

# PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES GUIDELINES

By Firoza Buranudeen

*The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) is the first internationally-agreed instrument dedicated entirely to the small-scale fisheries sector. Also noteworthy is the fact that this guidance document is the result of extensive global dialogue and consultation over the course of three years, involving fishers, fish workers and other stakeholders from more than 120 countries. This year (2024), being the tenth year of the existence of the SSF Guidelines, is an opportune moment in history to renew global commitment to its ideals, while continuing to place participatory communication at the heart of all awareness, dissemination and empowerment initiatives.*



*Training on homestead aquaculture to women, Faridpur, Bangladesh.*

Participatory communication, as the name suggests, seeks to involve, engage and empower stakeholders in decision-making processes, thereby incorporating their knowledge and perspectives and fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among fishers and their communities. One important result of effective participatory communication strategies is the generation of data and scientific knowledge which is crucial for fisheries management decisions at a national level, as well as driving greater public support for management decisions, promoting fisheries governance and sustainable use of resources.

The effectiveness of participatory communication is predicated upon the need to ensure that communication processes are transparent in order to maintain the trust, engagement, and full participation of fishers and their communities. Too often, these fishers and community representatives are invited to meetings and discussions where the approach, language and jargon used tend to exclude them from meaningful participation. Furthermore, the subtly paternalistic top-down system of governance in many countries in the global south may result in decisions being made, away from the realities on the ground and in a one-size-fits-all format.

Participation may be passive, where at the lowest level, the fisheries stakeholders may merely receive information with limited room for

feedback. The next level up might feature researchers and government representatives meeting with stakeholders to ask questions, but the final analysis and decision-making still lie with the former rather than the fishers themselves. An improvement on this process is when primary stakeholders are involved in analysis and discussions on the merits (or otherwise) of set objectives and how and what should be done to realize those objectives. However, the most effective participation process, not surprisingly, is where primary stakeholders (and this must include women as well as all traditionally marginalized groups) are capable and willing to become involved in the process; and take part in decision-making which eventually leads to empowerment. The goal in any communication process is therefore self-management, which could possibly be regarded as the most advanced form of participation.

One of the most important guidance documents related to participatory processes in the small-scale fisheries sector is the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines)<sup>1</sup>. Underpinned by the results of extensive consultation with fishers and their communities, the Guidelines constitute the first internationally-agreed instrument dedicated entirely to the small-scale fisheries sector.

<sup>1</sup> [SSF-Guidelines@fao.org](mailto:SSF-Guidelines@fao.org)

## The SSF Guidelines: a participatory communication roadmap

The SSF Guidelines are the result of a bottom-up participatory development process based on the recommendations of the Twenty-ninth and Thirtieth Sessions of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI). Between 2010 and 2013, FAO facilitated a global process that involved more than 4 000 representatives of governments, small-scale fishers, fish workers and their organizations, researchers, development partners and other relevant stakeholders from more than 120 countries in six regional and more than 20 civil society organization-led national consultative meetings. The International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) was one of the leading civil society organizations that was instrumental in making the formulation of these Guidelines an extremely participatory process<sup>2</sup>.

The outcomes of these consultations constituted the final text of the SSF Guidelines, which was subsequently endorsed by the Thirty-first Session of COFI in June 2014. It was hailed as a major achievement towards ensuring secure and sustainable small-scale fisheries, and this year (2024) marks the 10th Anniversary of this ground-breaking document.

The SSF Guidelines are consistent with the promotion and protection of human rights, including equality and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, accountability and the rule of law, and the principle that all human rights are universal, indivisible, inter-related and inter-dependent. Functioning as a political, legal and moral roadmap, the Guidelines also complement the 1995 FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries as well as other voluntary international instruments, such as the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (Tenure Guidelines) and the Voluntary Guidelines to support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security (Right to Food Guidelines), as applicable.

## Towards an enabling environment

There are several clauses within the SSF Guidelines which refer either directly to, or imply, the vital role of participatory communication as a vehicle for development and empowerment of the small-scale sector. Examples include:

- Through consultation, participation and publicizing, gender-sensitive policies and laws on regulated spatial planning should be developed as appropriate (Clause 10.2);
- Small-scale fisheries stakeholders.....should establish networks and platforms for the exchange of experiences and information and to facilitate their involvement in policy-and decision-making processes relevant to small-scale fishing communities (Clause 10.6);
- All stakeholders and small-scale fisheries communities should recognize the importance of communication and information, which are necessary for effective decision-making (Clause 11.2);
- All parties should recognize small-scale fishing communities as holders, providers and receivers of knowledge (Clause 11.4);
- Taking into account the social and cultural dimensions, appropriate approaches, tools and media should be used for communication with and capacity development for small-scale fishing communities (Clause 11.8);
- States and other parties should enhance the capacity of small-scale fishing communities in order to enable them to participate in decision-making processes (Clause 12.1); and
- All parties should recognize that capacity development should build on existing knowledge and skills and be a two-way process of knowledge transfer.....(Clause 12.3).

