

Re-energizing for Dignity and Prosperity

The 4th International General Assembly of the World Forum of Fisher People (WFFP) was held at Negombo, Sri Lanka

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On 28 November 2007, 82 small-scale fishery representatives from 30 different countries descended on Negombo, Sri Lanka, to take part in the 4th General Assembly of the World Forum of Fisher People (WFFP). The host organization, National Fisheries Solidarity (NAFSO), transported all delegates to the conference venue through streets adorned with welcoming banners. A warm, traditional Sri Lankan cultural performance of rhythmic drumbeats and dance, performed by members of the local fishing communities, greeted the delegates as they entered the Assembly venue. All the delegates and observers seemed to readily embrace the message of peace and dignity for fisherfolk around the world. Such was the spirit of welcome and togetherness that enveloped the Assembly.

But the Assembly had many more pressing issues to deal with. Key amongst these were developing strategies to engage with the negative impacts of the world's globalized economy on small-scale fishers; dealing with the socioeconomic and political aftermath of the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004; and re-establishing internal stability within WFFP after the turmoil that has bedeviled the organization over the last couple of years.

Ironically, it was the latter issue that was the easiest to deal with. The Assembly considered, and unanimously endorsed, the decisions of the Co-ordinating Committee meetings held in Hong Kong and the Basque Country that launched and subsequently received the report of the Independent

Investigation Team that probed the validity of the allegations of misappropriation of funds. The investigation team's report cleared all officials from all the misappropriation allegations. Its report was unanimously accepted. The Assembly similarly accepted proposals for amendments to the WFFP constitution in order to strengthen the organization's internal democratic functioning. A resolution proposed by the delegate from Martinique, calling on those making the unfounded allegations to cease from doing so and to join the struggle for the socioeconomic rights and human dignity of poor fishers across the world, was formally endorsed by all delegates. Explicitly, the Assembly expressed confidence in the contributions and efforts of Thomas Kocherry, Herman Kumara and the entire Co-ordinating Committee in advancing the plight of the poor fisherfolk of the world. With that, within WFFP, the internal turmoil was finally put to rest.

The Assembly afforded an opportunity for representatives to present reports of the key issues facing the traditional fishing communities in their respective countries and what they have done to engage with these issues. The reports reflected the wide range of problems and challenges that prevail in each country.

Diverse impacts

They stressed the diverse impacts that global trade practices and national policies have had on the lives of small-scale, traditional fishers. They highlighted matters pertaining to human rights abuses, marginalization

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of poor fishers and women, in particular, lack of official and institutional support for fisherfolk, and, in some cases, oppressive measures used by nation States against traditional fishers from neighbouring countries. Specifically, the reports highlighted the negative impact of fisheries management on the dignity and livelihoods needs of coastal communities.

The delegates from Sierra Leone took pains to point out how the voices of their fisherfolk have not been heard by the country's authorities, and how that undermined the values of democratic practice. The denial of the democratic rights of traditional fishers was echoed by delegates from all continents, who felt it was an issue critical for the formulation and implementation of legislation, allocation of fishing rights, harvesting, packaging and marketing of fish and fish products.

The Assembly also heard how many national conservation practices were insensitive to people's needs and how, with a paradigm shift, environmental conservation and human rights could be made to run in harmony with each other. This was recognized as a global problem, given the exclusively conservationist approach seen in most countries. Importantly, the degradation of mangroves was raised in the context of the natural role they could have played in reducing the devastating impact of the 2004 tsunami on coastal communities.

The country reports also illustrated how many of these issues prevailed, albeit in somewhat different forms, in what are generally regarded as countries with 'developed' economies, like Canada and Spain. In these countries, too, historically, traditional fishing communities have experienced similar negative impacts on their livelihoods as those experienced in developing countries. From the reports it became evident that the 'marginalization' of traditional fishing communities was a global phenomenon, irrespective of geographic location.

The principal issue boiled down to how WFFP could re-emerge as a global body to face the challenges facing poor fisherfolk around the world. In that respect, the following can be isolated as

the key issues that emerged from the country reports and debates at the Assembly, which will be incorporated into WFFP's agenda and programme of work in the forthcoming period.

The Assembly delegates recognized that all peoples in historically traditional fishing communities had a right to basic human rights, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which included basic socioeconomic rights. Accordingly, there should be official recognition of their right to be able to make a decent and dignified living off aquatic resources by interacting with natural marine and other aquatic-born resources for livelihoods and historical cultural practices; consequently, it should be recognized that these resources must be protected to enable them to do so. In contrast, individual fishing property rights, as envisaged in systems that promote fishing quotas, delegates noted, allocate the right to harvest a specific proportion of fish for commercial gain. The Assembly noted that this 'property ownership of quota' of a specific tonnage of fish is not synonymous with livelihoods rights over marine resources. Fishing for livelihoods, and related cultural practices, are human rights—not commercial exercises. Hence, delegates believed, recog-

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tion should be given to the traditional knowledge and practices of communities that help maintain their identities and ability to live in harmony with their immediate environment in order to sustain their livelihoods.

Forthcoming meet

The Assembly resolved to embark on advocacy programmes at the national and global levels to secure and protect these rights. The delegates wished for a dynamic presence and participation at the forthcoming conference to be convened by the Food and Agriculture

Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Bangkok in 2008.

The Assembly noted and welcomed the recently adopted Work in Fishing Convention, 2007, of the International Labour Organization (ILO). It was also noted that many improvements needed to be made to the Convention but that it would be useful if such improvements are based on the actual experiences of implementing the Convention in different countries.

