

# New Initiatives on Sea Safety to Help Small-scale Fisherfolk Communities

**T**here's good news for small-scale fisherfolk communities – in the Bay of Bengal region and elsewhere.

A safety-at-sea project will come up in Chennai from May 2007. It will be housed in the office of the BOBP-IGO and will cover small-scale fisherfolk communities in Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Maldives. A similar project will come up in West Africa.

Both projects will be part of a US \$10 million five-year FAO global programme on Safety at Sea for Small-scale Fisheries in Developing Countries, headquartered in Rome, with funds from Sweden.

The global programme aims at better and safer livelihoods for small-scale fishing communities globally. It will analyse information, raise awareness, adopt strategies, and formulate project proposals on safety at sea.

## Why such a project?

Fishing at sea is perhaps the most dangerous occupation in the world. Loss of life at sea has devastating consequences on dependents. Widows have low social standing. With no welfare system to help them, they and their dependents face destitution.

In South Asia, and in developing countries in general, safety standards for small vessels lag far behind those for larger vessels and industrial fisheries. Accident reporting is unsatisfactory. The IMO has recommended that statistical information on casualties, including fishing vessels and fishermen, should be collected and analysed annually. But few developing countries are able to supply this type of data.

Capacities and capabilities for ensuring safety at sea in the small-

scale fisheries sector are lacking in many developing countries. So is knowledge and awareness among government officials, fishers and communities on safety at sea procedures and equipment. Networks and institutional arrangements for dealing with safety-at-sea issues are inadequate.

The new project will seek to address these problems in co-operation with a Global Coordination Unit of the FAO Global Programme.

## Recommendations from Chennai Declaration

In South Asia, the project will build on the work of the BOBP and the BOBP-IGO – particularly on recommendations from the **Chennai Declaration** and the **IFISH 3 Conference**.

It will

- Provide and analyse data to identify the causes of accidents.
- Educate and train trainers, extensionists, fishermen and inspectors.
- Elaborate on improved fisheries management measures and safety regulations and enforcement of these regulations.
- Apply FAO draft guidelines for construction and repair of small FRP fishing vessels.
- Repair and upgrade vessels constructed for tsunami rehabilitation that are of poor quality, using FAO draft guidelines.

The project will liaise closely with projects concerned with tsunami rehabilitation and reconstruction.

The BOBP/ FAO Regional Workshop on Sea Safety for Artisanal and Small-scale Fishermen was held in Chennai, from 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> October 2001. It was attended by government officials from seven countries,

representatives of Fisheries and Maritime Administrations, the Coast Guard/ Navy and representatives of fishermen's associations.

*The Chennai Declaration*, adopted at the end of the workshop, suggested a Regional Program on Sea Safety for Artisanal and Small-Scale Fishermen, which could formulate a holistic long-term approach to improve safety at sea for small-scale fishermen.

Necessary measures would include analysis of accident data; education and training of trainers, extension workers, fishermen and inspectors; better fisheries management and enforcement; stronger collaboration between fishermen, fishermen's organisations and governments.

## IFISH 3 and after

On the basis of this suggestion, BOBP-IGO designed a programme for promoting safety at sea. As part of this programme, the third IFISH (International Fishing Industry Safety and Health Conference) was convened on 1-4 February 2006 by BOBP-IGO, FAO and the National Institute for Occupational Safety Health (NIOSH), USA in Chennai, one of its themes being "Enhancing the Safety of Fishermen in Small-scale Fisheries".

IFISH-3 placed special emphasis on issues confronting small-scale fishermen. It gave participants from developing countries a unique opportunity to interact with experts on fishing industry safety and health.

The workshop made a number of recommendations on safety at sea for small fishing vessels. They related particularly to collection and analysis of data from sea accidents and rules and regulations for safety and communication equipment and vessel construction.

The IFISH 3 conference included a special workshop to review rehabilitation efforts following the 26 December 2004 tsunami. The workshop pointed out that many small fishing vessels constructed with the assistance of NGOs after the tsunami were of low quality, often dangerous for fishing

operations, and exposed the fishermen to high risks.

#### Expected Outputs of the South Asia Project

- An improved system in place for reporting and analyzing accidents involving small scale fishers.

- Rules and regulations for safety and communication equipment and vessel construction developed and introduced.
- Increased collaboration between fishermen, fishers' organisations and government.

## NIOSH to assist in occupational safety and health of coastal communities in India

**N**IOSH (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health), USA, is to provide technical and other assistance to the BOBP-IGO for two pilot projects – strengthening sea safety, and improving the conditions of salt workers. This was revealed in April 2007 in Chennai by Dr George Conway, Chief of the Alaska Field Station and Director, Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery Program, NIOSH.

Dr Conway and Dr Y S Yadava met fishermen and visited boatyards in Tuticorin and Mahabalipuram. They also visited salt pans and met salt workers in Tuticorin and in the Sambar salt works of Rajasthan.

**Strengthening sea safety:** “Data collection and analysis are essential to strengthen sea safety,” Dr Conway said. Data on accidents and on safety practices in small-scale fisheries may be obtained from several sources - insurance agencies, Coast Guard records, fishermen’s associations, Focus group discussions. NIOSH would provide technical assistance with data collection methods and statistical analysis. This technical activity will be conducted in collaboration with the Fishing Technology Service (FIIT) of the FAO’s Fisheries and Aquaculture Department.

Post-tsunami relief work in India had led to a deluge of boats, many of them in fibreglass, a material some boatbuilders are not familiar with. Many of the boats were deficient in quality and failed to meet construction standards, and this affected the safety of fishermen. “We will look at what can be done to improve safety standards,” said Dr Conway.

In response to a question, Dr Conway said that the SIDA-funded FAO project on sea safety is much larger in scope and size than NIOSH’s assistance. “Our inputs will be supplementary and complementary, and relatively modest.”

**Improving the conditions of salt workers:** The BOBP-IGO has highlighted the plight of salt workers in India



through a one-year study completed recently. (See “The saga of India’s salt workers” in the March 2006 BBN). The health and safety of the salt workers are crucial problem areas. Says Dr Conway, “The salt industry in India has no parallel. India is by far the biggest producer of salt by manual and evaporative means of production. The salt industry in the US and in Europe, by comparison, is highly mechanised.”

“We have received a request for assistance to salt workers from the Salt Commissioner through the BOBP-IGO. In response, we are assisting the BOBP-IGO in preparing a plan for the health and safety of salt workers. This is a tremendous opportunity to help a rather large work force working under often quite basic conditions.

“Our goal will be to work with BOBP-IGO, the Salt Commissioner, the salt industry and its workers, to make tangible improvements in the condition of salt workers,” says Dr Conway.