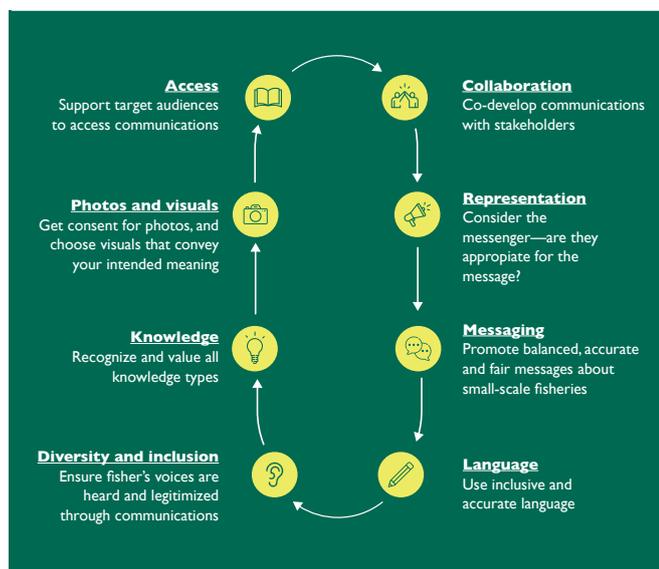


Having thus firmly placed participatory communication at the heart of awareness, dissemination and empowerment initiatives, implementation of the SSF Guidelines requires much thought in the identification of stakeholders and the best approaches for an inclusive dialogue; as well as the socio-economic and political landscape, taking into account the varying capacities and commitment in each country. Indeed, several countries have been implementing

various components of the SSF Guidelines to different extents and there is a need to ensure that the ideals contained in the roadmap are relatable and implementable even in countries with limited resources.

<sup>2</sup> John Kurien, Founder Member of the ICSF, had authored an interesting article entitled "Democratizing the implementation of the Small-scale Fisheries Guidelines", which was published in the INFOFISH International, January/February 2024 issue. The article can be viewed at: <https://infofish.org/v4/index.php/democratizing-the-implementation-of-the-small-scale-fisheries-guidelines>.

**Figure 1. Summary of practices to ensure ethical and inclusive communication on small-scale fisheries<sup>3</sup>**



With this in mind, a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework (MEL4SSF) was developed by FAO, WorldFish and the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA). This was followed by a handbook which was seen as an essential component in implementing

<sup>3</sup> Bevitt, K., Cohen, P.J., Diver, R., Kutub Uddin, M., Lukanga, E., Patel, A., Roshan, M., Solis Rivera, V., Westlund, L. 2022. A good practice guide for ethical and inclusive communications involving small-scale fisheries. Penang, Malaysia, WorldFish and Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0548en>.

the Framework<sup>4</sup>. Several agencies—governments, NGOs, fishworker organizations and civil society bodies as well as other interested actors—are encouraged to use the handbook in a participatory mode to further the implementation process, as indicated in Paragraph 13.5 of the SSF Guidelines which calls for “legitimate representatives of small-scale fishing communities [to] be involved both in the development and application of implementation strategies for the SSF Guidelines and in monitoring.”

## Summary

The SSF Guidelines constitute the first international instrument that focuses on the typically under-valued and globally under-represented small-scale fisheries sector. What also makes the Guidelines roadmap different from many previous documents is that it goes fisheries. The Guidelines highlight the rights of fishers and fish workers; and are aimed at all actors striving to secure sustainable small-scale fisheries in order to end hunger and poverty, and strengthen human rights.

Promoting support for the goals contained in the SSF Guidelines; mainstreaming the necessary messages; and guiding dialogue, policy processes and actions at national, regional and international level are all part of a multi-staged, multi-layered process. The effectiveness of these actions necessitates that all the important stakeholders in this complex process feel that they have a sense of ownership over their livelihoods and lives, and that their voices truly matter. These goals will remain elusive without a real commitment by all parties towards an inclusive and transparent participatory communication approach.

<sup>4</sup> FAO. 2023. Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework. A handbook in support of the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc8688en>

## Examples of participatory communication in the small-scale fisheries sector



This putitor mahseer (*Tor putitora*) fish was collected from Devarmatha spring to study how the species is faring there and was later released back.

### Example 1: Conservation of endangered species

- Unchecked logging and quarrying of rocks from streambeds in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts had led to springs drying up and populations of putitor mahseer fish, an endangered species, disappearing.
- The situation was worsened by climate change impacts, characterized here by a more intense dry season during which even streams that once ran year-round now dry up.
- A project launched in 2016 and backed by USAID and the UNDP is working with indigenous communities in Bangladesh to reverse this decline, starting with efforts to cut down on logging and quarrying.
- As a result of these efforts, areas where forests have been conserved have seen the flow of springs stabilize and populations of putitor mahseer and other fish revive.

Source: Mongabay

### Example 2: Empowering women

#### Papua New Guinea



Women in Papua New Guinea have been able to enhance their incomes through FAO-Thiaroye Technology (FTT)

- The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) introduced the FAO-Thiaroye Technology (FTT) in Papua New Guinea to address the challenges of post-harvest losses within the fisheries sector and to provide better market opportunities.
- Women are integral to the fish sector in PNG, traditionally dominating fish processing and local market sales. However, they often face limitations in resources and knowledge necessary for enhancing and managing their practices and business growth. FAO is actively working on empowering women's business groups.
- The lessons learned emphasize the importance of training and extension programs focused on business management, financial literacy, and cooperative operations, in alignment with the unique needs and customary practices of the local fishing communities.

Source: FAO

#### Thailand



- In the Thai province of Pathum Thani is a cooperative called the Lam Sai Pattana Community Enterprise. Working together with a business consultancy, the Enterprise sells fresh whole catfish and a wide range of processed products such as the popular crispy fish chips snack.
- The core team of women running the operations have won awards and are widely recognized as "Smart Farmers" whose role now includes conducting training for others.
- The Enterprise uses the profits to fund community and charitable activities such as funeral aid, and organizing children's day events in communities.

Source: Empowering women in small-scale aquaculture: the women's cooperative in Thailand. INFOFISH International Issue 5/2022

### Example 3: Empowering communities



- P2MKP Winner Perkasa Indonesia Unggul, an institution authorized by the Indonesian Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, carries out mentoring and training activities for fishers and farmers in coastal areas.

Source: Small-scale seaweed processing in Indonesia. INFOFISH International 3/2023