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Report of the Scoping Meeting on

Establishing a Network of Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) and Co-Management Practitioners in India

31 July 2025, Chennai, India

Lead Partners

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Scoping Meeting on

Establishing a Network of Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) and Co-Management Practitioners in India

A Dialogue among Organizations / Experts Working on Promotion of EAF & Co-Management in India

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Lead Partners

CMFRI

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31 July 2025 I 1030 – 1315 hours

Mode: Hybrid Mode

(BOBP-Secretariat, Chennai & online).

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Meeting ID: 823 9065 3714 I Passcode: bobp@1234

About the Organisers

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

FAO is a specialized UN agency founded in 1945 to combat global hunger and promote sustainable agricultural development. Headquartered in Rome, FAO works with governments and international organizations to improve food security, nutrition, and rural livelihoods. It plays a key role in fisheries and aquaculture governance, developing international agreements

Bay of Bengal Inter Governmental Organisation (BOBP-IGO)

The BOBP-IGO is a regional fisheries advisory body with Bangladesh, India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka as its contracting parties. It is mandated to enhance cooperation amongst its member countries and other countries (especially, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand) for sustainable fisheries management in the Bay of Bengal region. The BOBP-IGO Secretariat is located in Chennai. The Department of Fisheries, Government of India is the nodal agency from India and the hosting agency.

ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI)

The ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI), established in 1947 and later integrated into ICAR in 1967, has evolved into a globally recognized center for tropical marine fisheries research. It has made significant contributions through its national catch estimation system, development of mariculture technologies, and advancements in marine biotechnology and climate research. CMFRI's multidisciplinary work, including its efforts in data collection, resource management, and women led bivalve farming, has positioned it as a premier institute in both capture and culture fisheries.

M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF)

M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) is a non-profit research organization established in 1988 by M. S. Swaminathan, widely known as the father of India's Green Revolution. Headquartered in Chennai, MSSRF focuses on sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, coastal systems research, food and nutrition security, climate resilience, and rural livelihoods. The Foundation works closely with farming and fishing communities, women's self-help groups, policymakers, and research institutions to promote environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive development.

Dakshin Foundation

Dakshin Foundation is a non-governmental organization based in India that works towards marine and coastal conservation through interdisciplinary research, policy engagement, and community collaboration. The organization focuses on promoting sustainable fisheries, conserving marine biodiversity, and supporting the livelihoods and rights of coastal communities. Dakshin Foundation undertakes scientific research, capacity building, and policy advocacy to strengthen marine governance and ecosystem-based management in India. It also collaborates with government agencies, academic institutions, and civil society organizations to generate knowledge and implement conservation initiatives across India's coastal and marine ecosystems.

Report Preparation

This report on the "Scoping Meeting on Establishing a Network of Practitioners in Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) and Co-Management" is prepared by BOBP-IGO.

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Preferred Citation

BOBP-IGO. (2026). Report on the Scoping Meeting on Establishing a Network of Practitioners in Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) and Co-Management, Chennia, India, 31 July, 2025. Bay of Bengal Programme Inter-Governmental Organisation. 22 pp.

Executive Summary

A scoping Meeting on establishing a Network of Practitioners in Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) and Co-Management was held at the BOBP-IGO Secretariat, Chennai, on 31 July 2025. The meeting brought together representatives from government agencies, research institutions, academia, NGOs, and independent practitioners to deliberate on strengthening Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM) and co-management practices in India. The discussions highlighted that EAFM is increasingly recognized as the preferred pathway for sustainable fisheries governance, balancing ecological sustainability with human well-being through participatory and adaptive governance systems. Co-management, as a core component of EAFM, was identified as essential for sharing responsibilities between governments and fishing communities. Despite several successful initiatives across India through projects such as FIMSUL and BOBLME-I, knowledge and experiences remain fragmented and confined within individual organizations and communities. Experts emphasized the need for a national platform that could connect practitioners, document experiences, promote peer learning, and provide a unified voice for EAFM and co-management in India. The BOBLME Phase II project was recognized as a timely opportunity to facilitate such a network, supported by existing institutional structures and regional cooperation mechanisms. Presentations from practitioners showcased a wide range of experiences in marine and inland fisheries co-management across India. Case studies included the Coringa mangrove ecosystem in Andhra Pradesh, the Ashtamudi clam fisheries in Kerala, tuna fisheries in Lakshadweep, village-level fisheries governance initiatives in Tamil Nadu, and inland fisheries management in Assam. These experiences demonstrated that successful co-management depends on community participation, enabling legal and policy frameworks, adaptive governance, scientific support, and long-term facilitation. Participants also stressed the importance of documenting lessons learned, building capacity among practitioners and communities, developing practical operational guidance, and creating mechanisms for collaboration across institutions and regions. Discussions underscored that co-management should not remain a theoretical concept or isolated project activity, but should evolve into a practical governance framework that supports sustainable fisheries, social equity, and resilience of coastal and inland communities. A key outcome of the meeting was the adoption of the “Chennai Declaration: A Resolution to Network EAFM and Co-Management Practitioners in Fisheries in India.” The declaration called for the establishment of a Network of EAFM and Co-Management Practitioners in Fisheries in India under the BOBLME Phase II project. The proposed network aims to serve as a platform for knowledge exchange, documentation of case studies, capacity building, policy advocacy, collaborative research, and community-to-community learning. The declaration further recommended that BOBP-IGO operationalize the network through appropriate institutional mechanisms and facilitate coordination among government agencies, research organizations, NGOs, community representatives, and independent practitioners. The network is expected to strengthen collaboration, support integration of co-management principles into fisheries governance, and act as a common voice for advancing EAFM and co-management practices in India and potentially across the Bay of Bengal region.

