

Small-scale Fisheries

Managing the unmanaged



Managing small-scale fisheries is a major challenge for the global community. Enough has been said about their plight. What needs to be done and how?

Small-scale fisheries was debated intensely at the recently concluded meeting of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) in Rome. The subject aroused great interest also in previous meetings of COFI. But there was a tone of intensity and urgency at the latest meeting, the 27th – as the report on pages 5 to 8 of this issue of *Bay of Bengal News* shows.

A majority of COFI's members strongly urged the setting up of a dedicated COFI sub-committee or a specific work programme on small-scale fisheries to address the long-term developmental needs of small-scale fisheries.

This suggestion has merit. Small-scale fisheries is one of the most unorganised and unmanaged areas in global food production.

How big is small-scale fisheries?

Some 38 million people worldwide are fishers and fish farmers, according to the FAO document 'State of world fisheries and aquaculture, 2004'. Of these, 26 million are into capture fisheries (marine and inland), the remaining in aquaculture. Over 78 million people are dependent on small-scale fishing and ancillary activities such as processing, trade, etc. for their livelihoods. These estimates exclude the millions of people who are

temporary fishermen in marine areas and elsewhere.

How unmanaged is small-scale fisheries?

So un-managed that even a precise definition is elusive. An expert consultation on small-scale fisheries in 1975 proposed a 53-word omnibus definition. Another FAO group in 2005 concluded that it would be inappropriate to formulate a universally applicable definition for small-scale fisheries. It described the sector on the basis of the range of characteristics that are likely to be found in any particular small-scale fishery (see box on opposite page).

What are the problems of small-scale fisheries? They are very many, as pointed out in the FAO paper "Social issues in small-scale fisheries"

Defining small-scale fisheries

According to an expert consultation on small-scale fisheries development held in 1975 in Rome, "Small-scale fisheries are labour-intensive, and are conducted by artisanal craftsmen whose level of income, mechanical sophistication, quantity of production, fishing range, political influence, market outlets, employment and social mobility and financial dependence keep them subservient to the economic decisions and operating constraints placed upon them by those who buy their production."

According to the FAO Technical Guidelines for Responsible Fisheries, No.10 ("Increasing the contribution of small-scale fisheries to poverty alleviation and food security," Rome 2005), small-scale fisheries can be broadly characterized as a dynamic and evolving sector employing labour-intensive harvesting, processing and distribution technologies to exploit marine and inland water fishery resources. The sub-sector (conducted full-time or part-time, or just seasonally), aims at supplying fish and fishery products to local and domestic markets, and to meet subsistence consumption.

Export-oriented production has increased in many small-scale fisheries during the last one to two decades because of greater market integration and globalization. Typically, men engage in fishing and women in fish processing and marketing, but women are also active in near-shore harvesting activities while the men are known to engage in fish marketing and distribution as well. Other ancillary activities such as net-making, boatbuilding, engine repair and maintenance, etc. can provide additional fishery-related employment and income opportunities in marine and inland fishing communities.

Small-scale fisheries operates at widely differing organizational levels – ranging from self-employed single operators through informal micro-enterprises to formal sector businesses. This sub-sector, therefore, is not homogenous within and across countries and regions. This fact must be taken note of when formulating strategies and policies for enhancing the contribution of small-scale fisheries to food security and poverty alleviation.

- Poverty, harsh living and working conditions.
- Weak organisational structure, no social security.
- Lack of access to credit, particularly public finance, dependence on exploitative money-lenders
- Hazard to life and limb at sea through fishing vessels that lack basic safety standards and safety equipment. Vulnerable to floods and cyclones, and to the vagaries of climate change.
- Exclusion from access to other employment opportunities, to health and social services, to roads, markets and other infrastructure. Excluded from participation in social and political processes, and in development planning.
- Diminishing fish stocks and biodiversity. Increasing competition with other users of coastal resources, conflicts with the industrial fishing

What's the solution? How do we go about it?

