on Fisheries (IPCFWG) – comprised of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF), World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), and La Via Campesina (LVC) – as a space of convergence and solidarity-building among fisherfolks united around the concrete implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines), and pushing for governments to take accountability in this process.

The SSF Summit journey began in 2022 during the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA). After two years of pandemic-induced isolation, 145 delegates from 47 countries united to celebrate small-scale fisheries, share challenges and priorities, and take stock of SSF Guidelines implementation globally. The first SSF Summit, which was organized at the Città dell'Altra Economia in Rome by the IPCFWG, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Small-Scale Fisheries Hub (SSF Hub), included an IPCFWG-hosted event focusing on 'Peasants of the Oceans and Inland Water Bodies', and two additional days in which the IPCFWG invited other SSF actors engaged in implementing the SSF Guidelines. The IPCFWG also launched the first international report on the People Centred assessment of the Implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries. This report reclaimed the power of qualitative evidence, enabling SSF and Indigenous Peoples to monitor and assess the

implementation of the SSF Guidelines based on their lived experiences and daily realities.

In 2024, the second SSF Summit, marking the 10th anniversary of the endorsement of the SSF Guidelines, expanded to more than 300 participants from over 60 countries. This Summit was hosted inside FAO Headquarters in Rome, and co-organized by the IPCFWG, FAO, SSF Hub and SwedBio, with a focus on confronting Blue Economy narratives that often mask ocean grabbing and the expropriation of fisher peoples' ancestral territories. Representatives from SSF organizations and communities shared examples of how they are defending their customary tenure rights and demanding appropriate social development measures for fisher peoples, with a particular attention to gender justice for the women who are the backbone of fishing communities.

As we prepare for the third SSF Summit in September 2026 (running from September 4-6), one of the primary tasks is to create a more direct link with the priorities of FAO's Committee on Fisheries (COFI), and ensure that the voices of those who account for 90 percent of fisheries employment and provide 40 percent of fish catch globally are strongly present in COFI's 37th session (from September 7-11) immediately following the summit.

Framing SSF Summit III

The third SSF Summit – co-organized by the IPCFWG, FAO, ICSF, SwedBio and the SSF-GSF ad interim Secretariat, which together comprise the 2026 Organizing Committee – offers a multi-actor space focused on the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. Its objectives include: the reactivation of the Global Strategic Framework in support of the

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CHRISTIAN MANTUANO



SSF Summit I (2022) brought together over 100 participants, mostly SSF representatives, from 41 countries to learn from each other in Rome

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implementation of the SSF Guidelines (SSF-GSF); collective preparation and strategic engagement in COFI; and taking stock of, and accelerating, concrete approaches to implementing the SSF Guidelines.

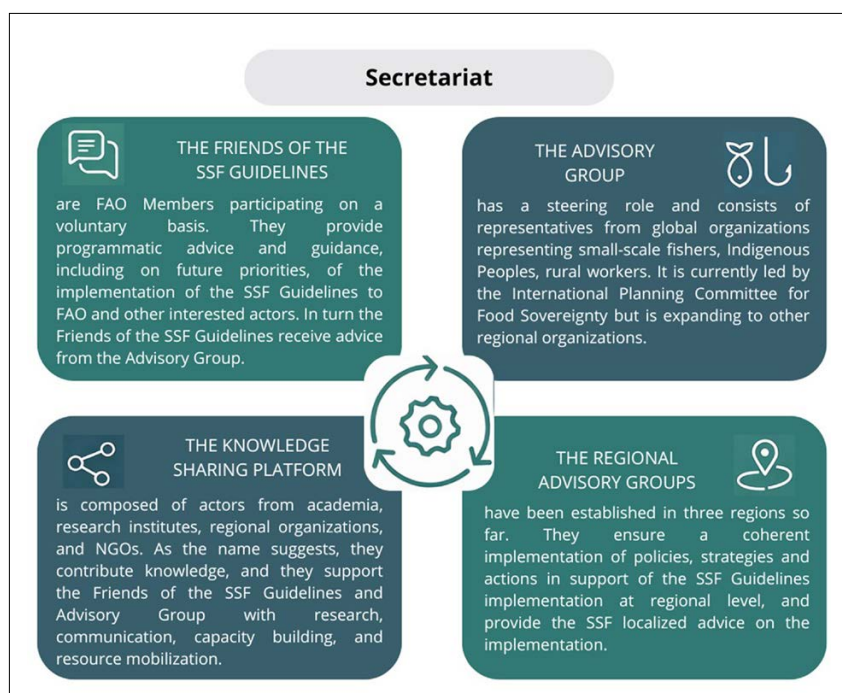
The first day (September 4) will be exclusively for representatives from SSF organizations and communities. The morning session will provide space for transnational SSF movements to present their struggles, priorities and strategies. Attention will be given to the SSF-GSF and its crucial role in coordinating the implementation of the SSF Guidelines at the global level. In the afternoon session, movements will share their positions on specific COFI agenda items, converging on common messages when possible. The second day will include discussions on regional processes, led by the SSF-GSF Regional Advisory Groups, and entry-points for the regional implementation of the SSF Guidelines; as well as on the Knowledge Sharing Platform (KSP), which is the space for NGOs and researchers to engage in the SSF-GSF. The third and final day will focus on taking stock of, and gathering recommendations

for accelerating, SSF Guidelines implementation, particularly through dialogues between SSF actors and governments.

Participatory consultations with SSF organizations

The agenda for the third SSF Summit was set primarily through consultation with SSF actors. In August 2025, the IPCFWG set the 'political vision' for this summit – meaning, it identified key objectives and thematic areas to frame the discussion. The Summit Organizing Committee then identified global and regional SSF and Indigenous Peoples movements that had participated in the second SSF Summit and could contribute to developing the 2026 agenda. In September, the identified movements were invited to two rounds of bilateral consultations, coordinated by the SSF-GSF ad interim Secretariat and the IPCFWG Facilitator, to discuss and give inputs on the zero draft of the agenda.

In addition to the IPCFWG's four global movements (WFF, WFFP, IITC, LVC), the consultations included: Community-Based Fisheries Dialogue's Advisory



Source: <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/beba9187-0bcf-4f79-a8ab-dfe12e9982c7/content>

concerns with the slow pace of the SSF Guidelines implementation process, and proposed using the SSF Summit as a space to strengthen coordination among the actors involved, which in turn could accelerate the process. Many referred directly to taking stock of and reviewing National Plans of Action for Small-Scale Fisheries (NPOAs-SSF) – part of an FAO programme providing guidance to countries on how to develop and implement the SSF Guidelines at national and local levels. However, other movement leaders highlighted that many countries implement fisheries legislation or policies that address the core principles of the SSF Guidelines, without being formally connected to the FAO programme, highlighting the necessity for the SSF Summit to also cover other approaches to implementation in addition to formal NPOAs.

Reflecting again on the need for unity, many movements expressed their willingness to share advocacy positions and look for commonalities with each other. In particular, it was deemed important to produce some common statements for COFI – presenting a united voice with regards to some of the COFI agenda items. In this sense, the SSF Summit will provide space for common SSF priorities to emerge. One movement leader summarised this perfectly: “We need to have the possibility to listen to one another and harmonise our positions.”

Finally, the consultations confirmed that the SSF Summit is a crucial space for SSF movements to interact with governments that prioritise SSF needs. This is further foregrounded in the SSF-GSF, where governments known as ‘Friends of the Guidelines’ are provided with a space to coordinate their efforts. Engaging with governments is a key priority for SSF movements, as one fisher highlighted: “The priority for the summit is that we must be heard by our governments!” For this reason, all movements were happy to dedicate an entire day to discussions with governments, and their role in advancing the SSF Guidelines and protecting SSF rights, while also providing a space for SSF representatives to share their concerns and recommendations with them.

Group (CBFD AG) from the Pacific; Latin American Union of Artisanal Fisheries (ULAPA); the African Confederation of Professional Organizations of Artisanal Fisheries (CAOPA); African Women Fish Processors and Traders Network (AWFISHNET); Low-Impact Fisheries of Europe (LIFE); Pan African Platform of Non-State Actors in Fisheries and Aquaculture (AFRIFISH-Net); as well as the Regional Advisory Groups of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean – the regional SSF actors’ components of the SSF-GSF.

These consultations ran from September to December 2025, and resulted in the first draft of the Summit agenda. A key priority that emerged from these consultations was the SSF movements’ intention to strive for unity and solidarity between them. As one movement leader said, “If we divide, we will lose. We need to stand united.” The spotlight on the SSF-GSF reflects this goal: movements expressed the need to have a governance space dedicated to the SSF Guidelines implementation, where dialogue with diverse actors – including governments, NGOs and researchers – is possible and collective strategies can be developed.

Through the consultations, many movement leaders also expressed

Preparatory discussions with NGOs and researchers

Following the consultations with SSF organizations, discussions were also organized with researchers and support NGOs working closely with small-scale fishers around the world. These meetings were facilitated by ICSF and SwedBio, as representatives of the Summit's Organizing Committee, and were held online with selected researchers in December 2025, and NGO representatives in January 2026. Those invited to the meetings were selected from among those who had submitted an expression of interest to participate in the SSF Summit. Some of the invitees had also been expressly identified by SSF actors who work closely with them, and requested that they participate in the summit.

