



Improving safety and health among fishers:

A major challenge in small-scale fisheries

The safety and health of fishers is paramount among small-scale fisheries issues that call for urgent action. Governments, fisher associations and the community must address the issues head on. Recommendations from IFISH 3 and from a post-tsunami workshop held recently at Mahabalipuram, India, must be taken up in right earnest.

Safety and health in the fisher community. The subject threatens to become an embarrassment. Despite strong vocal support and a show of hands at conferences, there seems little to show by way of action. Fishers themselves, who once regarded health and safety as occupational hazards, now look upon it with fear and awe. The sea is no more a benign mother and provider: she bristles with menace and peril. 12/26 changed many things – most of all, perhaps, the cozy equation between fishers and the sea.

During the past two decades, small-scale fisheries in developing

countries has undergone fundamental changes. It is no longer a near-shore coastal fishery. Small boats are going deeper and deeper in search of fish and profit, and embracing ever-greater risks.

Fishing technologies have improved, but boat construction norms and use of safety and communication equipment have failed to keep pace; and boat and engine maintenance have been non-existent. Result: avoidable accidents. Fishers encounter bad weather, cyclonic storms, tsunamis — often with little warning. Their own indifference to safety at sea has influenced neglect by those who are

concerned with the welfare of fisher communities. A safety net for small heavily modified vessels that go offshore is urgent.

The BOBP-IGO, in association with the FAO and the Alaska center of the National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety (NIOSH), USA, recently organised IFISH 3 (the Third International Conference on Fishing Industry Safety and Health Conference) at Mahabalipuram, near Chennai. From 1 to 4 February 2006, participants from 13 countries debated a range of issues concerning the safety and health of fishers. While the conference addressed both commercial and small-scale fisheries, the focus was on small-scale and artisanal fishers, the most vulnerable group.

A two-day workshop on Post-tsunami Revival of the Fisheries Sector and Rehabilitation of Fishing Communities followed IFISH 3 at the same venue. The workshop discussed rehabilitation and livelihoods issues, also the over-supply of poorly designed and constructed FRP fishing boats, the consequent increase in fishing effort, and in some cases the mismatch between boats and engines. Details are recounted elsewhere in this issue of *Bay of Bengal News*.

The two events synthesized some success stories and experiences from commercial and small-scale fisheries. They also raised the profile of safety and health issues among fishers, especially in the small-scale sector. The box on page 3 outlines some important recommendations.

The FAO's biannual publication, "The State of Fisheries and Aquaculture - 2004" says that about 28 million fishers engaged in fishing operations worldwide in 2002. Asia, where small-scale and artisanal fishers dominate, constitutes about 84 percent of the total fisher population. Data on fishing-related deaths may be relatively accurate

Some important recommendations for small-scale fisheries

- Create awareness and disseminate information using both print and electronic media.
- Register all boats and implement monitoring, control and surveillance programmes.
- Evolve guidelines for vessels below 12 meter.
- Certify boatyards.
- Enforce on-board safety inspections.
- Provide communication and navigation equipment on-board fishing vessels.
- Develop community health models.
- Improve data collection, compilation and its dissemination to user groups.
- Provide training to fishermen on sea safety measures.
- Identify cost-effective communication mechanisms.
- Include sea safety as an integral part of fisheries management and development.

for developed countries, but the picture is much less clear for developing countries. Data on accidents and their causes, on fatalities at sea and on shore, and on search and rescue operations are hard to come by. Developing and strengthening mechanisms for data collection, leading to the right management interventions, are a high priority

The FAO publication also estimates about 1.3 million decked vessels and 2.8 million undecked vessels,

65 percent of which are not powered. Of these, about 85 percent of total decked vessels, 50 percent of powered undecked vessels and 83 percent of total non-powered boats are concentrated in Asia. Such large fishing fleets, especially in Asia, operate in an open access regime with little or no fleet management. Regulated access to fisheries and sound fleet management



programmes will help enhance the safety of fishers, especially in developing countries.

Data on health too is sparse. Example: statistics about AIDS in small-scale fishing communities, especially where fishers migrate seasonally to other areas or work onboard larger fishing vessels. Once affected by AIDS, the workers serve as carriers of the disease.

Health issues also take us to the prevailing labour standards in the fishing industry. The many labour instruments in fisheries address mainly the crew of larger vessels. Small-scale vessels are excluded from their scope. The ILO is in the process of revising and updating some of the older standards, and it would be worthwhile if the revised standards adequately address the needs of the small-scale sector.

Similar global instruments are urgently needed on safety parameters for small-scale fishing vessels too. Such global initiatives will foster and catalyse action at national and regional levels.

The post-tsunami scenario concerning FRP fishing boats is scary. The thrust has been on more and cheaper boats; construction norms have not mattered, nor the quality of materials; neither scientists nor officials have been consulted. Plenty of 'bad' boats have been delivered to gullible fishermen. It is essential to segregate such boats to ensure that they do no harm. Their deployment should be considered only if they can be made sea-worthy.

If governments have neglected the safety and health of fishers, what about fisher groups? They have been engaging governments on fishing rights, access to markets, improved infrastructure for landing and berthing, concessions in fuel and other inputs; but rarely have they discussed safety and health issues, which don't seem to figure on their agenda. The inevitable result: not merely more accidents and fatalities, but heavier government



compensation burdens, more widows and destitutes, more migration to urban areas.

That prevention is better than cure certainly applies to fisher health and safety. An improved safety and health environment would mean substantial savings for government (by way of lower expenditure on death/ disability compensation and search and rescue operations). Such savings can be used to strengthen safety and health regimes.

To ensure an effective safety and health environment for fishers, programmes on sea safety should include fisher families, not fishers alone. The most brutal impact of a fisher's death is felt by the family. Wives and children can orient the mindset of fishermen toward safety and impart a safety culture more effectively than governments can. Community-based sea safety and disaster management programmes can be cost-effective and long-lasting. To achieve results quicker, the fisheries administrations must engage the Transport Ministry, the Coast Guard and other institutions.

The safety and health issues highlighted by the conference and the workshop constitute worthy challenges for the future. They have been met in many commercial fisheries. Increase awareness. Strengthen community participation. Make sturdy, reliable and cost-effective communication and navigation equipment available. Impart regular training. Make safety requirements for vessels and crew mandatory, and monitor compliance. More than anything else, lobby for a strong political will to address such issues. Conferences in future may then be able to tick off safety and health among fishers as achievements rather than challenges.

– Y S Yadava

Paintings by school children in India, Maldives and Sri Lanka depicting post-tsunami reconstruction