Acronyms

BOBLME	Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem
BOBP-IGO	Bay of Bengal Programme Inter-Governmental Organisation
CBOs	Community-Based Organisations
C-EAFM	Centre for Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management
CMFRI	Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute
COFI	Committee on Fisheries
EDF	Environmental Defense Fund
EDIF	Environmental Defense India Foundation
EAF	Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries
EAFM	Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GEF	Global Environment Facility
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
MPAs	Marine Protected Areas
MSSRF	M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation
NACA	Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
OECMs	Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures
SAP	Strategic Action Programme

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The Context

Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM) seeks to develop sustainable and equitable fisheries management plans by balancing ecological and human well-being through good governance. Applying EAF is considered the preferred option and best practice for long-term sustainability of fisheries and the services that fisheries ecosystems provide to society. Co-management is at the core of EAFM. Co-management arrangements function by sharing resource management responsibilities between governments and user groups. However, establishing co-management systems is not automatic or simple. Successful co-management depends on having an enabling policy and legal framework, participation and empowerment of communities, effective linkages/institutions and adequate resources.

In Indian fisheries, establishing co-management arrangements is in an initial stage, and has not taken deep root into the management system. Post-2004 Tsunami, a traction started gaining strength to revamp the marine fisheries governance system in India by using better science and making it participatory. The ideas were explored initially in the FIMSUL Project and later supported through the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project phase 1 (BOBLME-1). In addition, various organizations, such as CBOS and NGOs were also working with various fisher communities to promote the concepts.

Despite two decades of practice—through projects such as Fisheries Management for Sustainable Livelihoods (FIMSUL) and Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project (BOBLME) phase 1—knowledge about what works remains siloed within organizations and communities. Application of EAFM and Co-management received strong support from the National Policy on Marine Fisheries 2017 making it as the base framework for perusing sustainable fisheries governance. However, the knowledge accumulated during the last two decades often remains limited to the concerned organizations and the communities.

In this context, a “Scoping Meeting on Establishing a Network of Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) and Co-Management Practitioners” was convened to gain an insight on the experience of co-management practitioners, views on networking such practitioners, and steps to be taken to build such a network.

The Opening Session

Dr P. Krishnan, Director, BOBP-IGO

Establishing a Network of Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) and Co-Management Practitioners in India

Ecosystem approach to fisheries (EAF) and co-management were operational at varying stages across countries in the region. The idea now was to build on past initiatives, leverage the opportunities provided by the present, and collectively script the future. There were traditional management systems such as Padu, project pilots such as through FIMSUL, and others such as

those led by NGOs (e.g. MSSRF, Dakshin foundation) and institutions (ICAR-CMFRI). Currently, as part of the BOBLME II project, two sites in each of the four countries had been chosen for building and implementing an EAFM plan. The BOBLME project already has an existing institutional architecture well-positioned to facilitate knowledge exchange across sites, coordinate action plans and shared priorities and advocate for coastal and marine co-management at the national level. With EAFM working groups in each country, it was time to have a formalized regional network to ensure a shared vision, unified voice and regional resilience through collaboration. The idea was to create a network of practitioners, connecting individuals as well as institutions working in EAF and co-management and build collective strength. Such a network would foster knowledge exchange; help build capacity and support monitoring and evaluation. Dr Krishnan said that he envisioned a formalized regional network anchored in EAFM and co-management principles that was inclusive, participatory and adaptive. It would serve as an engine to drive ecosystem principles at the national level. Currently, no such network existed anywhere in the world, and hence this could set an example.

Dr. Grinson George, Director, ICAR-CMFRI.