In both meetings, the participants were provided with an update of the SSF Summit organization process, including an overview of the SSF actors consultations; they discussed the draft agenda that had been developed by the SSF actors; and brainstormed about how researchers and NGOs could best contribute to the SSF Summit process. The sessions were very interactive, and participants were enthusiastic about how to best engage with the summit process in a way that supported the key requests and priorities of the SSF actors.

In the researchers' meeting, key points of discussion included: how researchers could support SSF actors to prepare for the COFI, including providing analysis on the COFI papers; carrying out case studies on priorities for SSF communities that could support advocacy work; supporting SSF organizations in understanding relevant fisheries processes at national, regional and international levels; co-producing analyses on the SSF Summit from different perspectives in collaboration with SSF actors (e.g. linking to Blue Economy); and being responsible for notetaking and preparing reports on the summit discussions.

In the NGOs meeting, key points of discussion included: the need to provide fishers with appropriate tools through continuous capacity-building efforts to be carried out prior to the

SSF Summit and COFI to ensure SSF actors can participate in international spaces in an informed and effective way; the importance of having regular engagement with governments to ensure they understand the importance of the SSF Guidelines and commit to prioritising its implementation within national fisheries policies; working with governments to identify their own capacity gaps in concrete implementation and finding effective ways to address these gaps; and ensuring that NGOs supporting fishers are doing so in a respectful and just manner, through equations built upon a foundation of mutual trust.

From SSF Summit III to an active SSF-GSF

As the third SSF Summit draws nearer, the preparatory process with the diverse actors involved continues, with further consultative meetings being planned for June, July and August. This interactive bottom-up process has been central to ensuring that this summit continues to build upon the two previous editions, while also developing new approaches to ensure concrete outcomes for fishing communities themselves. This means truly making the SSF Summit an ongoing participatory process, and not just a biennial event, by ensuring proper preparation with participants, building an agenda that reflects the main priorities of SSF actors, and following up on the outcomes of the summits in the interim periods between editions. The reactivation of the SSF-GSF will be central to this – as the only international framework endorsed by COFI Members – that brings together SSF actors, governments, FAO, NGOs and researchers to regularly coordinate and collaborate on the concrete implementation of the SSF Guidelines. Emerging from SSF Summit III with an active and energised SSF-GSF will allow all actors involved in this mechanism to maintain momentum between SSF Summits, and ensure that we can collectively achieve real, long-term change in small-scale fishing communities around the world. 

For more



SSF-GSF

<https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/51a81d70-3d34-4d6f-86a0-461d7e1e7156>

People Centred assessment of the Implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries:

<https://www.foodsovereignty.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/IPC-report-FWG-EN.pdf>

Regional Advisory Groups:

<https://www.foodsovereignty.org/working-group/ssf-regional/>

The 3rd Small-Scale Fisheries Summit (SSF Summit 2026)

<https://www.fao.org/voluntary-guidelines-small-scale-fisheries/home/ssf-summit/2026/en>

Paper Promises, Rising Seas

When will Ghanaian fishers finally get a seat at the decision-making table?

In 2014, when FAO member-states endorsed the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines), an optimistic spirit filled the air. Many fishers looked forward to meaningfully participating in the decision-making process that impacts their lives and livelihoods. However, a decade since its adoption, scepticism

weak governance structures, high post-harvest losses, limited access to financial services, market exploitation, occupational safety risks and restricted participation in the decision-making process. Many fishery-dependent households say their very survival is at stake.

It is against this fraught backdrop that a three-day capacity building workshop for “empowering SSF stakeholders for inclusive policy engagement and sustainable development” was convened in Accra in November 2025. It brought together a diverse group of fishers, fish processors and traders, civil society actors, academics and government representatives.

The workshop sought to address a grievance consistently expressed by fishers: how they are often sidelined in the decision-making process, and only invited at the “validation” stage when key decisions have already been made

and wariness appear to have replaced optimism. Mamaga, an elderly fish processor in Ghana’s Volta Region who participated in the zero-draft discussion of the SSF Guidelines lamented that there has been “much talk and little action”. Her view expresses the sentiments of many fishers.

Advocates of SSF rights increasingly argue that the challenges faced by fishers have not received the serious attention they deserve due to the lack of political will. This underscores a familiar criticism: as long as the SSF Guidelines remain voluntary, implementation will depend more on national commitment than on legal obligation. And with African governments confronted with rapidly evolving and often unpredictable socio-economic and political contexts, small-scale fisheries are simply not a priority.

If the voices of fishers are any indication (and they are), their situation is getting worse. The vast majority of small-scale fishers face persistent challenges: declining fish stocks, climate change impacts,

Changing tack

Since 2018, Technical Services for Community Development (TESCOD) has organized a number of local-level and national workshops on the implementation of the SSF Guidelines in Ghana. The 2025 workshop was the fourth such national event. From the workshops, a consistent pattern of grievance has emerged: fishers complain that they are often sidelined in the decision-making process, and only invited at the “validation” stage when key decisions have already been made. This leaves them with a dilemma: either accept an outcome they had little role in shaping or decline participation altogether knowing they cannot influence anything more than cosmetic changes if they have reservations.

It was in this respect that the 2025 workshop sought to be different. It was strongly oriented towards practical know-how, equipping participants with the tools and strategies needed to engage more effectively in national policy spaces.

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Participants at the workshop for empowering SSF stakeholders for inclusive policy engagement and sustainable development, 11-13 November 2025, Erata Hotel, Accra, Ghana

Participants speak out

The workshop began on a note of solidarity and hope. In the keynote address, Dr. Eric Cobbinah of the Fisheries Commission (FC) noted that concrete measures are being taken to address existing challenges and emerging threats in the sector. 'These include the expansion of the artisanal fishing grounds (IEZ) from 6 to 12 nautical miles, and appointment of a Special Advisor on Indigenous Knowledge to guide the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture (MoFA) on SSF practices. He called for the strengthening of the sector through policy support, investment and community empowerment.

Discussions across the three days revealed a sector under pressure on multiple fronts. Participants highlighted persistent structural challenges, including weak infrastructure – in particular, the lack of improvements in fish processing facilities, which leads to significant post-harvest losses. Environmental degradation emerged as another critical concern. Activities such as sand

winning, illegal mining and mangrove destruction are destroying vital fish breeding grounds and exposing coastal and inland communities to severe tidal waves and increased climate vulnerability.

Despite existing regulations, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing continues to undermine the sustainability of fish stocks. Participants noted that inconsistent and weak enforcement has allowed industrial trawlers to encroach on artisanal fishing grounds, depriving small-scale fishers of income and threatening their livelihoods. Equally pressing are the social dimensions of vulnerability, characterised by high rates of youth disengagement, low school enrolment, and hazardous working conditions especially in inland fishing communities, highlighting a deepening social crisis.

At the heart of these issues lies the decision-making gap. Policies are often designed using a top-down approach. As one workshop participant noted, "We are asked to implement policies we did not help to create from the outset."

Bridging policy and practice

A central focus of the workshop was demystifying Ghana's policymaking process and equipping participants with the tools to engage more effectively. Prof. F.K.E Nunoo, a former Chief Director of MOFA and Chair of the FC Board provided a detailed overview of how policies are developed: from problem identification and data gathering through to drafting, validation, implementation and monitoring.

Prof. Nunoo drove home a clear and powerful message: meaningful engagement requires more than being merely present at meetings; it requires strategic influence. To achieve this, he encouraged participants to adopt evidence-based advocacy, combining lived experiences with credible data to strengthen their influence. While

Participants acknowledged significant barriers to advocacy, including fear of authority, lack of unity among competing SSF organizations, and limited access to accurate information

traditional and experiential knowledge remains invaluable, combining them with formal data methodologies increases legitimacy in policy spaces. SSF leaders also recognised the need to strengthen their organizational structures to ensure sustained engagement and continuity rather than depending on a few individuals as has often been the case.

The importance of respecting institutional protocols also emerged as a key lesson. In order for fishers' voices to reach the right desks, engagement with government agencies such as MOFA and FC must follow established channels. They called for a more inclusive framework that recognises diverse forms of knowledge. At the same time, participants challenged the limitations of existing policy engagement systems, particularly the frequent dismissal of community-generated data.

Advocacy, Communication and Power

The workshop placed strong emphasis on building advocacy and

communication skills, recognising that many SSF actors struggle to articulate their concerns in ways that resonate with policymakers. Dr. Aurelia Ayisi of the University of Ghana introduced participants to structured advocacy approaches, including how to identify priorities, map stakeholders and craft clear and compelling messages. A particularly impactful exercise involved mapping power and influence within communities and government structures. This revealed the complexity of local governance systems where traditional authorities, elected officials, and state institutions all play overlapping roles.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial. As Dr. Ayisi emphasised, engaging the wrong actor or bypassing established hierarchies can delay action or derail initiatives altogether. The concept of "best fit" emerged as a guiding principle, encouraging participants to adapt their strategies to specific contexts rather than relying on generic "best practices."

A major highlight was the focus on storytelling, a powerful but underutilised tool. Participants agreed that personal narratives grounded in lived experience can humanise policy issues and make them more tangible for decision-makers. However, they also acknowledged significant barriers to advocacy, including fear of authority, lack of unity among competing SSF organizations, and limited access to accurate information. These challenges, they noted, can only be overcome through both capacity-building and a shift in mindset – from passive recipients of policy to active agents of change.

Human Rights at the core

A defining feature of the workshop was its strong emphasis on the human rights-based approach (HRBA) to fisheries governance. The sessions highlighted how this approach recognises fishers not merely as economic actors, but as rightsholders entitled to participation, livelihood, dignity and non-discrimination. Discussions revealed that although Ghana's constitution guarantees these rights, their application in SSF is often



Group photo at the workshop for empowering SSF stakeholders for inclusive policy engagement and sustainable development

seen as discretionary rather than mandatory.

