

Comment

Act responsibly

The fisheries world is today awash with talk of responsibility. Nothing exemplifies this better than the recent Technical Consultation on the FAO'S Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing, on which we have a detailed report in this issue of SAMUDRA.

Since the contemporary world is not exactly happy home to such noble concepts, it might be worth pondering over the origins of such a notion. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines 'responsible' as 'liable to be called to account', 'morally accountable for one's actions' and 'capable of rational conduct'.

To talk about the concept of 'responsible fishing', therefore, would be to presume an explicitly ethical undertone. If this were the case, the concept would immediately advance beyond conventional fisheries management regimes. Such an outcome would certainly be laudatory.

Unfortunately, in this case, nothing of the sort has happened to date. This is evident from a review of the Articles of the Code and its guidelines and from listening to the acerbic debate that took place in the FAO conference room. There is thus no indication yet that the content of the Code has taken sufficient cognizance of the meaning of responsibility in all its connotations.

The Code, as it now stands, is a sad testimony to the fact that, as far as fisheries are concerned, biologists, lawyers and technologists still rule the roost. Unless economic, social and ethical goals are dragged on to the centre stage of fisheries management, the Code will remain inchoate. It may well have to struggle hard to retain the honorific tag 'responsible'.

That would surely be a pity, for the facts are compelling. Over 60 per cent of the fish used for direct human consumption still comes from the artisanal and small-scale sector. Around 100 million people worldwide, especially in the developing countries, are dependent on this sector for their life and livelihood. For this reason, as well as for the fact that they are among the poorest of the world's populations, it is important to recognize their right to social justice in manifold terms. Without doubt, they are the largest stakeholders in fisheries. They should therefore receive the greatest prominence in the Code.

The Technical Consultation in Rome brought together over 75 countries and several inter-government and non-governmental organizations. The FAO Secretariat made commendable efforts to ensure the participation of various user groups and to make the consultation a transparent process.

Yet, what transpired at Rome can be seen as, at best, the beginning of a process. Only overtime will the Code accumulate substance. Meanwhile, we must hope that the process acquires a greater sense of priority, especially with regard to the artisanal and small-scale fishing communities.

But ominous questions remain. Will the process continue to be hostage to the wrangling between coastal states and distant-water fishing nations? Will it be misused to nurse bruises and settle scores at the UN Conference on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks?

While the Code is not legally binding, its contents could fashion an effective tool for better fisheries management. It could actually help ameliorate the present crisis in world fisheries and prevent the displacement of hundreds of thousands of fishworkers and their dependents.

To be sure, the task is onerous. It demands collective responsibility as well as a dispassionate ability to come together to act above partisan considerations. But that is precisely what responsible people ought to do. It is not just enough to talk of a 'responsible' code of conduct.

