The Responsibility of Stewardship

The Siem Reap meet demonstrated collective goodwill and an impressive commitment to strengthening rights, shouldering responsibilities and finding spaces in the fast-changing coasts and wetlands of Asia

The Siem Reap Workshop and Symposium resulted in five days of intensive dialogue and learning on the rights and responsibilities of small-scale fisheries in the context of coastal and wetland management. It was a period of respectful exchange of experiences and views. As outsiders, we have gained the view of much collective goodwill, impressive commitment to strengthening rights and shouldering responsibilities, and finding spaces in the fast-changing coasts and wetlands of Asia.

This commitment was demonstrated by fishworkers themselves, by their supporters and by their governments, who have proved willing to undertake wide-ranging reforms. There is also increasing consensus among the international organizations. It is a good time to be fighting for your rights, because there are more people listening, and in sympathy, than there may have been 20 years ago. So although you may be fighting the same battles, you have more allies and sympathizers now, perhaps. But this is no reason for complacency. While in the past, there may have been more ideological opposition to small-scale artisanal production from the modernizing State, now there may be benign neglect from the neoliberal State and world order.

The fight for rights also constitutes a means of creating new institutions, as exemplified by the efforts of the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), which seems to have fully appreciated the link between responsible fisheries and wider rights.

The shift in rights to Cambodia's fisherfolk has been demonstrated in actual practice, with, for example, 509 community fisheries organizations now operating in the Tonle Sap Lake. The RGC's pioneering and socially responsible actions in the fisheries sector are a fine example of what we are all striving towards.

At the core of the Siem Reap Workshop and Symposium processes has been the series of case studies from fishing communities struggling to claim what they are entitled to by law—in other words, their rights. It is impossible, in this short summary, to do justice to that richness of experience and it is invidious to pick out examples, so I will generalize.

Community action

We have heard from fishworkers and their development partners in 10 Asian countries how communities have mobilized to:

- demonstrate their commitment to responsible fishing and their ability to manage their own resources when given the rights and responsibilities to do so;
- claim their space in the coastal zone, against competing interests from industry, water resources management and tourism, to name a few development processes;
- press for their entitlement to rights on land and sea, and access to basic

This synthesis of the Siem Reap Workshop and Symposium is by ***Edward Allison*** *(E.Allison@uea.ac.uk) of the School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, UK*

social services on a par with other citizens in their countries; and
- resist development processes incompatible with sustainability and the cultural and economic survival of coastal and wetland communities.

We have clarified and explained to one another the inseparable links between human rights and responsible fisheries "to enable a life of dignity while contributing to fisheries management" and ensure "justice, participation, sustainability and self-reliance."

We have dwelt somewhat on problems affecting small-scale fisheries, but we have also taken time to appreciate and celebrate the dynamism, technical adaptability, self-help capacity and, not least, the singing, dancing and performance-poetry skills of the small-scale fisherfolk of the region!

One of the most obvious broader issues to emerge from this workshop – and as demonstrated by the Statements to the Symposium from the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—has been the sense of a growing recognition of, and commitment to, the rights of small-scale fishworkers by the international institutions. The International Labour Organization (ILO), for instance, has been working on the small-scale fisheries sector—on issues related to safety at sea, rights to decent work, migrant labour, child labour, and women's rights in the workplace, among others.

The UN General Assembly believes that "…in order to achieve sustainable fisheries, States, and relevant national and international organizations should provide for participation of small-scale fishery stakeholders in policy development and fisheries management strategies."

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has begun to focus once more on its core mission—helping to create a world free of hunger (the right to food) and reorientating its mission towards finding effective ways to help countries meet the Millennium Development Goals. "We all agree there is an urgent need to restore and improve small-scale fisheries," Ichiro Nomura of FAO told the Siem Reap meet. Contrast this with the atmosphere in the 1970s and 1980s, when many people in FAO and elsewhere envisaged the decline and replacement of small-scale fisheries by larger-scale, industrialized production, with the small-scale sector cast as the "occupation of last resort".

There has also been a growing awareness internationally that development means more than economic growth, as shown by the series of global commitments to managing the environment and using the link between sustainable environment and sustainable livelihoods. There is now a recognition that economic growth alone is not enough to eradicate poverty, and that rights, freedoms and social justice are needed—not only to sustain growth, but as ends in themselves—to better reflect what it means to be 'developed'. The discussions at the Siem Reap Workshop and Symposium reflected this sense that the quality of life—manifested as wellbeing, job satisfaction, security, social cohesion and cultural survival, among other factors—were important considerations—not just fish and money.

Participants also emphasized that the rights to access resources are insufficient by themselves, to achieve the desired level of security and wellbeing. That realization seems to spring from a broader understanding of poverty, vulnerability and marginalization, with poverty being seen as arising not just from low incomes but due to inadequate command over economic resources such as fish stocks.