Participants explored how HRBA could transform governance by shifting the focus away from promises, assurances and handouts towards enforceable rights. These include recognising tenure through legislation, ensuring equitable access to resources, and addressing gender inequality. The workshop also examined complex debates surrounding issues such as child labour and trafficking (CLaT) and the socio-cultural realities of fishing communities. Participants called for clearer definitions and more context-sensitive enforcement of laws, particularly in inland fishing communities where misunderstandings can lead to arbitrary arrests.

Gender Justice and Social Inclusion

Truly inclusive governance requires a seat at the table for all stakeholders, including women, youth and marginalised groups whose contributions are often forgotten in

the shadows. The workshop provided a platform to examine these dynamics in depth, revealing both challenges and opportunities.

Women play a central role in fish processing and trade, but continue to face significant barriers, including limited access to credit, technology and decision-making spaces. While some progress has been made by organizations such as the Development Action Association (DAA) and the Central and Western Fishmongers Association (CEWEFIA) through savings groups and value addition initiatives, structural inequalities persist across the sector.

Youth on the other hand are increasingly disengaged, with many perceiving fisheries as a last resort rather than a viable career path. This is compounded by weak organization among youth actors within the value chain and limited opportunities for meaningful participation in governance. Addressing this gap requires not only dialogue, but also

deliberate efforts to include youth perspectives in policy processes. Participants called for targeted interventions to address the specific needs of women and youth, including tailored education programmes, improved access to finance and deliberate inclusion of marginalised voices in decision-making.

From guidelines to action

A recurring theme throughout the workshop was the need to translate the SSF Guidelines into local realities. While the guidelines provide a comprehensive blueprint for inclusive and sustainable governance, their impact depends on how effectively they are integrated into national policies and community practices. To this end, participants examined the current state of integration in Ghana, identifying gaps in coherence, implementation,

thematic areas: governance and policy coherence, capacity building and awareness and gender and social inclusion. The key actions identified included strengthening participatory processes, enhancing communication and feedback mechanisms, building organizational capacity, and promoting continuous training on governance and rights. Addressing social issues such as child labour, unsafe working conditions, and youth unemployment was also identified as a priority.

Equally important is the need for stronger partnerships. Effective governance requires collaboration among governance agencies, civil society, academia, and fishing communities. Resource mobilisation, both financial and technical, will be essential to sustain these efforts.

The workshop concluded with a strong sense of commitment. Prof. Benjamin Campion of the FC and Mr. Ishmael Adjei Browne of MoFA expressed willingness to collaborate with fishworker organizations and civil society in advancing integration of the SSF Guidelines. Facilitators and participants ended the workshop with a shared resolve to advance equitable, human rights-based and sustainable fisheries governance in Ghana.

Participants called for a clear roadmap to guide the SSF Guidelines implementation process, including mechanisms for stakeholder participation, monitoring and accountability

and awareness. Although some elements are reflected in existing policies, many remain fragmented or poorly understood at the community level. Strengthening this integration requires a multi-level approach. At the national level, they must be translated into accessible formats and embedded in local governance systems.

Participants also called for a clear roadmap to guide this process, including mechanisms for stakeholder participation, monitoring and accountability. The proposed development of a national plan of action for SSF (NPOA-SSF) was welcomed as a critical step in this direction.

Collective action and the way forward

One of the most significant outcomes of the workshop was the development of a shared action framework. Through group work and cross-learning, participants identified common priorities across three

Next steps

The workshop was a vital intervention for a sector that feeds millions, but largely remains excluded from the decision-making process. It made one thing clear: meaningful participation cannot remain a paper promise. If the SSF Guidelines are to make a real difference, fishers must move from the margins of consultation to the centre of decision-making. Government, fishing communities, civil society, academia and the media must now turn dialogue into action by strengthening participatory governance, empowering small-scale fishers and ensuring accountability at every level. The future of small-scale fisheries in Ghana depends not only on better policies, but on whether fishers themselves are given a seat at the table.

For more

Building Capacity with Small-Scale Fishworkers: Knowledge, Skills and Leadership: Project

<https://icsf.net/resources/icsf-project-building-capacity-with-small-scale-fishworkers-knowledge-skills-and-leadership/>

Report on the capacity-building workshops for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines and empowering SSF stakeholders in Ghana, Costa Rica & The Philippines

<https://icsf.net/resources/report-on-the-capacity-building-workshops-costa-rica-ghana-philippines/>

Report of the Africa Regional Workshop IYafa: Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-scale Fisheries, 15–18 February 2023, Accra, Ghana

<https://icsf.net/resources/africa-iyafa-report-icsf-2023/>

The Peer-to-Peer Network

A workshop for SSF communities to exchange ideas, build collective capacity, solidarity and leadership to advance rights-based actions for the future of Costa Rica's small-scale fisheries

From November 17 to 21, 2025, a workshop was held in Costa Rica to strengthen the capacities of fishers from the Network of Responsible Marine Fishing Areas and Marine Territories of Life (Red de Áreas de Pesca Responsable y Territorios Marinos de Vida). The workshop focused on small-scale fisheries and explored conservation efforts that respect a human rights-based approach (HRBA). As well, it emphasised capacity-building, sharing knowledge and expertise that will enable fisher representatives from the Network to meaningfully participate at global processes on marine conservation in a just and equitable manner.

The workshop, organized by CoopeSoliDar R.L. with the support of ICSF, brought together more than 40 representatives from 18 communities that form part of the Network of Responsible Marine Fishing Areas and Marine Territories of Costa Rica. They were joined by delegates from the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), the Latin American Union of Artisanal Fishers (ULAPA), the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF), and the Consortium of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Conserved Territories and Areas (ICCA).

As Don Jesús Chaves, a fisher and representative of the Network's Coordination Committee at the time, noted in the welcome address, the workshop was intended as a space "where ideas prevail for the benefit of the common good". Encouraging the participants to brainstorm, in "maximum harmony", solutions to pressing concerns and challenges facing the SSF subsector, he said, "In the Network, we are a great organization ready to work for coastal communities. The Network is strengthened by community leaders. We know the small-scale fisheries sector has

experienced many historical injustices: access to territory, access to marine space, and others. However, the only way to overcome this is by standing all united. I am convinced that we can move forward. We have achieved many benefits for the sector."

The main objective of the meeting was to strengthen knowledge, capacities, and alliances around the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines). These guidelines were endorsed by the Government of Costa Rica in 2014 and incorporated

The SSF Guidelines were endorsed by the Government of Costa Rica in 2014, and incorporated into national policy through Executive Decree No. 39195

into national policy through Executive Decree No. 39195, serving as a key tool for promoting HRBA-guided efforts geared towards fostering equity, and sustainability in small-scale fisheries. Participants addressed topics related to biodiversity conservation, the Blue Economy, climate change, gender, youth, governance, and marine spatial planning. They also shared emblematic experiences of fisher communities from the various represented countries, including Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama, Mexico, and Ecuador.

The programme included a technical visit to the National Food Supply and Distribution Center (CENADA), where participants learned about value-added processes, waste management, and the sanitation of seafood products. It also featured analytical spaces focused on the role

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of the guidelines in public policies, national regulations, and regional and international advocacy. Based on the visit to CENADA, the participants formulated the following proposals, emphasising the need to:

- Create internal fair pricing agreements for marine products commercialised among members of the Network
- Boost community sales spaces with institutional support, while prioritising those who practice responsible fishing
- Strengthen knowledge on vulnerable species and conservation practices, especially among traders who do not come from the fisheries sector
- Promote accessible formalisation mechanisms, reducing costs and simplifying processes for artisanal fishers

Concerns and challenges

The workshop brought together communities from the Costa Rican Pacific and Caribbean coasts, for whom small-scale fishing is a way of life, and where Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendant populations depend on the use of marine resources. In Costa Rica, there are approximately 15,000 people who make a living from small-scale fisheries. As Kembly Mora, a fisher representing ASOPAR from El Jobo in Guanacaste province on Costa Rica's North Pacific coast, said, "Over in El Jobo, 80 percent of activities are not just fishing, but many hotels have closed and because of that, everyone returned to the sea, especially the youth. I come from a fishing family; we are fishers, fighters. We live in Bahía Santa Elena and I have been the founder of a women's association since 2008. Some people say you cannot live off fishing, but it does work; we harvest octopus and lobster."

Over three days of discussions, the fisher representatives analysed progress and challenges in implementing the SSF Guidelines. They discussed the impact of international policies such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and their respective agreements

regarding small-scale fisheries. They also debated the importance of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) and the upcoming SSF Summit III to be held in Rome prior to COFI³⁷.

The fishers emphasised the serious situations facing their communities regarding gentrification, the lack of land tenure security, and the lack of fair access to the sea, which is their source of livelihood and tied to their way of life. In Costa Rica, eight out of 10 fishers (not counting women fishers) do not have a fishing license, meaning they are forced to conduct their work informally, which carries serious and unjust implications in terms of the social protections net they are afforded – and which in many cases leads to the criminalisation of their work when they come up against conservation and coastal development projects.

Pamela Méndez, from the Responsible Fishing Marine Area of Dominicalito, highlighted the problem of gentrification occurring in her community. "Right now, our community has suffered major changes due to the purchase of land by foreigners. We have people who have been removed from their lands by a project that is 70 percent foreign-owned, where they sell houses – with the cheapest option currently priced at USD 300,000," she said.