Opportunities for Mainstreaming EAFM in India: Proposals from CMFRI

ICAR-CMFRI was a lead partner in this crucial initiative of balancing ecological and human well-being through good governance. Co-management is at the heart of EAFM, and was a complex exercise involving the sharing of resource management responsibilities between the government and user groups. Successful implementation of co-management hinges on an enabling policy and legal framework, community participation and empowerment, effective linkages, and adequate resources, and is not an easy task. Despite many projects and initiatives led by ICAR-CMFRI and others to promote co-management practices, knowledge sharing had been limited to a small segment of the population. This siloing of knowledge needed to be addressed by establishing a common platform for knowledge sharing to tackle the diverse challenges in fisheries management. Considering the diversity of India's fisheries and the wealth of co-existing co-management practitioners, establishing such a platform was an essential step to encourage cross-learning and expand co-management frameworks. BOBLME-II provided a timely and strategic opportunity, and the right platform, to launch this EAFM network initiative. By combining the gained experience with policy support and BOBLME Phase II funding, a collaborative platform can be created that facilitates knowledge sharing, expands successful FMUs, and shapes policy ultimately promoting sustainable marine ecosystems and healthier coastal communities. Such a system will promote the sustainability of marine ecosystems and the well-being of coastal communities. ICAR-CMFRI was committed to contributing to the network and mainstreaming ecosystem-based management practices.

Dr B.K. Behera, Director, National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB)

Address by the Chief Guest

India had a lot of inland resources across the country in addition to the marine systems. Ecosystem-based approaches and co-management practices in India are not limited to the marine domain but are equally relevant for inland resources such as wetlands, reservoirs, and

floodplain systems. It was essential to document all co-management related activities in the country and bring out a bulletin as a precursor to preparing a more comprehensive project with a clear work-plan in time for the second phase of the PMMSY. Awareness had to be raised about the importance of managing common property resources such as wetlands and marine ecosystems, which, unlike private aquaculture ventures, often suffered from a lack of clear ownership or stewardship. These shared ecosystems are critical for livelihoods and must be managed not only for fish production but also for long-term sustainability and social equity. A small-scale network of stakeholders in collaboration with international organizations such as FAO, BOBP, and WorldFish would be ideal.

Dr Krishnan suggested holding a write-shop at the NFDB with a structured template to document all experiences.

Presentations by Practitioners

Subsequent to the opening session, select practitioners from the field shared their experiences. The presentations ranged from overview of the state of knowledge regarding co-management to practical field experiences.

The session was moderated by **Dr E. Vivekanandan, Senior Scientific Consultant, BOBP-IGO.**

Dr Muktha M., Senior Scientist, ICAR-CMFRI

EAF Initiatives of the past and future plans

Coringa is the site of one of the two BOBLME EAFM Projects being implemented in India. The Coringa mangrove ecosystem in Andhra Pradesh with its high biodiversity, diverse resource base, and complex social and ecological pressures, serves as a microcosm of the broader sustainability challenges in coastal ecosystems. Its location within the Godavari Delta and partial protection under the Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary makes it ecologically significant; its traditional fishing communities rely heavily on it for their livelihoods and food security. Fisheries here are small scale and traditional with communities deeply connected to their villages, and they face challenges such as declining fish stocks, habitat loss, industrial expansion, and pollution. They followed an informal management system: a 16-member council of elders, selected by the two major hamlets in the area, plays a key role in conflict resolution, access regulation, and community-level decision-making. This informal but effective institution represents a strong starting point for the development of a formalized co-management framework. There was also a group of women engaged in post-harvest processes, united through women SHGs. This could be a promising model for value addition, and could be formalised, strengthened and replicated. Multiple interventions ranging from sustainable mud crab harvest strategies to mangrove and creek restoration, pollution mitigation, ecotourism promotion, and potential deployment of artificial reefs were being considered as part of the EAFM programme requiring a strong inter-disciplinary team that integrates natural and social sciences with strong community engagement.

Dr K. Sunil Mohamed, former Principal Scientist and Head of Division, ICAR-CMFRI and Chair of the Sustainable Seafood Network India

Ashtamudi Clam Fisheries

Ashtamudi Lake, covering over 60 square kilometres, supports one of India's most prominent clam fisheries, with historical exports to Japan and Southeast Asia valued at over half a million USD. However, overexploitation led to a marked decline in clam populations, prompting CMFRI to intervene with a comprehensive fisheries management plan in 2011 which introduced multiple regulatory and conservation measures including the designation of a clam sanctuary, restrictions on minimum legal size, prohibition of mechanical harvesting, transplantation limits, effort control through allowable catch quotas, and the recommendation of a participatory governance model. Though initially the fisheries department was unable to implement the proposed council structure, the District Collector of Kollam facilitated the formation of a Clam Fisheries Governance Council in 2013 including representatives from fisherfolk, exporters, scientists, NGOs, and enforcement agencies, with the Collector as Chair and the Deputy Director of Fisheries as Member Secretary. The council meets quarterly, and its decisions are binding on all stakeholders.