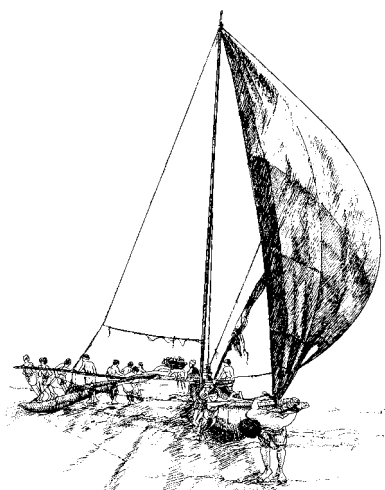
Some of the problems listed above are unique to fishers, but many are common to all rural populations. Managing them call for a slew of measures. They demand a

combination of resources, political commitment plus political, economic and social reform.

The BOBP-IGO believes, however, that five measures are critical.

- **Open access** is the bane of small-scale fisheries. It leads to fleet overcapacity, indiscriminate overfishing and resource degradation.

A rights-based system of access is needed that respects the interests of both present and future generations, ensures sustainability of resources and optimizes benefits to fishing communities. This is of course easier said than done, but the process must be set in motion.



Such a system would vary from country to country, and within a country as well, depending on the ethos of the community, the resources available, the composition of resource users.

- Fishing communities need **social services** – relating to education, health, housing, insurance, access to government schemes, etc. – which are provided by government departments other than fisheries. Inter-sector co-operation is essential so that fishers can get these benefits.

- **Credit and public finance** are a part of the social services mentioned above, but need special mention because of their importance for fisherfolk communities. Simple and convenient access to credit can make all the difference between self-reliance on the one hand, destitution on the other.

While lack of credit has usually inhibited development of small-scale fisheries, excess flow of capital has contributed to overcapacity. This happened recently with the tsunami reconstruction drive.

- **Introduce the stakeholder approach to fisheries management**

and resource sustainability. The fishing resource is under pressure everywhere, with some exceptions, and sustainability is being endangered. The rationale of the stakeholder approach is that legislation alone can't bring about management, even persuasion cannot. The active co-operation of a number of stakeholders – fishers, the public, fish vendors, retailers, processors, wholesalers and exporters, government departments and scientists, the media, social scientists and biologists, perhaps international organisations and donors – is essential.

Representatives of all stakeholder groups come together, discuss individual and collective perceptions of the problem, analyse them and come up with options.

The stakeholder approach to management is participatory. It can be slow. But it is steady, sure and systematic. It not merely widens awareness, it narrows differences, reconciles conflicting viewpoints, facilitates solutions.

During the BOBP's third phase, the stakeholder approach to management was used to tackle an impressive diversity of management problems. To cite an example, community-based fisheries management (CBFM) in Thailand. CBFM came into force in 110 fishing villages of Phang Nga bay where resource stress was a serious problem. The package of CBFM measures included a ban on trawls and push nets within 3 km of the shoreline; construction and installation of community spawning cages; culture of finfish, oysters and mussels; voluntary surrender of resource-damaging push nets by fisherfolk in return for gillnets; installation of artificial reefs to keep out trawlers; mangrove reforestation and sea ranching; construction of a floating pontoon on the sea; setting up of a community learning center; enrolment of fishermen themselves as voluntary rangers to monitor fisheries and ensure compliance with management effort. The project was a huge success.



The stakeholder approach was also used with ornamental fisheries in Sri Lanka; reef fisheries resource management in the Maldives; tackling the resource problems posed by two fisheries in Bangladesh (push nets and set bagnets) that employed thousands of subsistence fishers; participatory training of fisheries officials in Tamil Nadu, India; tackling shrimp culture problems in Andhra Pradesh, India; use of PRA as a tool for data collection and analysis in West Bengal, India; setting up of a marine park in Malaysia.

The fragile nature of small-scale fisheries may make drastic management changes difficult. New management approaches, locally relevant and appropriate, need to be tried.

- **Empowerment of small-scale fisherfolk communities:** Social and economic empowerment have been discussed above, but political empowerment is even more critical. Self-help groups of men and women, co-operatives and other forms of organisation would catalyze action and serve as forums for co-operation with government and other institutions, for expression of grievances, for problem-solving.

In sum, managing of small-scale fisheries is a large-scale challenge. It can be undertaken by the government only through a stakeholder approach that involves social scientists, biologists, the media, and the fishers themselves.

A COFI Sub-committee on small-scale fisheries may provide critical inputs into understanding of present problems, but the burden of action has to be shouldered largely by governments worldwide. Political will and commitment are crucial. Other action is often quick to follow.

– Y S Yadava

Paintings by school children in India, Maldives and Sri Lanka depicting post-tsunami reconstruction.