Next steps for the Network

Among the main agreements reached for the Network's roadmap for ongoing work, the following stand out, regarding the need to:

- Continue pushing for the approval of Bill No. 24.626, currently convened for ordinary sessions in the Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica
- Provide continuity to Executive Decree 42.955, the "12 Oars Model" (Modelo 12 Remos), and above all, emphasise the urgent need for its implementation
- Strengthen youth leadership and territorial representation, promoting the continuity of capacity-building activities

The pressing questions of generation turnover and the need for formalisation to avoid institutional infringement of fishers' rights were issues highlighted



Group photo at the Workshop on Capacity Building for the Implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Small-Scale Fisheries and the Participation and Influence of the Sector in the Context of International Policies for The Conservation and Sustainable Use of the Oceans, November 18 to 21, 2025 in Puerto Jiménez, Costa Rica

by Don Ronald Villarreal, a fisher from Puntarenas. “I represent the Marinos de San Luis; we have 200 members, but our organization has declined a bit. Our fisheries are coming to an end: 80 percent of our fishers are older adults,” he noted. Offering an example to illustrate the arbitrary nature of “institutional persecution” affecting his community, Villareal added, “We go out to fish today, and tomorrow there is a buoy alerting us that the area is prohibited for fishing.”

Don Jesús Chaves explained the situation faced by his community in Barra del Colorado, as fishing grounds narrow due to being caught between a national park, a marine management area, and a wildlife refuge. “There are marine areas of responsible fishing that are small spaces where fisher communities have had to fight to ensure the fishing activity survives. In Barra del Colorado, we are surrounded by protected areas,” he said, adding that this was “why we need Bill No. 24.626 to be approved to save small-scale fisheries”.

“The Network is what unites all representatives so we can fight together for our rights. The Network is a free-entry and free-exit structure;

what matters is to stand united, with information, with knowledge, united towards the same goal,” Chaves said.

As to the pathway to build capacity for the future, the participants mentioned the need to have:

- **Greater knowledge of the ssf Guidelines:** to strengthen the understanding and application of this international instrument
- **Practical knowledge of fishing communities:** through site visits that allow observing local realities
- **Fisheries management course:** with special interest in training regarding the handling of fisheries products and their fair and equitable commercialisation
- **More access to regulations and international forums:** such as the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC, the Conference of the Parties to the CBD, and COFI, among other processes of importance to the sector

From words to actions

The workshop concluded by reaffirming the collective commitment to the defense of small-scale fisheries’ marine territories of life, the country’s food security, and the necessary and urgent need for HRBA-guided initiatives

COOPESOLIDAR R.L.



During discussions, fishers emphasised threats from gentrification, lack of land tenure security, and the lack of fair access to the sea

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Report on the capacity-building workshops for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines and empowering SSF stakeholders in Ghana, Costa Rica & The Philippines

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Report on Latin American and Caribbean Workshop – IYafa 2022: Celebrating Sustainable and Equitable Small-scale Fisheries, 2-5 November 2022, Brazil

<https://icsf.net/resources/report-on-latin-american-and-caribbean-workshop-iyafa-2022-english/>

Social Development and Sustainable Fisheries: Costa Rica by CoopeSoliDar R.L.

<https://icsf.net/resources/icsfs-social-development-costa-rica/>

for small-scale fisheries within marine conservation. David Chacón, a fisher from CoopeTárcoles R.L., noted how fishers currently “don’t have the right to have rights”. “We cannot think about rights if fishers don’t even have their licenses,” he said.

“Within CoopeTárcoles R.L., we have fought collectively. We were part of a Confederation that did not work because it lacked the flexibility of the Network, where we have been since 2014 and where the interests of small-scale fishers are represented,” Chacón said. “Now, we are also in the Latin American Union of Artisanal Fisheries (ULAPA). The Network is linking itself to other international networks.”

The importance of complying with the current instruments and regulations pertinent to the SSF subsector was recognised, but it was understood that the most important priority was to ensure efforts are made to strengthen the organizational base and political advocacy capacity towards the pursuit of rights within a framework of equity, justice, and food security. During the workshop, there was consensus about how marine conservation needs to respect agreements and ensure free,

prior, and informed consent, inclusion, and equity in territorial management efforts and action plans. As well, participants recognised the need for urgent application of the SSF Guidelines, the SSF Call to Action, and the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries. The road ahead is not simply a matter of rights; it is about safeguarding collective care in the territory, the defense of identity, and preserving cultural relationships. The prospects for success depend on the communities and the decisions taken to sustain our organizations as a collective.

The workshop’s evaluation process revealed how: the exchange of experiences and knowledge among communities; the acquisition of new technical skills that contribute to their daily work; the opportunity to be heard by Members of Parliament; the collaborative environment; and the strengthening of alliances, were the aspects most highly valued by the participants. As the workshop wound down, there was an atmosphere of enthusiasm and satisfaction with the fishers expressing gratitude to ICSF and CoopeSoliDar R.L. for the experience and opportunity.

The Upwelling Wind

Fishers are bringing the NPOA-SSF to life through local leadership, collective ownership and community action

Over a decade removed from the adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines, 2014), the Philippine small-scale fisheries (SSF) subsector stands at a critical juncture. The creation of the SSF Guidelines involved about 4,000 stakeholders from civil society groups in 120 countries in the UN FAO-led process to ensure that the voices, concerns and rights of actual fishers and fishworkers were embedded in the final document. Following the endorsement of the SSF Guidelines, The Philippines became in 2024 the first country in Asia to develop a National Plan of Action for Small-Scale Fisheries (NPOA-SSF). The NPOA-SSF, rooted in the SSF Guidelines, has evolved into a national instrument designed to address the specific vulnerabilities and aspirations of the country's small-scale fisheries.

In November 2025, a capacity-building workshop organized by Tambuyog Development Center, Inc. (Tambuyog), with the support of ICSF, signalled a momentous shift in sectoral governance strategy: rather than waiting for top-down directives, fisherfolk networks and local stakeholders resolved to take ownership of the NPOA-SSF to ensure it becomes a living document that genuinely serves fisherfolk communities.

Alternative pathways

Translating strategic ownership of a process into practice necessitates navigating the complex governance and socio-economic realities of the Philippine SSF subsector. The implementation of the NPOA-SSF occurs within a complex governance landscape. Consistent with the Constitution of the Philippines and the Local Government Code of 1991, the country's governance structure

is defined by decentralisation and devolution of powers. The municipal waters, where the SSF primarily find themselves, belong in the domain of local governance. Consistent with these legislations, the implementation of national plans and policies in relation to SSF will take place at the local level. Therefore, national fisheries laws, regulations and programmes need to be harmonised with local legislations and programmes.

The Philippine NPOA-SSF is a plan under the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), yet its success depends on its integration into municipal development and local mechanisms for implementation.

Fisherfolk networks and local stakeholders resolved to take ownership of the Philippine NPOA-SSF to ensure it becomes a living document that genuinely serves communities

Though a landmark achievement, the NPOA-SSF is still just a plan that is incomparable to a legislation that has internal mechanisms for sourcing funding for implementation. The BFAR's efforts to align its existing funded programme of work with the thematic concerns of the NPOA-SSF remain limited in addressing the challenges faced by fisherfolk communities. Therefore, the involvement of the local government units (LGUs) and inland and coastal communities is critical for the effective implementation of the plan.

Taking ownership of the NPOA-SSF's spirit and intent

Although the process of developing the plan involved SSF stakeholders in identifying issues and challenges, for many fisher communities, the NPOA-SSF is still the plan of the national government. Additionally, as a technical

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document drafted in the language of the BFAR, the proposed solutions fail to resonate with the coastal communities who directly experience the issues and challenges facing the subsector. As a national-level plan, the document does not fully reflect the priorities of the different inland and coastal communities that are facing similar, but varying, challenges on the ground. Nonetheless, as a plan that embodies the principles of the SSF Guidelines, the NPOA-SSF has the opportunity to gain both acceptance by fisherfolk and support for its intent to develop the SSF subsector in a manner that recognises the rights of fishers.

The *Katipunan ng mga Kilusan ng mga Artisanong Mangangisda sa Pilipinas (KKAMPI)*, the country's SSF coalition, identified priority challenges such as weak law enforcement, coastal vulnerabilities, and limited access to social protection as areas of work that the plan should address. Other specific actions identified by the coalition include: further developing and broadening the scope of parametric insurance; expanding both community-led FishR (fisherfolk registration system); deepening partnerships with LGUs on campaigns to ensure that social protection and government aid reach intended beneficiaries; lobbying for permanent fisheries units and dedicated support for *Bantay Dagat* (community-based fish wardens) to strengthen local-level law enforcement; and integrating the traditional ecological knowledge of fisherfolk into formal decision-making processes for fisheries management.

This prioritisation at the local level is not reflected in the national plan, which led the KKAMPI to develop their own localised versions of the plan's target objectives, activities and strategies that highlight these priority issues and actions. This contextual adaptation is vital, but as the participants in the recent capacity-building workshop noted, the NPOA-SSF is a lengthy and complex document that can be difficult to communicate to the average fisher. Therefore, the ongoing work is one of translation – not just of language, but of intent as well – in a manner that leads to actionable programmes that take into account the context of each inland and coastal community.