Adaptive management has been a key feature of the system, with CMFRI providing regular biomass assessments to inform decisions such as seasonal closures or reduced fishing effort. Compliance is supported by inspections from the marine enforcement wing. These efforts led to the fishery being certified by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), a significant recognition of sustainability. The Ashtamudi case effectively incorporates key elements of EAFM including the precautionary approach, effort and mesh-size controls, closed seasons and areas (though the latter remains limited), participatory governance, and partial sectoral integration, especially with export and tourism sectors. However, some areas like incentive mechanisms and resilience to extreme climatic events (e.g., floods) remain underdeveloped.

Broader efforts to include co-management in India include the draft Indian marine fisheries code which recommends a multi-tiered co-management structure encompassing village-level, district, state, and regional fisheries councils. Although the concept is yet to be implemented nationally, Kerala has taken initial steps. In 2017, the state amended its Fisheries Regulation Act to formally adopt a three-tiered council system, with dedicated staff and budget allocations; however, operationalization has been limited.

Dr. Naveen Namboothri, Trustee, Dakshin Foundation.

Experiences with the tuna fishery of Lakshadweep

The live-bait fishery is a critical aspect of the pole line tuna fishing and needs to be seen as an integral part of the latter. These fisheries evolved centuries ago on Minicoy Island and was transferred to other islands of Lakshadweep in the late 1950s through the efforts of the fisheries department. Minicoy Island also has intricate spatial and temporal management practices for baitfish that are based on traditional knowledge and customary practices. However, only the

technology aspects of the fisheries were transferred to the other islands of Lakshadweep but the live bait management practices were overlooked.

Along with the documentation of Minicoy's customary practices, Dakshin Foundation launched a participatory, co-created fisheries monitoring initiative to address the major data gaps in Lakshadweep's pole and line tuna fishery in 2014. The data collection was conducted in voluntary mode with the help of community. Over four years, the 4000 data points collected from four islands provided critical insights into the tuna harvest levels, live bait composition, catch per unit effort and the impacts of FADs on tuna stocks.

The participatory monitoring effort led to conversations around fisheries management and to initiation of co-management initiatives. The efforts culminated in a UT-level meeting at the head office of the fisheries department where fisher communities resolved to ban/restrict certain unsustainable practices including

- The harvesting of live bait fisheries with LED lights, which had become a very common practice by then.
- A ban on dumping tuna waste into the lagoon
- Phasing out the use of "mosquito nets" or fine meshed nets

The Government of Lakshadweep was on the verge of formalising this order but the COVID pandemic delayed this process. The subsequent political turmoil and push for a tourism-based economy changed the priorities on ground and these orders were not pursued further. Post-covid, many of the planned restrictions became even more irrelevant, with the emergence of tourism; which also reduced the pressure on live-bait capture, to the extent that it is not now considered as a top priority. While the co-management efforts did not really take off, the process of collectivization and building a sense of stewardship is likely to have long-term benefits for the Lakshadweep's fisheries.

A critical outcome was the internal power dynamics and the ability of the communities to address their own issues, not as external observers, but for the communities themselves. The trust between the community and DoF was strengthened by this process, where they got space to have open dialogue, bridge building, disagreement, etc. It also created an opportunity to convert knowledge into practice. A key takeaway is that focus on the process and skilful engagement with the community is essential for co-management successes. The process is not only important but empowering as well.

Dr S. Velvizhi, Director, Coastal and Marine Systems, MS Swaminathan Research Foundation

Mayiladuthurai District fisheries

The project supported by the Environmental Defence Fund aimed at building the capacity of village-level co-management committees to prepare village level fisheries co-management plans by engaging local communities, especially fishers and marginalized groups like fishing labourers, small boat owners, fish vendors, head-loaders, and the traditional panchayats. Although the Government of Tamil Nadu had issued a directive for establishing co-management

committees at multiple levels, including at the village level, these were often inactive or unknown to fishers. The project focused on forming new functional committees and enabling meaningful community participation to drive co-management from the bottom-up.

Two villages were selected to reflect diverse community profiles: Vanagiri, a larger and heterogeneous village with multiple fishing practices, and Madathukuppam a smaller, homogeneous village of artisanal fishers. The process involved forming new 13-member committees with gender balance in both villages, supported by the Fisheries Department. Orientation sessions were conducted to introduce members to the principles of co-management, legal frameworks, and the purpose of the government order. Initial resistance from traditional panchayat leaders, particularly in Vanagiri, was gradually overcome through training, exposure visits, and stakeholder dialogues that built trust and clarified roles.

Through structured consultations, the communities identified key challenges such as nearshore trawling, night fishing, illegal gear use, and conflicts between mechanized and small-scale fishers. The resulting co-management plans balanced fisheries conservation with livelihood needs and included a five-year implementation roadmap. These plans assigned clear responsibilities to committee members, government officials, and local institutions. The process also sparked greater ownership, with committees taking proactive steps such as writing formal petitions to district authorities to address coastal erosion and infrastructure issues.

