

Out of the Trenches

Future SSF summits should help small-scale fishing communities defend their spaces in all international forums in the context of conservation and marine and coastal area development

We arrived in Rome with two questions, at the very least. One: will it be possible to develop a small-scale fisheries meeting based on the efforts and negotiations of the real fisheries movements, on their principles, values and efforts? Two: will the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) be able to maintain the urgency of addressing the issues of this subsector as a priority in the fulfilment of its mandate to reduce hunger and poverty?

From my point of view, the SSF Summit guaranteed a fresh and innovative space for discussions on fisherfolks' movements. It strengthened what has been a fundamental struggle of fishers towards the implementation of a human rights perspective in the approach to protection, development and sustainable use of water resources. Much of this success was due to the hard work put in by the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC). The success also drew from the collaboration, camaraderie and fundamental respect among like-minded organizations for providing and managing spaces for dialogue. FAO must be acknowledged for sharing a space that, although not neutral, allowed an excellent logistics support for the complex conversations held at the Summit.

On the other side, the SSF Summit demonstrated the fragility of the process needed to implement the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines), agreed on ten years ago in 2014. It made evident the loss of a decade as well as the acute and difficult situation confronting the subsector. Given the 'voluntary' nature of the mandate, national governments have not done

enough to recognize its value and the need for a comprehensive, inter-institutional and responsible approach to its implementation.

The SSF Summit did provide the opportunity for personal interactions among varied stakeholders. One aspect that came up was the need to go beyond the agenda of FAO's Committee on Fisheries (COFI). Participants understood the need to extend the struggle to other spaces that governments use for the discussion of conservation and coastal and marine development. The supporters of small-scale fishers have been absent from these spaces. This absence can result in national governments abandoning their responsibility to stay within the bounds of a human rights-based vision that posits greater equity and justice in the distribution of benefits from political and economic decisions supposedly aimed at ensuring the sustainability of the small-scale fisheries sector.

There should be a third, a fourth and a fifth summit, and FAO and other organizations interested in the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans should be required to support, and continue to support, fisher movements to conduct such meetings every two years.

Understanding that small-scale fisherfolk will now fight for their rights in other forums and other spaces as well, these organizations should learn from their struggles and demands, and make up their minds to support them. If not, they will find themselves stuck in the trenches that trap those who suffer the cost of ocean conservation and development.

This is what we hope will begin to change, thanks to future fisheries meetings inspired by the SSF Summit. ♣

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