As part of the process of taking ownership of the NPOA-SSF, stakeholders must also look beyond the technical text and embrace its underlying spirit: the empowerment of fisherfolk as central actors in governance. Although the process of its development may not have been ideal – especially in the failure to include fishers beyond the consultation stage and into the drafting of solutions and writing the formal plan document, the spirit and intent of the development of the plan remains consistent with the aspirations of SSF communities. During the in-depth analysis of the NPOA-SSF documents, the sentiment among grassroots leaders was that the current NPOA-SSF, similar to other national plans, reflected the desires of the drafters rather than the lived realities of those at sea.

The workshop also emphasised empowerment as a critical complement of taking responsibility for the NPOA-SSF implementation. This involves moving fisherfolk from the periphery of simply recommending policies to being an integral part of the decision-making process alongside government agencies. This shift in ownership is fueled by the realisation that if fisherfolk do not claim the plan as their own, it risks becoming another unenforced policy. The KKAMPI, with support from Tambuyog, has already begun leading the coalition to secure this direct role in monitoring and implementation through its plans to lead the localisation of the NPOA-SSF in select pilot sites. However, ownership also mandates accountability. Taking ownership of the plan requires that the fishers take accountability by helming its implementation.

Taking the lead in NPOA-SSF localisation

In the Philippine context, implementation of fisheries policies targeted towards SSF is heavily centered around the LGUs and the Municipal Fisheries Development Plans (MFDPs) as the primary legal instrument for fisheries development and regulation. The integration of the principles of the SSF Guidelines at this level effectively makes the targets under the SSF Guidelines binding. With KKAMPI's members pushing for the integration of a Localized Plan of Action for SSF

RONALD B. RODRIGUEZ



Participants of the Philippine NPOA-SSF Capacity Building Workshop, 26-28 November 2025, Manila, The Philippines

(LPOA-SSF), the priorities defined by the fisherfolk using the lens of the SSF Guidelines and following a human rights-based approach (HRBA) can be integrated into local legislation. This process is expected to be funded, implemented, and monitored and evaluated by the LGUs. Consistent with a decentralised governance model that promotes multi-stakeholder cooperation and direct participation of fisherfolk through the Municipal Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Councils (MFARMs), the fishers will be able to participate not just in the development of the policy, but also in its implementation and monitoring and evaluation. This localisation strategy can also leverage the Supreme Court's landmark 2018 Mandanas ruling, which increases the Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA) for LGUs, potentially securing the necessary funding for fisheries-specific initiatives.

The fisherfolk leaders from the workshop also emphasised that the success of the localisation process hinges on identifying new, unique, and innovative selling points for the NPOA-SSF and their LPOA-SSF to avoid the perception that it is just a repetition of old, failed policies. This involves distinguishing the NPOA-SSF's unique focus on social protection and fisherfolk rights from standard resource management activities.

Taking ownership by taking action

Taking ownership culminates in concrete action. The 2025 capacity-building workshop resulted in clear pledges of commitment and the identification of strategic next steps. These actions are designed to move

the sector beyond advocacy and into the realm of measurable impact. The harmonisation of MFDPs with the NPOA-SSF results in a localised plan of action for SSF and ensures that municipal budgets reflect the priorities of small-scale fishers. To further support this process and further engage the BFAR, KKAMPI and Tambuyog will push for reconvening or establishing a working group on implementation and monitoring and evaluation that includes SSF representatives.

The Philippine NPOA-SSF is no longer just a document sitting in a national office. The plan is becoming a localised movement led by the fisherfolk themselves. By taking ownership of its spirit and leading its localisation through integration of its content within the MFDPs, the SSF subsector is reclaiming its space and advancing Blue Justice. The path forward will continue to require a persistent and iterative process of negotiation and action to ensure that the intent of the plan is continuously translated into actions that advance a sustainable and dignified life for every Filipino fisher. Through the leadership of networks like KKAMPI, partnership with LGUs, and the support of agencies like BFAR, the NPOA-SSF process will be able to provide a roadmap for a future where SSF are not just participants, but leaders in their own development.

**This article is based on the Philippine National Plan of Action on Small-Scale Fisheries (NPOA-SSF) Capacity Building Session held in 26-28 November 2025 at Verjandel Hotel, 70 Kalayaan Ave, Diliman, Quezon City, 1101 Metro Manila*

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Milestone marker

FAO award recognises ICSF's contributions toward strengthening livelihoods, food security and sustainability across aquatic food systems

In 2025, ICSF was honoured by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) with a **Global Technical Recognition award in the area of Sustainable Aquatic Food Systems**. The Technical Recognition Ceremony was held at FAO headquarters on 15th October 2025, from 17:30 to 19:30 (CEST), in a hybrid format as part of FAO's 80th anniversary celebrations and the 2025 FAO World Food Forum.

Since its establishment in 1945, FAO has been at the forefront of global efforts to combat hunger and malnutrition. Recognising the critical role of aquatic foods in nourishing communities and sustaining livelihoods, the FAO Conference established the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) in 1965, making FAO the leading global forum for advancing sustainable aquatic food systems and strengthening their contribution to tackling hunger, malnutrition and poverty.

Achieving sustainable aquatic food systems, however, depends on the collective efforts of people and institutions around the world. To mark both its 80th anniversary and the 30th anniversary of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, FAO recognised several organizations and institutions, including ICSF, for effective practices and innovations that are contributing to the transformation of agrifood systems across six thematic areas.

Entities working across fisheries and aquaculture value chains were recognised under the thematic area 'Sustainable aquatic food systems'. In total, 46 organizations received recognition for their contributions to strengthening livelihoods, improving food and nutrition security, and promoting sustainability throughout aquatic value chains. Their work is also helping advance FAO's Blue Transformation initiative, which seeks to accelerate the transition towards more productive, sustainable and resilient fisheries and aquaculture in support of better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life.

Aligned with FAO's 'Four Betters' strategic framework – better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life – and reflecting the World Food Day theme, 'Hand in Hand for Better Foods and a Better Future', the recognitions celebrated technical leadership, collaboration and innovation in advancing the transformation of sustainable agrifood systems.

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Reeling in the Real

The 18th Fishers of the World Film Festival celebrated cinema that places fishing communities, ocean stewardship and humanity at the heart of the global conversation

The 18th edition of the Fishers of the World (Pêcheurs du monde) Film Festival was held in Lorient, France, from 17 to 29 March 2026. Nearly 3,000 spectators and visitors gathered to celebrate what are perhaps humanity's greatest gifts: the capacity to dream, to think freely, and to remain deeply connected to the living world of the sea. The 2026 film selection offered audiences an opportunity to encounter the ocean and the people who depend on it with respect and passion, while reflecting on the hopes and anxieties of our time.

In a first, the festival took to the road, travelling through 12 towns and ports across southern Brittany, where it was met with great enthusiasm all through the journey. Featuring 47 films, including 11 debut works, alongside debates and discussions, the festival continued to champion investigative cinema that challenges fake news and simplistic clichés. Films from more than 23 countries – including Iceland, Kiribati, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sardinia (Italy), Canada, Bolivia, Tunisia, India and, of course, the French coast – confirmed the festival's truly global character.

Alongside the screenings, audiences enjoyed performances, exhibitions, guided tours of the fishing port, and artistic activities in schools and at the university. Organized by an independent association, the festival has become an important space for public debate, offering hope for the future of both the ocean and the peoples who depend upon it.

Dignity, passion, future

The dignity of the women and men of the sea, the passion that defines their profession, and the future of an entire sector formed the guiding themes of this year's festival. How can we secure

the future of fishing communities while ensuring food security through fish protein, preserving the ocean's biodiversity, and adapting to climate change? The films invited audiences to confront these questions by immersing them in the lived realities of the women and men whose lives are shaped by the sea.

The strong presence of filmmakers – an indication of the festival's growing recognition within the profession – was greatly appreciated. So too was the participation of expert speakers, including the Vice-President of the Brittany Region, scientists from Brest and southern Brittany, fishers and

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representatives of fisheries committees, and leaders of organizations such as the Collectif Pêche et Développement, Espace des Sciences – Maison de la Mer (Lorient), and J'ai Vu Un Documentaire. Another highlight was the highly successful Forum of Young Fishers of the Future, which brought together students from three maritime secondary schools. The forum served as a reminder that the future of the oceans is inseparable from the future of the fishing professions that help feed the world.

Juries rooted in Cinema and the world of the Sea

The festival juries brought together distinguished figures from both the worlds of cinema and fisheries. The 'Professional Jury' was chaired by

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PÊCHEURS DU MONDE



The festival's juries

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Lise Blanchet, an acclaimed reporter for *Thalassas* and *Envoyé Spécial*. Its members included Patrick Daniel-Ramanarivo, an agronomist and fisheries engineer based in Madagascar; Gilles Toumelin, a skipper-fisher from Lorient; Alexia Vanhée, artistic delegate of the Jean Rouch International Film Festival in Paris; and Marie Dautzenberg, founder of the École de l'Exploration in Saint-Malo. The 'Youth Jury', chaired by Senegalese filmmaker Mamadou Khouma Gueye, was composed of secondary school students.

The 2026 Awards immerse us in humanity and the Ocean

The Professional Jury's 'Feature Film Award' went to *The Queen and the Smokehouse*, directed by Iga Lis. The film portrays a woman as she truly is within her working environment—a fish smokehouse in the heart of a popular Baltic seaside resort. Surrounded by her community, loved yet confronted by illness, she emerges through cinematic storytelling that gives her deeply personal story a universal dimension.