Consequently, the Assembly agreed that WFFP members should actively engage in a national programme to ensure that the provisions of the ILO Convention are implemented through national legislation and related practices. To ensure this, national awareness had to be raised about the Convention through co-operative campaigns with allied national and international groupings, to secure implementation of the provisions of the Convention. Ongoing evaluations of the outcome of these campaigns would form the basis for further proposals for improvements to the protocol.

The Assembly noted that the issue of managing coastal areas has become critical in most countries. Many man-

and called for plans that would factor in considerations of equity and sustainability.

Out of necessity, these efforts need to accommodate disaster management plans, particularly in areas that are vulnerable to natural disasters such as tsunamis. In this regard, delegates unanimously agreed that governments should establish a 'national autonomous disaster management authority' that should be able to deal with these challenges effectively. The post-tsunami challenges in Sri Lanka provided a substantive motivation for such a decision. Such intervention was felt to be urgent, and essential, given the additional challenges that are emerging as a result of climate change and its impact on coastal communities. The Assembly agreed that all WFFP members must give ongoing attention to the matter at the national level.

Internationally, in most countries, the rights of women and the need for gender equity remain under threat. Women are the most vulnerable section of society, who suffer the inequities in policy and management practices in the fishing industry. Many nation States do not have specific programmes to deal with this challenge. The Assembly resolved to build greater solidarity amongst women in fishing communities so that more effective campaigns can be mounted to protect their rights. In particular, international exchange programmes will be considered. Empowering coastal women, specifically, will become a specific goal of the campaign.

Many country reports presented at the Assembly reflected on how coastal communities suffer under the negative trade practices promoted by national and international bodies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). Such practices contribute to the continued marginalization of poor fishing communities as their work and output fetch less value on the global market.

Large-scale fishing

Policies like individual transferable quotas (ITQs), subsidies, and the promotion of the large-scale fishing industry are especially problematic. In particular, as argued by the

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agement regimes eroded the rights of adjacent communities to live interactively with the aquatic resources in those areas. The Assembly noted that marine protected areas (MPAs) may be necessary in certain instances but they should be democratically considered in conjunction with the basic livelihoods needs of fishing communities living in, or adjacent to, such areas.

Post-tsunami developments in some countries have also produced new challenges for traditional fishing activities and other commercial uses of near-shore land space. The Assembly noted that the global challenges on coastal land space were diverse,

representatives from Thailand, they lead to the continued use of destructive fishing gear, privatization of the sea, and the encouragement of large-scale fishing practices that destroy community rights, as well as the unsustainable use of marine resources and the adjacent land.

The Assembly also engaged in wide-ranging debate and discussion on many other pertinent issues that have an impact on coastal communities. These included:

- the need to make a distinction between destructive tourism practices and positive and developmentally sensitive tourism possibilities;
- the negative impact on the lives of fishers who are victims of trans-border fishing activities and the political tensions between nation States, which resulted in the Assembly demanding an ongoing global campaign for the release of jailed fishers who are caught in unintentional transboundary crossings, and for the unconditional return of their gear and protection of their human rights;
- the need to provide ongoing capacity building for communities to fight for their rights;
- the need to provide skills training programmes to enable poor coastal communities to engage in economic development projects; and
- the need to create greater awareness amongst local communities and national governments of their rights and responsibilities as conceived in many international conventions.

The issues described above will form the cornerstone of the WFFP programme for the next few years. The annual Co-ordinating Committee meetings will assess these campaigns and improve them. It is important to note that the Assembly agreed that certain identified aspects of the campaigns must be carried out at the national level by member organizations while others will be done at the global level, and co-ordinated by the Co-ordinating Committee.

There was general agreement that the Assembly was a positive one. Electing a new committee proved challeng-

ing, as was to be expected, as members wanted to ensure that the incoming committee should reflect the unified energy within the organization. In keeping with the general spirit of the Assembly, the election of the new committee was unanimous.

The new Co-ordinating Committee consists of representatives from South Africa, Canada, Sri Lanka, Spain, Martinique, Honduras, Pakistan, India, Kenya, Mauritania and New Zealand. In addition, the Assembly also elected two Special Invitees, one from Senegal and the other from India, individuals who have made significant contributions to the founding and work of WFFP, and who will serve for the term of the current Co-ordinating Committee.

To confirm this re-energized unity within WFFP, the Assembly concluded with the new Co-ordinating Committee making the following pledge publicly:

- We will work as a team.
- We will have regular communication among ourselves through tele-conferences every three months.
- We will communicate in the three languages of WFFP, namely, Spanish, French and English.
- We will implement our global fishery policy.
- We will implement all WFFP decisions.
- Today, 3rd December 2007, we launch a movement of planting trees and mangroves wherever we are.
- We will celebrate every 21 November as World Fisheries Day for the traditional fisher people of the world, who depend on water bodies, and coastal and fish resources for a livelihood, and who own and manage these resources as natural capital.

With this being done, the Assembly thanked NAFSO and the Sri Lankan fisher people for the energetic and dedicated manner in which they had hosted the WFFP.

The Assembly ended in a colourful celebration of culture and dance symbolizing human dignity and prosperity. ❧

THOMAS KOCHERRY



Mass rally on the occasion of the 4th International General Assembly of the World Forum of Fisher People (WFFP) at Negombo, Sri Lanka

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