The project demonstrated that, despite initial hesitation, fishing communities are willing and capable partners in co-management if approached respectfully and included in decision-making. The experience underlined the need for long-term facilitation, government support, and integration of livelihoods to sustain community engagement. It also highlighted the importance of building on existing social structures and allowing space for organic evolution of governance models. Overall, the initiative showed that grassroots-driven co-management can be both effective and scalable when aligned with community interests and supported through inclusive, participatory processes.

Mr C.M. Muralidharan, Consultant, FAO and former coordinator FIMSUL programme

Fisheries co-management: Concept to Practices

Mr. Muralidharan reflected on the concept and practice of fisheries co-management, drawing from his extensive experience with the FAO-UNTRS and FIMSUL projects, as well as the changes witnessed in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Puducherry. He shared insights into the evolution of fisheries co-management, tracing its origins to post-tsunami recovery initiatives. Early efforts by the FAO focused on “building back better,” rather than focusing on the relief and rehabilitation that has been invested by many other donors. These initiatives laid the groundwork for co-management, a collaborative governance model that brings together the state and fishing communities.

The FAO-World Bank FIMSUL (Fisheries Management for Sustainable Livelihoods) project played a critical role in institutionalizing this approach, steering states towards participatory fisheries management through policy reform and inclusive stakeholder engagement.

There were practical outcomes from field-level interventions. In Palk Bay, Tamil Nadu, issues such as trawl overcapacity and transboundary fishing conflicts with Sri Lanka were attempted to be addressed through stakeholder consultations, proposals for trawl fleet reduction, and the exploration of buyback schemes. Nagapattinam had much more structured co-management initiatives involving the traditional leadership systems at different levels. In Alappad, Kerala, a coastal village with strong traditional institutions, a Fisheries Management Council was formed by integrating karayogams, trade unions, and panchayats. This council adopted community-driven management measures for ring seine fishing, including restrictions on night fishing, limits on fishing trips per vessel, and a freeze on fleet expansion, highlighting the potential of community-led resource governance.

A significant contribution of the FIMSUL project (Phase 1 and phase 2) was the recommendation and piloting of a three-tier co-management system, which has since been incorporated into some state fisheries policies. At the village level, local councils engage traditional institutions or/and panchayat raj institutions; district-level platforms enable coordination among coastal communities; and state-level forums bring together government bodies, research institutions, and other stakeholders. Tamil Nadu and Kerala have formally adopted this model, while Puducherry issued a co-management policy in 2017 with a similar three-tier structure. In Tamil Nadu harbour management committees were also established under this framework to address issues related to fish hygiene, infrastructure development, and revenue generation.

While the structural foundation for co-management is now in place, its long-term effectiveness hinges on sustained facilitation, strong legal support, and continuous capacity building. Co-management lies at the core of the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM), aligning with its principles of inclusive governance, adaptive planning, and precautionary regulation. While significant progress has been made, continued investment is essential to embed co-management as a dynamic and responsive pillar of India's coastal governance landscape.

Dr Suresh, Independent Consultant, formerly with WorldFish

Managing Inland Fisheries

There have been several initiatives emphasizing community participation and sustainable resource use. One such is the Beel Fishery initiative in Assam, where fishing communities, government agencies, and research institutions worked together to implement co-management strategies.

Beel fishery in Assam was funded by World Bank and implemented under the Assam Agribusiness and Rural Development Project. The geographic area selected covered huge floodplain wetlands of Assam, spread over one lakh hectares, are vital to the livelihoods of thousands. The project adopted a participatory approach involving local communities in selected 1500 ha beel areas. Initial activities included awareness creation, baseline surveys, and scientific selection of beels in collaboration with the Department of Fisheries, Assam Agricultural University, and ICAR-CIFRI.

Each beel's, user groups were structured based on beel size and population density, with each group forming general bodies and management committees. Post-formation, communities implemented action plans including weed removal, bund strengthening, sediment clearing, and sanctuary creation which are named locally as Kattal. Native fish species were conserved, and nursery ponds were developed and managed by the communities themselves. Stock enhancement included indigenous fish like minor carps, supported by mentorship from WorldFish experts, who shared insights from similar co-management projects previously implemented in Bangladesh.

The success of the project led to its scaling-up across more districts in Assam and is now being practised in 14 districts of Assam. The project also ensured a 30% reservation for women participants, serves as a significant step towards encouraging gender equity. Recently these types of management models have emerged in Tamil Nadu and Odisha. In Tamil Nadu, women-led SHGs are practicing aquaculture in village ponds across Pudukkottai, Thanjavur, Tiruvarur, and Nagapattinam. For structured management, fishers in the villages also formed associations at village, district, and state levels, work with established bylaws guiding their operations. These groups have influenced policy, including revising fish culture tariffs to be on par with agriculture and implementing various government-supported programs.

These initiatives exemplify successful bottom-up development. They are now expanding into integrated aquaculture and are being considered for replication in the marine fisheries sector. Inland culture fisheries present an emerging area requiring supportive policies and legal frameworks to scale co-management further.