The Professional Jury's 'Short Film Award' was presented to *Acide Océan* (Acid Ocean) by Sébastien Thiébot. The film follows a scientist and father as he confronts the impacts of climate

disruption on the ocean. Moving between his laboratory and family life, it adopts a deeply human perspective that powerfully conveys the urgency of ocean acidification. It is a film that invites discussion well beyond screenings.

The Youth Jury's 'Feature Film Award' went to *Soren et Karvng en Eaux Libres* (Soren and Karvng in Open Waters) by Fanny Gadan. The film also received the 'Audience Award' and a 'Special Mention' from the Professional Jury. Closely following two teenagers whose shared passion is fishing, the documentary unfolds with remarkable intimacy on the quays of Le Havre, creating a work of quiet poetry.

The Professional Jury also awarded a 'Special Mention' to *32 ans à bord* (32 Years Aboard) by Naomi Goldziuk. Without narration, the audience is immersed in the sights and sounds aboard a trawler. The film's inventive and intense approach offers an intimate experience of everyday life and labour at sea, allowing viewers a glimpse into the fishers' lived realities.

The Youth Jury's 'Short Film Award' went to *Ursus*, directed by Antonio Maciocco. Through striking imagery, the film tells the story of an ageing fisher whose simple, authentic, nostalgic and often humorous reflections raise questions about the growing scarcity of fish.

A 'Special Mention' from the Youth Jury went to *L'oro del Mare* (The Gold of the Sea) by Egidio Musitano, a film distinguished by its finely balanced use of sound, archival material and images capturing the heart of fishers' daily labours. The Youth Jury also recognised *Les Recommencements* (Fresh Starts) by Isabelle Ingold and Vivianne Perelmuter with a 'Special Mention'. Through beautiful cinematography, poetic metaphors and a compelling narrative, the film weaves together the perilous journey of a Californian Native American during the Vietnam War with that of wild salmon, creating a powerful meditation on resilience, displacement and renewal.

The 'Chandrika Sharma Award' was presented to *The Feast*, directed by Indian filmmaker Rishi Chandna. The award honours the memory

17-29 MARS
2026

18^e FESTIVAL DE FILMS PÊCHEURS DU MONDE

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of Chandrika Sharma, the former Executive Secretary of ICSF, who disappeared aboard Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 in March 2014. A tireless advocate for small-scale fishing communities, Chandrika Sharma played a central role in the development and adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines), which were dedicated to her in recognition of her extraordinary contributions. Her lifelong commitment and activism in aid of fishworkers' rights, and particularly to advance the recognition of women's roles and labour in fisheries, is reflected in this award, which celebrates films that bring women's experiences in fisheries to the forefront. With humour and subtlety, *The Feast* tells the story of a woman fisher who invites a wealthy local notable to share a meal prepared from the finest local seafood, hoping to persuade him to support local fisheries rather than imported products.

The films and debates repeatedly emphasised the urgent, and core, issue: the need to recognise fishing as a pillar that underpins food sovereignty, sustains the development of coastal communities and contributes to the conservation of marine life

Each year, the festival partners with a secondary school through a film-literacy programme organized with the J'ai Vu Un Documentaire association. Students view six selected films before choosing the recipient of the 'Schoolchildren's Award'. In 2026, the award went to *2 hommes à la mer* (Men at Sea) by David Morvan and Erwan Le Guillermic. Recounting a disappearance at sea, the film explores both personal tragedy and the search for accountability, serving as a moving reminder of the stark dangers fishers must contend with.

Many of this year's films highlighted the importance of passing on knowledge and skills between generations. In *Estelle Le Corre, La Relève* (Estelle Le Corre, Next Generation), directed by Pauline Le Péculier, viewers follow,

with warmth and humanity, a young woman learning the craft of seaweed harvesting from Scarlett, a specialist.

Other films explored how traditional practices may offer solutions to contemporary challenges, such as declining fish stocks. In *Rahui, Le Lagon en partage* (Rahui, the Shared Lagoon), Melissa Constantinovitch documents efforts in Polynesia to revive the traditional *rahui* system. Similarly, *Les derniers Raïs of Méditerranée* (The Last Raïs of the Mediterranean) by Karine Guillaumain asks whether Sardinia's traditional *tonnara* trap (madrague) could provide a less destructive alternative to the industrial purse-seine fisheries targeting bluefin tuna.

Other films reveal fishing communities struggling simply to survive. *Tarrac na Farraige* (The Sea's Tide) by Maggie Breathnach follows Irish fishers confronting an uncertain future, while *Pêcheurs de Crevettes en Mer du Nord* (North Sea Shrimp Fishers) by Jonas Geisler and Eberhard Rühl documents similar challenges facing shrimp fishers in Germany. In *Adrift: Senegal's coastal crisis and the deadly route to Europe*, produced by the Environmental Justice Foundation, the decline of coastal fisheries is shown as one of the forces driving dangerous migration from Senegal.

A global crisis

Taken together, these films reflect a global crisis impacting both marine ecosystems and the communities that depend upon them. One warning comes from *Sabre: Rôle du Plancton dans le développement de la Sardine à la Pointe Bretonne* (The Role of Plankton in the Development of the Sardine at the Breton Headland), directed by Romain Le Bleis in partnership with the Fisheries Committee and the Iroise Marine Park. The film documents collaborative research by scientists and fishers that points to worrying changes in sardine development. The concerns raised in the above-mentioned *Acide Océan* (Acid Ocean) fit into this theme as well.

At the same time, there is a worryingly strong tendency (and temptation) to condemn fishers, by seeking to exclude them from so-



A still from *The Feast*, which was presented the festival's inaugural Chandrika Sharma Award

called 'marine protected areas', while allowing what might be described as a form of 'Blue Colonialism' to continue unchecked. Across Africa, Asia and Latin America, marine resources are plundered to supply international markets, with fish and fishmeal exported to sustain industrial shrimp farms and marine fish aquaculture in China, Europe and the United States. This environmental, social and biological contradiction is explored in *A Salmon Nation* by Arthur Neumeier and *Dying Lochs* by Francesco De Augustinis, which expose the consequences of industrial salmon production in Iceland and Scotland.

This global crisis is also driving the dramatic displacement of communities, although examples of solidarity continue to emerge. *Les mains du Monde* (The Hands of the World) by Julien Cadieux illustrates how communities in New Brunswick are responding collectively to address these profound social changes. Other films serve as reminders too, such as *Ici commence la mer* (Here begins the Sea) by Alice Ajorque, while *Oceania, Journey to the Center* directed by Natalie Zimmermann, documents the existential threat posed by rising sea levels to Pacific island nations such as Kiribati. In doing so, the film runs

counter to the tide of devastating 'Trumpism' and political narratives that seek to minimise or deny the realities of climate change.

Recognition of the fishing professions: The other urgent challenge

The films and debates repeatedly emphasised the urgent, and core, issue: the need to recognise fishing as a pillar that underpins food sovereignty, sustains the development of coastal communities and contributes to the conservation of marine life. Today, shrinking fishing grounds, smear campaigns that stigmatise fishers, and the continued colonial plunder in the seas of the Global South continue to benefit those who prioritise the trade and commodification of seafood over the people who harvest it. They also encourage imports that fail to comply with social and environmental standards.

The overarching message of the 18th edition of the Fishers of the World Film Festival is therefore directed not only at filmmakers and fishers, but also at citizens, viewers and consumers: "Let us mobilise!" 🐟

For more



Pêcheurs du monde

<https://pecheursdumonde.org/>

Oceans for Humans: The 17th Fishermen of the World film festival put a spotlight on a wide range of issues relating to fisherfolk around the world

https://icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/SAM_93_Film-Festival_France.pdf

Mombasa Declaration against IUU fishing

Fifteen countries from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Pacific adopted a declaration on Wednesday to step up efforts to combat illegal fishing, a practice that experts say costs the world economy up to \$50 billion annually.

The Mombasa Declaration, named after the Kenyan city hosting the 11th Our Ocean Conference, calls on governments to improve access to information on fishing vessels, ownership and licensing, and to strengthen data sharing to better track fishing activities and enforce regulations.

Out of the more than 30 countries represented in the summit, Belgium, Cameroon, Chile, the Dominican Republic, France, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Republic of the Congo, Somalia and South Korea signed the agreement.

The signatories said in a statement the measures are intended to curb illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, also known as IUU fishing, which threatens marine ecosystems and the livelihoods of millions of people who depend on fisheries.

Illegal fishing disproportionately affects coastal communities and small-scale fishers, particularly in developing countries, by depleting fish stocks, undermining food security and distorting markets. Experts also link it to human rights abuses, including forced labor and

unsafe working conditions aboard fishing vessels.

The declaration builds support for the Global Charter for Fisheries Transparency, a set of 10 policy principles aimed at improving governance through low-cost reforms, including modernizing vessel registries and publishing fishing authorizations.

French Minister Delegate for the Sea and Fisheries Catherine Chabaud said international cooperation was essential, with her country leading European nations in supporting the agreement.

Conservation groups welcomed the agreement, saying it reflects growing global momentum for greater accountability at sea. For too long, illegal fishing has thrived in the dark," said Tony Long, CEO of nonprofit Global Fishing Watch. "When governments commit to transparency, they create an interconnected network where bad actors have nowhere left to hide."

Beth Lowell, vice president of the environmental advocacy group Oceana, said the declaration signals that governments are "ready to act against illegal fishing and work together for a more transparent, equitable and sustainable ocean."

