JOHN KURIEN

Retired Professor, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, India; and Founder Member of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF)

Q: *In your capacity as Founder Member of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), could you provide readers with some historical context of the organisation, including the organisation's involvement in seminal documents such as The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines), adopted in June 2014?*

A: The founding of the ICSF in 1986 is linked to the first *International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters* held at Rome in July 1984 – now referred to, in the circles of small-scale fishers and activists, as the "Rome Conference[1]".

As Secretary-General of this initiative, collaborating with individuals worldwide, we organised a unique gathering where sixty fishworkers and forty activists representing 34 countries from all the continents, convened in Rome. They first discussed their common concerns, then deliberated appropriate ways to progress an agenda for sustainable fisheries where fishworkers matter as much as the natural resource. This event overlapped with the FAO/UN's first World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development.

The Rome Conference also popularised the term "fishworker," now widely used in fishery circles and international documents. The term encompasses anyone involved in the labour process of fish harvesting, processing, and marketing, including small-scale fishers and workers in industrial fishing vessels, processing plants, and marketing chains. Additionally, the Conference prompted supporters to explore concrete expressions of solidarity for global fishworker-related issues.

It was in November 1986, when at an international workshop at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Trivandrum, India, supporters who had attended the Rome Conference, decided to establish the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF)[2].

Comprising community activists, academics, and organizers, the ICSF network focused on advocating for the rights of small-scale fishworkers. The common denominator was that all members were in some manner connected to small-scale fishworkers in their respective countries. From its inception, ICSF emphasised the economic, ecological, social, and cultural importance of the small-scale fishing sector, undertaking various initiatives such as workshops, conferences, and publications like the SAMUDRA Journal, Yemaya newsletter and provided daily fishery news alerts.

In 2008, a meeting in Bangkok, spurred by an FAO/UN initiative, and together with global fishworker and civil society organisations, established the initial agenda for formulating broad guidelines to support small-scale fisheries. ICSF, along with other organisations, took on the task of drafting guidelines to valorise small-scale fisheries, building on the recommendations of the Rome Conference and the extensive knowledge and contacts already accumulated through ICSF's global activities.

Ms Chandrika Sharma, then Executive Secretary of ICSF, and my former student at CDS, played a pivotal role in spearheading a global bottom-up approach to formulate guidelines for small-scale fisheries. She travelled extensively, engaging with small-scale fishworkers to incorporate their concerns into the document. Tragically, she was aboard the ill-fated MH370 in March 2014 en route to a meeting to discuss details about the Guidelines. In an exceptional gesture for a UN document, the *Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Alleviation* (SSF Guidelines) adopted in June 2014 was dedicated to her memory, recognising her tireless efforts in improving the lives of fishworkers worldwide and her invaluable contribution to the formulation of these Guidelines.

[1] *https://www.icsf.net/resources/report-of-the-international-conference-of-fishworkers-and-their-supporters-rome-july-4-8-1984/*

[2] *http://www.icsf.net*

Q: *In a thought-provoking article that you wrote for the INFOFISH International at the beginning of this year[3], one clear message was that post-adoption of the SSF Guidelines (and other international guidelines), States often lack clear strategies for national implementation. At the same time, local communities remain unaware and uninvolved in the implementation processes. As quoted in your article, it is important to "democratise the implementation and monitoring of voluntary guidelines, making it a process by, for, and of the community"? What are some major steps that could be taken by both parties that might be useful in this democratisation process?*

A: To my mind, for any international agreement to effectively serve its purpose, it must undergo a process of democratisation. This involves making the agreement accessible and understandable, particularly for those who will be affected by it. When representatives of States agree to collaborate at international fora, it is because they see alignment with the contents of a concerned agreement. So, they vote that the agreement be adopted. Thereafter, national ratification is crucial, requiring efforts to raise awareness about the agreement's contents and implications among various sections of society. Governments, media and civil society should collaborate to ensure that the message reaches citizens, fostering a sense of commitment and purpose in implementing the agreement.