Mr Varun Tandon, Fisheries Consultant, FAO

Operational Guidance for Co-Management in Small-scale Fisheries

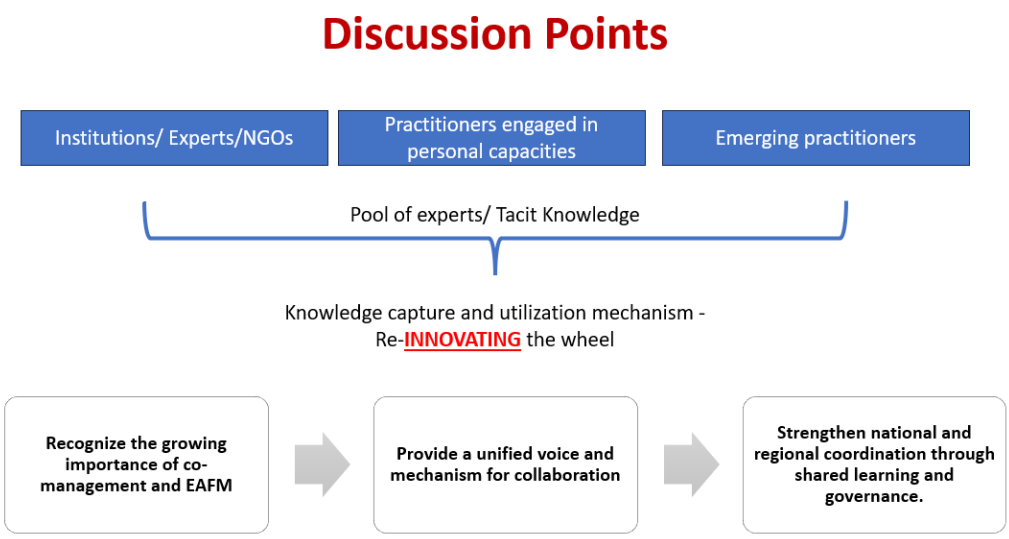
One of the workstreams of the current SIDA funded global project on the SSF Guidelines was co-management. As part of this a prepare practical SSF co-management guidance was being prepared with illustrative case studies integrating issues such as Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries, Climate Change and gender. This was necessary because there have been a lot of changes in the last 30 years since co-management was initiated; and the contexts have changed. The target group for preparation of this guidance was NGO staff, fisher leaders, consultants and facilitators. In the co-management implementation cycle, the formulation of fishery policy and legal framework formulation was needed.

A survey came up with four key takeaways: weak or inconsistent governance support, implementation challenges, the capacity of communities and the challenge of legal integration. Practitioners needed monitoring tools and capacity building materials with peer-to-peer exchange rather than print manuals. While conceptual material is available, practical operational guidance with relevant examples is needed. Hence what is being planned is an effective practical toolkit that supports practitioners working with communities with examples to identify and address bottlenecks in critical stages and also for sustainability of the co-management beyond classic projects. And then to look at capacity-building tools for appropriate support. What was also being planned was to look at leadership, communication, collaboration, negotiation, conflict management and such activities. The plan was to make it modular with games and participatory exercises and promote communities of practice and

create a network of practitioners. Towards this, gap analysis had been done and areas to be focused on had been agreed upon. At the co-designing stage, they were taking inputs from practitioners around the world to co-create the framework and source case studies before piloting and testing it out.

Discussion

Dr P. Krishnan, Director, BOBP-IGO, thanked the presenters and said that the previous session was to get a glimpse of what was happening in the field with reference to co-management. He said that the composition of the network was clear, comprising of the institutes, experts, NGOs, practitioners engaged in their personal capacities and emerging practitioners. This network could be used to capture the knowledge, to re-innovate (rather than re-invent) the wheel. This network could provide a unified voice and mechanism for collaboration and strengthen the national and regional coordination through shared learning and governance. The network could be formalized under the governance of the BOBLME II project for the initial few years. Given its strong institutional base and government support, the project could serve as an anchor during the formative phase. Over time, leadership may transition to national agencies, which are expected to play a significant role throughout. Efforts would also be made to establish similar structures in other countries, along with SEAFDEC, a regional partner, which would help in developing a regional network of practitioners during the BOBLME project period. Dr Krishnan said that many of those present could form the core group, anchored by the BOBP-A charter could be developed collectively. Initially, activities such as holding a write-shop could be organized so that experiences could be systematically documented in a structured template. The Department of Fisheries would be involved at every stage.



Mr. Sebastian Mathew from ICSF suggested inclusion of those from the forest department in addition to fisheries. Including co-management into legal frameworks could make it rigid. On the other hand, legal frameworks should be enabled to keep it flexible. He referred to the 2009 fisheries management guidebook's definition which referred to co-management as giving

exclusive rights to communities or fishery groups. However, the presentations made earlier were partnerships and did not talk about exclusive transfer of rights. With the multiplicity of groups in the fishing communities, they have to be made more forward-looking to see this as a positive initiative and something not depriving them of rights but empowering them. The community dimension had to be developed and strengthened so that eventually they could look after the resources.