The countries that signed the declaration are expected to begin implementing their commitments

immediately. More governments are expected to join the initiative before the next Our Ocean Conference in 2027, a major annual event focused on addressing critical ocean issues.

Source: <https://apnews.com/article/kenya-our-oceans-summit-mombasa-declaration-f6ea7eacbo8bbb6c4d45985ca5543f6b>

High Seas Treaty enters into force

The Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement) was adopted on 19 June 2023 by the Intergovernmental Conference on Marine BBNJ convened under the auspices of the United Nations, and entered into force on 17 January 2026. The BBNJ Agreement becomes the third implementing agreement to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Under the overall objective of the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, for the present and in the long-term, through effective implementation of the relevant provisions of the Convention and further international cooperation and coordination, the Agreement addresses four main issues:

- Marine genetic resources, including the fair and equitable sharing of benefits;
- Measures such as area-based management tools, including marine protected areas;
- Environmental impact assessments; and
- Capacity-building and the transfer of marine technology.

The Agreement also addresses a number of "cross-cutting issues", establishes a funding mechanism and sets up institutional arrangements, including a Conference of the Parties and various subsidiary bodies, a Clearing-House Mechanism and a secretariat.

The Agreement was open for signature by all States and regional economic integration organizations from 20 September 2023 to 20 September 2025, and entered into force on 17 January 2026 (Depositary notification C.N.447.2025.TREATIES-XXI.10). As of 21 September 2025, any State or regional economic integration organization that has not signed the Agreement by the date it was closed for signature may accede to it.

Status of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction

Source: <https://www.un.org/bbnjagreement/en>

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ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILE

African Women Fish Processors and Traders Network (AWFISHNET)

A network in Africa that advocates for gender-inclusive policies in fisheries governance, while advancing efforts to balance power dynamics and give women an equal seat at the table

A vital continental networking hub that brings together national organizations representing women involved in fish processing and trade across Africa, African Women Fish Processors and Traders Network (AWFISHNET) is built around the recognition that women are central to the fisheries economy and to the social and economic life of fishing communities – and yet their contributions and concerns have often received insufficient attention.

Established in 2017 with support from the African Union Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR) and other partner organizations, the network has expanded from its initial membership of 28 countries to its present strength of 44 countries across Africa – functioning as a crucial unifying voice for women who dominate the post-harvest fishing sector.

The network's scope of work extends across several interconnected areas, including improving labour conditions, safety and health for women engaged in fish processing and trading, supporting their social welfare, and strengthening their professional and entrepreneurial capabilities – through access to training, education and technical support. As well, AWFISHNET promotes initiatives to impart financial knowledge, business skills and

ability to access resources and markets, thereby building resilience into women-led fisheries enterprises, improving the competitiveness of their products and expanding access opportunities to reach markets. Such efforts are closely tied into the economic empowerment prong of the network's broader vision for women working along the fisheries value chain.



Another strategic priority is policy engagement, with AWFISHNET seeking to ensure the experiences and priorities of women fish processors and traders are reflected in governance discussions and decision-making processes. To this end, the network advocates for policy interventions and approaches that promote gender equality, strengthen women's participation and create more conducive environments for their economic activities. This ties into the need to ensure the meaningful involvement

of women in decisions affecting fisheries communities and livelihoods at various levels.

Besides creating connections among women and their organizations across the continent, the network serves as a hub of coordination and consultation that provides opportunities for members to exchange experiences, learn from one another and explore practical approaches to common challenges.

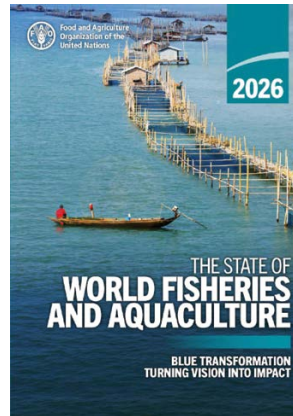
A significant milestone in the network's organizational journey occurred during its leadership handover process in August 2025. Cognizant that long-term impact requires continuous and transparent governance, AWFISHNET organized a specialised leadership and organizational capacity training event in Kenya. This event, supported by FAO and held in collaboration with AU-IBAR, brought together 12 prominent women leaders from as many African countries. The primary objective was to ensure a seamless and structured transition of knowledge and institutional responsibilities from the outgoing executive members to the newly-elected leadership team – through collaborative training based on peer-to-peer learning and practical skill development.

This intensive capacity-building exercise proved hugely successful, with a significant majority of participants reporting knowledge improvements and expressing newfound confidence for grassroots advocacy efforts. Under the leadership of newly-elected President Lovin Kobusingye from Uganda, the executive team successfully finalised an ambitious Action Plan for 2025–2026. This roadmap outlines several key priorities for the network, including the active expansion of national chapters across the continent, the improvement of regional market access for women traders, and the pursuit of gender-responsive governance. By strengthening its institutional capacity, AWFISHNET has aligned itself closely with the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines).

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African Women Fish Processors and Traders Network (AWFISHNET)

Fisheries Statistics

1. **Global fisheries and aquaculture production is at a record high, but ensuring sustainable and equitable growth remains a major challenge.**
 - Global fisheries and aquaculture production reached a new record of 235 million tonnes in 2024, confirming the sector's expanding role in feeding a growing global population.
 - Aquatic animal production reached 195 million tonnes and has grown steadily over decades, expanding at an average annual rate of 3.2 percent since 1950.
 - Aquatic animals play an increasingly important role in healthy diets, with 89 percent of production destined for human consumption, and average per capita availability exceeding 21 kg per year.
 - Aquatic food systems employed 65 million people in the primary sector in 2024, playing a critical role in rural economies and coastal communities. Women represent 27 percent of the employment in primary production and 56 percent in processing activities.
 - Despite these gains, access to aquatic animal foods and their benefits remains uneven. While global availability continues to outpace population growth, thus making net contributions to nutritional improvements, per capita availability in some regions, particularly Africa, remains far below the global average.
 - Targeted policies are needed to address these disparities and ensure that growth in production translates into improved food security, nutrition and livelihoods across all regions.
2. **Aquaculture is the main driver of growth in aquatic food systems. While production remains concentrated in Asia, other regions such as Africa hold significant untapped potential.**
 - World aquaculture production of aquatic animals and algae reached a new record of 142 million tonnes in 2024, confirming its increasing contribution to global supply of aquatic foods.
 - Aquaculture produced 103 million tonnes of aquatic animals, an all-time record, equivalent to 53 percent of global aquatic animal output, and over 59 percent of aquatic animal foods for human consumption.
 - Aquaculture production remains concentrated, with Asia accounting for around 89 percent of global aquatic animal aquaculture production, and the top five countries together producing 82 percent of the total output.
- Freshwater systems dominate aquaculture production of aquatic animals, accounting for 64 million tonnes (63 percent), compared to 38 million tonnes (37 percent) from marine and coastal systems.
3. **Global capture fisheries production remains stable, but concern over the state of marine fishery stocks persists, underscoring the urgent need to scale up effective fisheries management.**
 - In 2024, capture fisheries production remained stable at 92 million tonnes (excluding algae), continuing its long-term pattern of fluctuation within the range of 86 and 94 million tonnes since the late 1980s.
 - Marine capture fisheries remain the main source of aquatic animal production, with about 80 million tonnes harvested, accounting for 41 percent of total aquatic animal production.
 - Inland fisheries reached a record 12.3 million tonnes in 2024, driven by significant increases in countries where they play a critical role in national food security.
 - The share of the world's marine fishery stocks fished within biologically sustainable levels declined to 62.4 percent in 2023, down by 2.1 percentage points from 2021. This is driven by methodological adjustments as well as sustainability declines in specific regions.
 - When weighted by volume, 72.6 percent of the landings of assessed stocks monitored by FAO are estimated to originate from sustainably fished stocks, indicating that larger and more productive stocks tend to be better managed.
 - Achieving the SDG target of 100 percent of stocks within biologically sustainable levels remains extremely challenging, particularly in regions characterized by complex multispecies fisheries and limited assessment and management capacity.
4. **Aquatic foods are essential for nutrition, and their rise in availability for human consumption continues to outpace population growth globally, yet their benefits remain inequitably distributed across regions.**
 - Aquatic foods make an ever-increasing critical contribution to human nutrition, providing essential micronutrients, omega-3 fatty acids and high-quality proteins that support healthy diets.
 - In 2023, aquatic animal foods accounted for at least 20 percent



of per capita animal protein supply for over 40 percent of the world's population, underscoring their importance in food security and nutrition.