Applying a similar democratisation process to the SSF Guidelines implies advocating for the involvement of national fisheries ministries/departments/institutions in raising awareness and popularising the Guidelines. This includes translating them into languages spoken by fishworkers and simplifying their core contents.[4] Additionally, producing informational materials in various media formats is recommended. Prioritising the involvement of local government governance structures is paramount, as they are closest to small-scale fisheries and can effectively recognise their benefits such as engendering employment, income, food, appropriate technologies, local culture, taxes and so on. States should integrate the SSF Guidelines into their policy documents and ensure that relevant themes such as tenure, fisheries management, social development, and gender parity are addressed at the appropriate government departments.

Similarly, small-scale fishworkers and their associations must understand the implications of the core contents of the SSF Guidelines. Vibrant civil society supporters should facilitate this process, as has been seen in various initiatives worldwide over the last decade. This grassroots engagement is crucial for generating pressure for implementation. Given the wide and participative nature of the SSF Guidelines' creation, it is only natural that the very same level of zeal and enthusiasm should drive commitment toward their implementation.

Achieving effective democratisation of awareness and implementation of the Guidelines resembles the dynamic of clapping—it requires both hands. Similarly, this process necessitates participatory actions from grassroots levels and obligatory commitments from higher authorities. This dual commitment, especially in the context of any voluntary guidelines document, often yields surprisingly more effective outcomes than relying solely on legal mandates.

Q: *One can argue that in theory, democratisation is entirely achievable. But in the increasing context of commercial fisheries, big businesses, and other sectors (mining, tourism, etc) encroaching upon the spaces traditionally occupied by the SSF sector, how can we ensure that ocean governance is just, as well as within the framework of the Blue Economy defined by the World Bank as "the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and ocean ecosystem health".*

A: I cannot agree more with you about the risks and limitations inherent in the fast evolving and competing interests which are casting their eyes on the oceans and the coasts, posing a huge challenge for the survival of small-scale fisheries world over and to the real sustainability of the oceans.

We need to change our perspective from "what more can we get from the ocean" to "what value does the ocean offer to us." The framework of the World Bank about the Blue Economy continues to focus on the former materialist perspective. Our human relationships with the ocean represent a plurality of values – material, monetary, emotional, and spiritual – that must be respected and fostered.

Blue Justice will prevail only if we give priority to all these values. And only those who have an intimate relationship with the oceans – ocean citizens so to speak – can spearhead this. I believe the many millions of small-scale fishers of the world, for whom the sea is "Mother", should take the lead. They are the true ocean citizens, who, while they depend for their livelihoods on its living material resources, foster the values of care, cooperation, mutual assistance, and the ethic of sufficiency. These values are foundational to create a more just, sustainable, participatory, and self-reliant ocean economy.

Q: *Could you cite some examples from the work of ICSF where fishing communities, either on their own or through discussions with the authorities, have been successful in strengthening the coherence between overarching policy and implementation at grassroots level?*

A: Since the commencement of the ICSF in 1986, in hindsight, I see two broad phases of its work.

The first two decades focused on facilitating existing fishworker organisations and where appropriate, facilitating the formation of new ones, in different parts of the world. In this phase, I can recall the activities which have taken place with the Maritime Fishers Union in Canada; the National Collective of Fishers of Senegal; the National Fishworker Forum of India; and the Network of Fishers of Laguna, Philippines; to name a few across the globe. Such initiatives were combined with training and exchange programs; campaigning for different issues of concern for fishworkers; organisation of multi-stakeholder workshops dealing with a variety of issues such as work on distant-water vessels; the role of

[3] *John Kurien. 2024. Democratizing the Implementation of the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines. INFOFISH International January/February 2024 (https://infofish.org/v4/media/attachments/2024/01/08/article-democratizing-the-implementation-of-the-small-scale-fisheries-guidelines.pdf)*

[4] *https://www.icsf.net/resources/ssf-guidelines-summary-john-kurien/*

customary organisations in management; collaboration in the Indian Ocean; a feminist perspective in fisheries; and others.