Dr. Naveen Namboothiri expressed satisfaction that the concept which had appeared in the fishery policy in 2017 was at last moving forward. He said that there was a long path from developing frameworks to actually implementing them. The network initiative was a good initiative to bring everyone together and so far, work was happening in smaller groups and silos. He also pointed out that the framework had to be detailed out as context and scale mattered.

Dr. Velvizhi of MSSRF said that the network was a good initiative and suggested the inclusion of groups such as the eco-development committees of GOMBRT. She also mentioned that there were some fisher group initiatives in the Palk Bay which could be included.

Dr. Sunil Mohamed said that he had reservations over the inclusion of the Ministry of Environment as fisheries was always in conflict with environment in India, for example, as in the Palk Bay. He agreed that documentation of initiatives itself would be a very useful exercise.

Mr. Varun Tandon said that it was important to have some success metrics such as impact on the ground, reusability and so on. He said that Communities of Practice generally have a standard set of eight elements, which when put together, could serve as a charter for that community of practice. He said that the FAO was happy to leverage this as what was being planned is what they were thinking of. It would be useful to see how the sharing of best practices, tools, learnings, capacity-building materials worked and how reusable they were and in what context, so that they could be shared on the global platform.

Mr. C. M. Muralidharan said that the focus should be on hand-holding of functional officers and policy makers at the ground level. He said that the write shop was a good idea and said that material produced should be tailored to the Indian context.

Dr. Suresh opined that documenting existing activities including their impacts, scalability and replicability needs to be understood before the next meeting so that it could be understood in the regional context as well.

Dr. P. Krishnan said that the plan was to develop a template based on the various metrics discussed and then plan for the workshop.

Dr. E. Vivekanandan said that he thought the discussion would include who was to be part of the network, and what was intended to be achieved by forming the network. He opined that we need to hit the ground running, meet with the stakeholders or the communities. This should not be another paper network. Functioning of network partners had to be visualized. Questions such as whether the examples comply with EAFM principles had to be answered. It was necessary to prepare a roadmap which talked about ‘who’, ‘what’ and ‘how’.

Mr. Carlos Montero-Castaño said that co-management was essential to better manage fisheries. Specific fisheries where co-management is the most suitable strategy need to be identified as “case studies” to reflect the implementation of real-world management solutions rather than as experimental "pilots." It was necessary to set measurable goals, as without well-defined objectives, it becomes difficult to evaluate progress. A hands-on approach that actively involves network experts and government agencies across all levels is important to work toward concrete management outcomes. While the ecosystem approach to fisheries is fundamentally a social process, it must remain focused on achieving specific outcomes related to sustainability and resilience.

The long-term nature of successful fisheries management implies that achieving effective results can take decades, and co-management may further lengthen this timeline. It was essential to have a clear vision. Also, , harnessing the political momentum already present in certain Indian states where co-management frameworks have been formally recognized is the way forward. This political will has to be transformed into tangible actions, ensuring that the overarching vision for sustainable fisheries leads to real, on-the-ground changes rather than remaining an abstract concept.

Mr. Sebastian Mathew pointed to the spectrum of cases in terms of property rights that had been discussed. There was also extensive Blue Economy development at land and sea. It was necessary to broaden the scope of the MFRA to support communities to absorb new concepts, address migration and social protection; in general, take a holistic approach.

Dr Sunil Mohamed said that the network should offer training to the management council members.

Dr. Ananthan, P. S., said it was important to caution ourselves about what the network can do in the short term. It could serve as a virtual think tank consolidating experiences, influencing policy and legal frameworks. For example, could the network help the state rework MFRA to make it more conducive? He called for an incremental shift rather than a paradigm shift, as the former was easier to absorb.

Dr. Suresh felt that the focus should be on building capacity on governance issues rather than technical aspects; and that it was better to involve NGOs rather than government staff in co-management.

Mr. Rajdeep Mukherjee referred to the additional value on getting information from groups working on similar fisheries but in different locations, such as Dakshin in Lakshadweep and BOBP in the Maldives tuna live-bait fishery. There was also need to develop standardized terminology. He agreed with Dr Ananthan that what was required was nudging and behavioural change.

Dr. P. Krishnan summed up the discussions saying that a major output would be that if there is a discussion on co-management in the country, the network would be the one the government would reach out to, and the network would represent a common voice. The platform would also be the place for the government to channel its funds for ground action.