- Their role is particularly important in low-income countries where aquatic animal foods are among the most affordable and accessible sources of high-quality proteins, supporting diet quality where it is needed most.
 - In Africa, aquatic animal foods contribute around 19 percent of animal protein availability – the second-highest share globally.
 - Realizing the potential of aquatic foods requires targeted policies and investments to improve availability, accessibility and affordability for wider inclusion in diets.
5. **Trade in aquatic products continues to expand, reflecting strong global demand and greatly contributing to economic development and higher nutrition levels.**
 - In 2024, global trade in aquatic products reached USD 186 billion – comprising USD 184 billion in aquatic animal products and USD 2 billion in algae and other aquatic products – and involved 230 countries and territories.
 - The value of trade in aquatic animal products is comparable to that in terrestrial meats, and aquatic trade accounts for 9 percent of total agricultural trade (excluding forestry) and about 1 percent of total merchandise trade.
 - Approximately 36 percent of global aquatic animal production in weight was traded internationally in 2024, helping supply nutritious foods where domestic production falls short, and highlighting the sector's strong integration in global markets.
 6. **Future growth in aquatic animal production will be mainly driven by aquaculture, and its sustainability will depend**
 - on efficiency, innovation and equitable access.
 - FAO projections to 2034 indicate continued growth in fisheries and aquaculture production, consumption and trade, with total aquatic animal production expected to reach 214 million tonnes.
 - Aquaculture will remain the main driver of growth, with production projected to reach 119 million tonnes by 2034.
 - Capture fisheries are expected to recover to around 95 million tonnes, as a direct result of improved management and reduced losses.
 - Over 90 percent of production is expected to be available for human consumption, with per capita availability reaching 21.9 kg globally. However, this increase will not be evenly distributed.
 - The highest growth rate of aquatic animal food availability, from both domestic production and imports, is forecast to be in Africa (18 percent). Nevertheless, per capita availability is projected to decline as population growth will outpace supply. Trade in aquatic animal products is expected to continue expanding, although at a slower pace, with a slight decline in the share of production exported.
 7. **Investment, effective governance and innovation are key to transforming aquatic food systems towards greater sustainability and productivity. Without sufficient progress in these areas, growth will outpace equity and sustainability.**
 - Targeted investment, innovation and strong policy frameworks are essential to scale up aquaculture production, while minimizing social, economic and environmental impacts, especially in regions with capacity constraints.
 - Upgrading value chains towards greater efficiency and equity can increase availability of aquatic foods, and promote better job conditions, particularly for small-scale actors, women and youth.
 - FAO's Blue Transformation Roadmap provides a quantifiable global framework to realize these objectives and transform aquatic food systems into an even stronger driver of food security, livelihoods and sustainable development.

Source: *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2026: Blue Transformation: turning vision into impact*

<https://icsf.net/resources/the-state-of-world-fisheries-and-aquaculture-2026-blue-transformation-turning-vision-into-impact-by-fao-2026/>

INFOLOG: NEW RESOURCES AT ICSF

Publications

Resolving transboundary fishing conflicts in the Palk Bay: Report of a panel discussion prepared by Siddharth Premkumar, 2025
https://icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/930.ICSF264_Palk_Bay_Panel_discussion_report.pdf

During a panel discussion on resolving the transboundary fishing conflicts in the Palk Bay between India and Sri Lanka, representatives from small-scale fisheries, civil society, academia and media shared their views on how eliminating illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing—namely, bottom trawling—in the Palk Bay will improve livelihoods of fishers in Northern Sri Lanka.

Tamil translation is available at:

https://icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/930.ICSF265_Palk_Bay_Panel_discussion_report_TAMIL.pdf

Report on the capacity-building workshops for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines and empowering SSF stakeholders in Ghana, Costa Rica & The Philippines

<https://icsf.net/resources/report-on-the-capacity-building-workshops-costa-rica-ghana-philippines/>

In November 2025, ICSF and partner organizations conducted three national-level capacity-building workshops in Costa Rica, Ghana and Philippines to strengthen fishworkers' effective engagement with the SSF Guidelines, related fisheries policy processes, and National Plan of Action for Small-Scale Fisheries (NPOA-SSF).

The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2026: Blue Transformation: turning vision into impact by FAO, 2026

<https://icsf.net/resources/the-state-of-world-fisheries-and-aquaculture-2026-blue-transformation-turning-vision-into-impact-by-fao-2026/>

The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2026 provides the latest evidence-based information and insights on challenges, opportunities and solutions shaping the present and future of the sector.

Sand and sustainability: An essential resource for nature and development by UNEP, 2026

<https://icsfarchives.net/22619/>

The Sand and Sustainability: An Essential Resource for Nature and Development highlights sand's multiple values to modern society, as well as its often overlooked 'non-use' values when left within functioning ecosystems where it underpins livelihoods, water security, food systems, territorial integrity, and shelter. The report examines the growing environmental, social, and economic pressures linked to rising global sand demand and identifies key gaps in governance, biodiversity integration, monitoring, and long-term planning.

Video: Caught in the Dragnet: Small-scale Fishers of Palk Bay, Sri Lanka

<https://icsf.net/resources/caught-in-the-dragnet-small-scale-fishers-of-palk-bay-sri-lanka-by-icsf-2025/>

This video, produced by ICSF, captures a panel discussion on addressing transboundary fishing conflicts in the Palk Bay between India and Sri Lanka. Representatives of small-scale fishers, civil society, academia, and the media discuss how eliminating illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing—particularly bottom trawling—can improve livelihoods and marine ecosystems in Northern Sri Lanka.

FLASHBACK

Striving Together for Rights Forever

A wide range of actors—ranging from civil society organizations to grassroots activists and trade unionists—are rallying around a human rights-based approach to tackle issues plaguing the small-scale fisheries subsector

It was on 10 June 2014—a little over a decade ago—that the Thirty-first Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) formally endorsed the SSF Guidelines. COFI also recognized the critical role of the “adopted SSF Guidelines” in improving the social, economic and cultural status of small-scale fisheries vulnerable to disasters and climate change, and reiterated the human rights-based approach. Also on the same day, COFI welcomed the global assistance programme launched by FAO to support the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. COFI thus helped germinate seeds sown during the International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters in Rome in July 1984 (See the article, *Rallying for Collectivism*, page 4).

It is just incredible that COFI saw the relevance of a human rights-based approach in the context of small-scale fisheries to meet its obligations arising out of Rule XXX of FAO. Ten years down the line, there is so much water under the bridge. The SSF Guidelines have triggered many processes, worldwide. There are several national plans of action for small-scale fisheries that have been developed in Africa and Asia (see the article, *Leaving No One Behind*, page 11).

Many countries are drawing elements from the SSF Guidelines to develop their own national legislation (See the article, *A Robust Platform*, page 88). The characterization matrix developed by the Illuminating Hidden Harvests report of the FAO, Duke University and WorldFish is now being used in different contexts to develop acceptable definitions of small-scale fishing. Artisanal fishers of Africa are drawing inspiration to uphold decent work and are seeking wider ratification of the C88 Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (See the article, *Tooling Up*, page 55).

Civil society mechanisms like International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), and organizations like World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), World Forum of Fish Harvesters & Fish Workers (WFF), African Confederation of Professional Organizations of Artisanal Fisheries (CAOPA), Platform for African Women Network of Fish Processors and Traders (AWFISHNET) and ICSF's own initiatives, among others, have been complementing those of FAO to implement the SSF Guidelines in several national and regional contexts. Academic initiatives such as Too Big to Ignore (TBTI) and Centre for Maritime Research (MARE) have led to several SSF-focused events and bringing forth useful publications.

The United Nations General Assembly Declaration of the year 2022 as the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA) and the sustainable development goals (SDGs) certainly gave a fillip to the implementation of the SSF Guidelines in different regional contexts. An enhanced awareness of the SSF Guidelines is leading to a serious engagement with elements like tenure rights, social development, social protection, climate change impacts and disaster preparedness. There are several articles in this issue of SAMUDRA Report dealing with these topics. The rise of “occupational pluralism” to deal with climate change impacts (See the article, *A Portrait of Risk and Resilience*, page 65) and the emergence of parametric insurance to cover disaster risks (See articles, *A Formidable Arsenal*, page 73 and *Parametric Insurance*, page 91) are significant developments for small-scale fishers.

The forthcoming SSF Summit must bring greater coherence across these civil society, NGO, academic intergovernmental and national efforts to fully realize the potential of sustainable small-scale fisheries for food security and poverty eradication in a logical manner, and to uphold the culture of traditional fishing communities and Indigenous Peoples.

The summit must become a forum for exchanging ideas, to direct different concerns and interests to relevant and competent processes and agencies, within and beyond fisheries, to realize the full potential of a human rights-based approach, towards securing lives and livelihoods of small-scale fishers and fishworkers, as well as Indigenous Peoples, caught between the negative impacts of the blue economy and climate change

—from SAMUDRA Report, No. 91, June 2024



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ANNOUNCEMENTS

MEETINGS

The 3rd Small-Scale Fisheries Summit (3rd SSF Summit 2026), 4-6 September 2026, FAO Headquarters, Rome, Italy

<https://www.fao.org/voluntary-guidelines-small-scale-fisheries/home/ssf-summit/2026/en>

The 37th Session of the Committee on Fisheries is

scheduled to convene from 7 to 11 September 2026, Rome, Italy

<https://www.fao.org/cofi/documents-cofi37/en>

Seventeenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP-17) to the Convention on Biological Diversity, 19-30 October 2026 – Yerevan, Armenia

<https://www.cbd.int/meetings/COP-17>

54th Plenary Session of the Committee on World Food Security, 19-23 October 2026, FAO Headquarters, Rome, Italy

<https://www.fao.org/cfs/plenary/cfs54/en>

WEBSITE

International Year of the Woman Farmer 2026

<https://www.fao.org/woman-farmer-2026/en/>

The celebration of the International Year of the Woman Farmer (IYWF 2026) aims to raise awareness among the public of the essential roles of women farmers in agrifood systems, contributing to poverty reduction and sustainable food production for a food secure future.



JIBIN ROBIN
Fishing boats at Vizhinjam Fishing Harbour, Kerala, India

Endquote

For the coast...

*“Her fishermen sleep dreamless on the sand.
On the high sea a rose is their compass.
The horizon, virgin of wounded handkerchiefs,
links the great crystals of fish and moon.”*

— Federico Garcia Lorca (Ode to Salvador Dali)