The second phase was the period after 2008 which can be described as focusing more on small-scale fisheries issues. ICSF members were joined by many other NGOs and CSOs which were starting to take interest in fishworker issues. During this period, members first facilitated the articulation of what was needed to secure sustainable small-scale fisheries, holding local meetings and discussions with communities. It was these processes which led to the bottom-up articulation of themes for inclusion in what finally became the SSF Guidelines. Thereafter, particularly after the adoption of the SSF Guidelines, contemporaneous national-to-local and local-to-national facilitation and action has taken place in Tanzania, Ghana, Costa Rica and Thailand. Members, and the fishworker organisations with which they associate, have engaged in multiple activities. These include translation of the Guidelines to local dialects; undertaking analysis of national social development programs and budgets, pointing out their agrarian and urban bias; and then indicating the realms for providing the kind of social support which is required for the fisheries sector; and setting up networks of fishers from indigenous communities across national territories.

Q: *Still on the SSF Guidelines, what would you identify as being the top three global priorities for action leading up to 2030?*

A: To me the three top priorities within the SSF Guidelines are human capacity development for youth (Ch.12); collective action for (re)securing tenure and fisheries management (Ch 5); and social development (Ch.7). It is my considered opinion – based on my five decades of field experience, research, and reflection – that if these three priorities are given global and local attention, then the rest of the vital elements needed for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries will quickly fall into place.

Q: *Moving on to a very topical matter, in 2006, you authored a paper titled "Untangling subsidies, supporting fisheries: The WTO fisheries subsidies debate and developing-country priorities"[5]. You had said then that banning all subsidies is unfair for developing countries, particularly since the level of support given to the fisheries industries in developed countries often far exceeds that in less developed countries. Moreover, that State support is essential for fishing communities to enhance human development aspects such as poverty alleviation and increasing food security. In view of the recent discussions at the WTO's MC13 conference, has your opinion changed substantially?*

A: My opinion on the need for developing countries to subsidise their fisheries remains the same. It must be continued and enhanced. Though the adoption of the WTO Fisheries Subsidies Agreement remains incomplete, my position is that developing States should plan to utilise it importantly to support their fisheries towards implementing sound management practices within their EEZs – with special focus on their small-scale fisheries.

Observers well-versed in the global issue of fisheries subsidies are acutely aware that developed maritime nations have consistently and generously subsidised both their small-scale and industrial fisheries sectors. However, it is the support directed towards the industrial sector that has predominantly contributed to the worldwide over-exploitation of fishery resources.

Hence, the utilisation of WTO regulations by developed nations to halt or challenge subsidies granted by developing coastal States for their fisheries, smacks of hypocrisy. It resembles employing a ladder to ascend and then dismantling it when others seek to utilise it as well—a contradiction in action and principle.

What we need to understand is that, when States provide subsidies, the considerations are not exclusively economic, nor are they related only to the issues exclusively to the sector in question. The decision to provide any subsidy is importantly socio-political. This applies to the fisheries sector as well.

Take the example of Norway. Since the mid-1900s, it has given direct income support to its coastal fishing communities. Based on costs and earnings data provided by Norway's Directorate of Fisheries, if the income of fishers, in any year, fell below that of the oil-rig workers of the country, their incomes were topped-up to that extent. This practice was even opposed by well-known Norwegian fishery economists as being a "market distortion". However, one crucial socio-political and strategic reason for this levelling of incomes was that, during the Cold-War era, it was paramount to support coastal fishers' livelihoods in the cold northern provinces of Norway which were close to the erstwhile USSR, and thus prevent migration to the more climate-friendly southern provinces and to the capital, Oslo. As a result, the fisheries of Norway, have over time, transitioned from small-scale into middle and large-scale operations primarily due to this long-sustained State support and their own strong professional organisational strength.

Why should developing countries be denied a similar course of action today, by scare-mongering about global overcapacity and overfishing which, in the first place, is essentially the result of unbridled investment and destructive fishing originally subsidised by developed fishing nations?

