



One of the matters uppermost in the minds of people who have been associated with the Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP) is whether it will develop as an Inter-Governmental Organization (IGO) to meet the growing needs of the coastal fisheries in the Bay of Bengal (BOB) region – or end up as a page in the annals of history.

The Documentation of Learnings of the Third Phase (BOBP/REP/85), though not intended to explore the member-countries' views on the future of BOBP, came out with a clear message that the Programme should continue to tackle the challenges of fisheries in the region. Subsequently, in Phuket, Thailand, representatives of the national governments at the 24th Advisory Committee Meeting in October 1999 voiced clearly and categorically, through the Phuket Declaration, their desire to see BOBP emerge as an IGO.

Why an IGO?

The role of coastal fisheries in food security, employment and income in the BOB countries is critical. The BOB large marine ecosystem supports some 6-8 million fish harvesters directly, of whom about 90 percent are small-scale fishermen. Besides, about 35-40 million others are engaged in ancillary activities relating to fisheries. The region covers some of the most productive waters in the world and a fisheries which is characterized by complexities of multi-gear and multi-species resources.

However, in the new millennium, small-scale fisheries in the BOB region is confronted with tough problems and challenges. Declining catches, continuous degradation of the environment, post-harvest losses, conflicts between large-scale and small-

scale harvesters, and a host of other issues fast threaten the livelihood of millions of small-scale fishers.

Governments in the region have long recognised the need for fisheries management to improve the situation, but have lacked resources and technical expertise, even the will. The changes necessary to develop small-scale fisheries in general, and in the BOB region in particular, are influenced by the complex interaction of social, political, economic and technological forces. Further, there is often strong resistance to change – because small-scale fisher communities are deeply rooted in tradition. To effect substantive transformation through changes in attitudes, knowledge, and skills and through the adoption of more efficient and effective methods of resource utilization, substantial effort would be required at all levels.

With the emergence of a new global order in the management of fisheries, the responsibilities on the national governments have increased manifold. Therefore, attainment of national economic and social goals for the well-being of fisher families and for the sustainable development of fishery resources would call for much greater effort on their part.

Can the national efforts be supplemented and complemented by regional initiatives?

The BOBP has an excellent track record as catalyst and consultant in developing, demonstrating and promoting new techniques and technologies to help improve the conditions of small-scale fisher communities in the region. The Programme's past activities – many of them of a pioneering nature – have laid a strong foundation for small-scale fisheries development and management. An IGO would carry the work forward.

The IGO would stimulate and strengthen national management efforts, the prime need in fisheries today. More. Experiences in every member country of BOBP through the Programme's pilot activities provide lessons and learnings useful for all, obviating the need for expensive duplication of effort. During the Third Phase, Malaysia's experiences

with national parks, India's efforts with conflict resolution in Kanniyakumari, Thailand's work with community-based fisheries management, and Sri Lanka's pilot project on ornamental fisheries were instructive examples of complex and significant management initiatives. BOBP has been instrumental in sensitizing national governments to the needs of good management. This work requires continuity. The benefits of management are now well recognized, but the methods and approaches are still not well understood or implemented. The Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries needs to be taken to user groups. People's participation and women's empowerment must be institutionalised, and be an integral part of the development and management process – at the policy-making level, also at the grassroots level, in the many thousand fishing villages of the region. Management regulations must be harmonised and streamlined.

There are many other areas where regional or sub-regional initiatives would be of immense value. Enforcement of regulations concerning capture fisheries. A common vessel monitoring system. Stock surveys. Methods to estimate harvestable potential. Networking of fishermen cooperatives and associations. Networking of information. Quality assurance in fish and fishery products. Specialised services for technical

backstopping. Communication strategies for fisheries management.

Establishing a new order in fisheries management in the BOB large marine ecosystem can be possible only through co-operative effort, joint initiatives and a better understanding by member-countries of the region of one another's problems. Shared waters need shared management. There cannot be a better mechanism than the BOBP for establishing a new paradigm in natural resources management or for addressing the common requirements and needs of small-scale marine fisheries of the region.

As a powerful catalyst of small-scale fisheries development and management in the region for over 20 years, BOBP has effectively demonstrated what regional co-operation can achieve. It is incomparable within the region as a generator of ideas, as an engine of change or as a promoter of exchange of experiences in small-scale fisheries. As an IGO, it will continue to meet the aspirations of member-countries for promoting sustainable and responsible fisheries.

BOBP as an IGO will be the best gift of the new millennium to fisheries in the region. *Let us join hands in making this gift possible.*

Y.S. Yadava