CHENNAI DECLARATION

A Resolution to Network EAFM and Co-Management Practitioners in in India

31 July 2025

The Background

The fisheries sector plays a pivotal role in India's economy, contributing significantly to national income, exports, food and nutritional security, and employment generation. The sector supports the livelihoods of nearly 30 million people, particularly from marginalized and vulnerable communities. The fisheries are diverse in nature, supported by a range of ecosystems, from inland waters through brackish-water systems to the marine realm. The 2017 National Policy on Marine Fisheries talks about EAFM and Co-management being the way forward.

A number of local management regimes and initiatives to manage fisheries exist, that have evolved with considerations of equity or have been developed and implemented through projects and organisations working in the sector. The diversity of fisheries and fishing communities has also resulted in a diversity of experiences in managing them. But those working on co-management and related activities are working in silos.

To summarize, *India has a pool of co-management practitioners, who are scattered across diverse fisheries. To facilitate cross-learning, build on what is already done, and engage the practitioners to develop co-management arrangements on an expanded scale, networking the practitioners in the country is a practical option with a good chance of achieving the desired outcome*.

Advantage BOBLME II

The BOBLME Phase II project titled "Sustainable Management of Fisheries, Marine Living Resources and their Habitats in the Bay of Bengal Region for the Benefit of Coastal States and Communities" is being implemented by BOBP-IGO in its four member countries of Bangladesh, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka. The project has five components of which Component 1 is 'Sustainable Management of Fisheries'. Outcome 1.1 of this component is "The Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM) institutionalized at national level, including targeted transboundary fish stocks". Two EAFM sites have been identified in each of the four countries for which management plans are to be developed and implemented.

Seize the Chance

- The prospect of designing change through affirmative EAFM with co-management as a core principle
- An opportunity and purpose to synthesize and build on the lessons learned from decades of practice in fisheries management as well as to channelize them in the field

- A ready-made institutional structure at the national level which could be utilized to support the network.
- High potential for replicating the structure in other BOBLME countries and ensuring cross-learnings considering many similarities in the fisheries of the countries.

Needed: A single voice

In this context, a scoping meeting was convened on 'Establishing a Network of Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) and Co-Management Practitioners' on 31st July, 2025. The attendees included representatives from government, academia, fisheries research institutions, non-governmental organisations and independent practitioners. The meeting saw overwhelming support for creation of **a network of EAFM and Co-management practitioners.** Key roles to be played by this network were identified as follows:

- **Documentation** of case studies on a standardized template
- **Development** of a knowledge-sharing platform
- **Building** a virtual community of practice
- **A single voice** for EAFM and CoM practices and practitioners

Towards this, mechanisms would be needed to

- **Provide adequate funding and resource allocation mechanisms** to support capacity-building, institutional strengthening, research and policy advocacy
- **Strengthen institutional capacities** enabling organisations like BOBP-IGO to take the lead in building and operationalizing the network.

The outcome of the scoping workshop was adopted as the "Chennai Declaration: A Resolution to network EAFM and Co-Management Practitioners in Fisheries in India"

The Declaration

Acknowledging the diversity of marine, coastal, and inland ecosystems and the diverse fisheries management systems that exist in various forms;

Noting that Ecosystem Based Fisheries Management, a holistic approach to managing fisheries that considers the entire ecosystem, including human well-being, rather than just focusing on target fish populations, is the way forward in fisheries management as mentioned in the NMPF, 2017

Accepting that the core of EAFM is co-management which is based on shared responsibility, participatory decision-making, and mutual accountability between fishing communities, government agencies, researchers, and civil society and offers a proven pathway to equitable and resilient fisheries;

Recognizing the absence of a platform for documentation, collation and exchange of information on EAFM and co-management practices,

- Call for the establishment of a **Network of EAFM and Co-Management Practitioners in Fisheries in India (FishComNet)** under the BOBLME Phase II project
- **FishComNet** will serve as **a single voice** on EAFM and co-management implementation
- **BOBP-IGO** to operationalize the network through appropriate mechanisms

Purpose

The Network shall serve as a platform to:

- Facilitate exchange of experiences, knowledge, and good practices in fisheries co-management.
- Strengthen the capacity of practitioners through training, peer learning, and mentorship.
- Support the integration of co-management principles into fisheries laws, policies, and local governance systems.
- Enhance collaboration among communities, government, research institutions, and NGOs.
- Serve as a single voice on EAFM and co-management implementation

Activities

The Network will:

- Organise regular forums, workshops, and webinars.
- Develop and maintain a repository of co-management case studies, tools, and policies.
- Facilitate community-to-community exchanges and learning visits.
- Undertake joint research and documentation of lessons learned.

- Advocate for enabling legal and institutional frameworks for co-management.

Membership

Members would include EAFM and co-management practitioners from:

- Academic and research institutions.
- State and central fisheries departments
- NGOs, CBOs
- Community representatives
- Independent practitioners and experts.

Structure

The Network shall have:

- A Steering Committee representing diverse stakeholder groups to guide activities.
- A Secretariat to coordinate communication, events, and resources.

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