For developing coastal States, small-scale fishing communities are increasingly being recognised as providers of local, decentralised employment, food security, coastal protection, and promoters of coastal tourism. These factors alone justify support. Fishing communities, whose political influence have grown in many countries, also often happen to be "outliers" on the scales of human development in many countries. For all these socio-cultural, political, and economic concerns; and for important fishery reasons as well; it is both a historical right and a matter of global justice for developing States to continue/increase financial support to their marine fisheries – including for large-scale industrial operations, if and where they consider it necessary and appropriate.

[5] *https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2006/09/930.ICSF112.pdf*

Despite their political stance at the WTO, developing countries must still make prudent decisions regarding the forms of support they provide to their fisheries. Should they prioritise subsidising fuel for vessels; or should they promote the adoption of science-intensive innovations to incentivise fishers to transition to multiple energy sources? Alternatively, should support focus solely on fishery infrastructure; or should it also encompass secure coastal land tenure, adequate housing, healthcare and education facilities; and parametric insurance against extreme weather events and unemployment due to meteorological conditions? These are crucial questions that require careful consideration to ensure effective and sustainable support for fishing communities and broader socio-economic development.

My sole plea would be for developing countries that advocate staunchly for their fishing sectors and fishworkers at the WTO, often challenging the negotiating positions of developed nations, to exhibit equal vigour and dedication in implementing these policies at their national level.

Q: *Are you optimistic that this dissonance between the developed and developing countries can be resolved to achieve a compromise on subsidies which will be acceptable to all?*

A: The global discourse surrounding fisheries subsidies traces back to the GATT era and has remained a contentious issue within the WTO framework for decades. Discussions on fisheries have often been sidelined in WTO negotiations, receiving insufficient attention compared to other priorities of developed nations. However, with developing countries becoming more assertive and unwilling to be sidelined, there is growing discomfort within the WTO, where the veto power cannot be applied. My speculation is that this shift in the political balance among nations will ultimately result in a more equitable agreement. It may take time to reach such a consensus.

Q: *Also, in your opinion, what are some approaches that governments in developing countries today could use to strike a balance between subsidizing their small-scale fisheries sector, fostering a large-scale fishery, and ensuring the conservation of resources?*

A: To fully address this question, it is crucial to consider both historical context and the unique characteristics of tropical ecosystems.

In the 1950s, many tropical developing countries rushed to modernise their fisheries by adopting the large-scale, industrial model prevalent in temperate regions. This decision was partly influenced by the pressures of development assistance and technical aid aimed at modernising their fisheries infrastructure. Unfortunately, little consideration was given to the inherent value and sustainable practices of existing small-scale fisheries. These traditional fisheries, often dismissed as "primitive" and in decline, were overlooked in favour of industrialisation.

Another crucial consideration, often overlooked but of significant importance, is the inherent bias towards, and logical rationale behind, supporting small-scale fisheries in the tropical world. Approximately sixty percent of fishery resources are concentrated within the 12- nautical mile limit of most tropical developing countries. These resources encompass a vast array of species, each with relatively smaller biomass and significant inter-species interactions. Therefore, advocating for spatially decentralised and appropriate forms of small-scale fish harvesting, processing, and marketing becomes imperative. This approach is intricately linked to conserving fishery resources and achieving optimal sustainable and economic yields; as well as maximising employment opportunities within tropical coastal fisheries.

Therefore, does it not seem more prudent to allocate financial resources towards supporting small-scale fisheries rather than investing in centralised, capital-intensive industrial fisheries? The historical errors made by many developing countries in initially favouring large-scale fisheries—accompanied by large-scale technology, temperate water science, and centralized administration—underscore the need for course correction. A wiser approach to fisheries development would have been to enhance the capabilities of the existing small-scale sector before considering the establishment of a large-scale industrial sector. The latter should ideally complement small-scale operations by targeting areas beyond their reach.

When you know you are on the wrong road, it is never too late to turn back!