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Poverty reduction and sustainable fisheries thus become more than a moral responsibility or social choice —becomes then a legal obligation. This recognition of legal entitlement to self-determination is the first step towards empowerment.

In the midst of all the talk about rights and international institutions

VIEWPOINT

More work needed

The Siem Reap Workshop and Symposium were among the more challenging meetings that ICSF has organized in Asia, not least because of the high profile, with fisheries bureaucrats from several South and Southeast Asian countries present, together with officials from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in a gathering co-hosted with the Royal Government of Cambodia.

The Workshop focused on understanding how different fishworker organizations (FWOs) and community representatives understood rights to, and responsibilities for, the coastal resources. The Symposium provided a platform for the governments to explain their official positions on the management of fisheries.

There was a fairly good representation of organizations and initiatives from the different countries of the region, and a fair mix of men and women—though not the desired 50:50 ratio—with the women being outspoken. As usual, though, translation was a problem, and only the Thais, Indonesians and Vietnamese got a full translation of the proceedings. The Tamil, Sinhala and Bangladeshi participants could not have understood much, although they all did participate in the group discussions.

Several of the case studies could not be fully presented as they came in late. That must have hindered the participants' understanding of the different issues. There was not much of a focus on the geopolitics of the two regions. Yet, on the whole, the Workshop and Symposium processes were participatory, and led to the Siem Reap Statement.

While the discussions did highlight the role and scope of traditional institutions to affirm rights and execute responsibilities, it is difficult to juxtapose such micro-institutions—most of which are male-dominated—with the State.

There was also some discussion on the understanding of rights from a human-rights perspective or as a strategy within the struggle for a shift in the development paradigm. People are asking for more than use or property rights. They are asking for the right to also decide who can use the resources and for what purpose. Rights imply entitlements, and the entitlement

and global networks of activists and supporters, it has been encouraging to see the continuing importance of locally distinct cultural and social practices. Traditional institutions may often be fragile to external influences and may need formal/legal recognition. Strikingly enough, several governments in the region, like those of Indonesia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, have formally recognized traditional rights.

Yet, despite increasing recognition of their cultural and economic contributions, small-scale fisheries are squeezed out by coastal development and wetland reclamation for agriculture, from the landward side, and by industrial fisheries and water resource abstraction, from the seaward side.

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Decentralization of government, though cautiously welcomed as a means to local-level empowerment and accountability, is not always beneficial, as we learned from the experience of Indonesia. There, although decentralization has increased the autonomy to manage and control resources, it has increased the pressure on the natural resources that are used by local governments to raise revenues, since they no longer enjoy budget allocations from the central government.

From the perspective of supporters of small-scale fisheries, the rights to fish are paramount—but only if you can exercise them without alienating the rights of others like consumers, future generations and other users of re-

to self-determination is the main step to empowerment.

The Symposium highlighted a great contrast between the positions and presentations of the South and Southeast Asian countries, with the latter displaying greater clarity and focus. The presentations of SEAFDEC and the WorldFish Centre were also interesting. While the former highlighted the role of traditional institutions and knowledge in fisheries management, the latter spoke of management being more about relations between people, and highlighted the factors that influence livelihoods.

There was general agreement that in multispecies fisheries, there is no way of assessing stock size to assign community quotas, but, in a context of co-management, fishers themselves can best determine how to regulate the fishery if they are given custodial rights.

There was some focus on traditional community organizations. While I would think they are still the only organizations in some Asian countries that can implement common decisions, they are still male-dominated, and we would have to find creative ways of drawing women into the decision-making process. All along, it was admitted that there is no data on women's role and space in the fisheries, and the general focus remained on fishing rights. There was little time to analyze local, national and global linkages, and how to strategize. Though there is still an important role for union-type organizations, their existing dynamics are limiting, and they do not exist everywhere. The Philippines is the only country that has a Fisheries Code using which organizations can act. Cambodia also has a progressive fisheries policy, but organizations have to be built up. Aceh in Indonesia has very clear traditional laws and rights, and the fishers there are able to negotiate their rights with the central government.

I feel the main problem in Asia continues to be the lack of good FWOs that have an understanding of coastal rights and responsibilities, and can develop the means to establish them. While meetings like the one at Siem Reap certainly give organization leaders a broader vision, there is need for intensive work in each country to widen the understanding at the base level and evolve strategies of action.

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sources. Claims for rights in small-scale fisheries have often arisen when faced by a wrong committed by someone else. We would not want to perpetuate a wrong on another group.

A strong message has been sent out from Siem Reap to governments and international bodies that the transfer of the sea from a common-pool resource into private ownership will be seen by the regions' small-scale fisherfolk as a violation of their rights.

Ultimately, what is being requested by participants at the Siem Reap meet is a non-transferable community right —not only to use resources, but also to decide on how they are to be used. With this right comes the responsibility of stewardship, of equity of access and allocation within communities.

For more

rights.icsf.net/icsf2006/jspFiles/rights/staticPages/introduction.jsp