Q: *And a final personal question: as a researcher and grassroots activist for global small-scale fisheries over many decades, what are some special memories of events that stand out for you? These could be personal stories or moments in history which have altered the course of development in a positive way for artisanal fishers, fish workers, and communities.*

A: As I look back over my career, I recall several such decisive and precious moments.

Fifty years ago, I found myself in a fishing village in Kerala State, India. In my early twenties, with a management degree and a corporate job, my knowledge of beaches was limited to places of relaxation. However, this visit exposed me to a vibrant and bustling scene of occupational beach life. Log kattumarams were being brought ashore, while fishermen, their sun-kissed bodies gleaming, swiftly unloaded their catch for lively auctions. The coast buzzed with activity as buyers hurried to purchase fish for market.

I was introduced to Nelson, the President of a newly formed cooperative in the village. His genuine warmth and simple faith resonated with me, prompting me to accept his spontaneous invitation to stay and assist in organising the cooperative's fish marketing efforts. This encounter ignited something within me, leading me to commit to dedicating one year to this cause. Little did I know then that this serendipitous moment would mark the beginning of a lifelong journey living among, and learning from, small-scale fishing communities worldwide for the next five decades. It is a journey I have never regretted.

The successful conclusion of the Rome Conference in 1984 marked another pivotal moment. It illuminated the shared challenges faced by fishing communities worldwide and demonstrated their readiness to collaborate for collective action, supported by larger civil society. The subsequent emergence of numerous organisations and movements; shifts in governmental and international organisation agendas; and the evolving attitudes of civil society toward the realities of fishing communities were unexpected, but welcomed, outcomes. These developments reinforced my belief that sincere collective commitment to a just cause, such as elevating the status of small-scale fisheries, sets into motion virtuous cycles of events that lead to positive actions and greater achievements. For me, the adoption of the SSF Guidelines stands as a prime example of this phenomenon.

A third event, set in the Aceh province of Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami, deeply reinforced my admiration for, and understanding of, fishing communities, adding to what I perceive as the realistic optimism of small-scale fishers in this era of unprecedented climate change.

During a preliminary visit to the province, which had gained political autonomy almost as a "gift of the tsunami", I was contemplating undertaking a long-term assignment to facilitate new fisheries co-management arrangements in Aceh. It was during this time that I encountered Pak Shaiffudin, a fisherman from Patek village, at a makeshift coffee shop. Their village had been nearly obliterated by the tsunami, with only a handful of male survivors who were fortunately at sea during the catastrophe. Our conversation spanned from Bollywood movies to the Free Aceh Movement's 30-year war, the post-tsunami fishery recovery efforts, and the devastating day of the tsunami itself, which claimed around 180 000 lives in Aceh in just 30 minutes.

Surprisingly, when discussing the tsunami, which claimed about 200 000 lives, there was no distinct sense of grief or remorse. It seemed that for these survivors, the universality of the losses provided mutual solace. I inquired about the aid they received and whether it brought comfort for their loss. Pak Shaiffudin shared that while he had received a new home from an aid agency, he had not yet decided what to do with it, as the monstrous wave had taken his entire family. Despite enduring such profound loss and facing the challenge of a drastically changed sea yielding fewer catches in familiar areas, he spoke with remarkable equanimity and concluded with a momentous statement: "The tsunami was not God's punishment but God's training!"

Amid scientists and climate activists convening in major international conferences to discuss the daunting effects of climate change and the foreboding implications of a predicted 1-meter rise in sea levels, Pak Shaiffudin's perspective on a real 15-meter wave that engulfed everything he held dear as "God's training" stands as a stark contrast—devoid of fear or bitterness.

His unwavering faith and hope left me profoundly humbled and inspired, prompting me to embrace a four-year assignment in Aceh focused on enhancing human capacity among the young women and men of coastal communities, as well as fostering collaboration between fishers' customary organisations and State officials.

As I look back over the years, it is my conviction that the future of small-scale fishing and coastal communities in the developing world will depend significantly on the nature and quality of capacity development initiatives they collectively undertake to safeguard their human rights. This endeavour will cultivate a sense of collective spirit and resilience that refuses to succumb to despair.

Credit: ICSF