

BOBP and the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries

As a first step toward promoting implementation of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, a National Workshop on the subject was organised by the BOBP in association with the Government of India at Chennai during 29-30 September 2000. The Workshop brought together the most senior fisheries administrators working with the Union Ministry of Agriculture and the State and Union Territory Governments, scientists and experts from fisheries institutions, and representatives from national and international NGOs. The objectives of the Workshop were to fully familiarise government functionaries with the elements of the Code and the technical guidelines that have been prepared by FAO to assist member-countries in implementing the Code. The output of the Workshop – an agreed plan of action for operationalising the Code.

The two-day Workshop highlighted several problems concerning implementation of the Code in a large country like India. Keeping in view the strengths and weaknesses of national and state governments, the vastness of the country and the diverse and highly complex demographic and socio-political fabric, the planners and experts concluded that massive efforts would be needed to take the Code to the grassroots level quickly in India.

Although much smaller in size and geographically and socio-politically more homogenous, island nations such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives, which I subsequently visited, also spoke of similar difficulties in implementing the Code – in fact the requirements were almost identical.

Learnings from the Chennai workshop and the detailed discussions with the authorities in Sri Lanka and the Maldives highlight the primary task of educating everybody about the Code. The Code needs to be popularised and effectively communicated, understood and also fully imbibed by everyone concerned in the fisheries sector – fish workers, investors, traders, processors, scientists, bureaucrats, politicians and others.

The BOB large marine ecosystem covers some of the most productive waters in the world and supports a large population of small-scale fishermen – some 6-8 million directly and some 35-40 million others engaged in ancillary activities relating to fisheries. Declining catches, environmental degradation, post-harvest losses, conflicts between large-scale and small-scale harvesters – such issues fast threaten the livelihood of millions of small-scale fishers in the Bay. Steady loss of productivity and biodiversity is also amply visible. Per capita consumption has already declined over the years.

The contribution of coastal fisheries to the region is substantial. Any decline in fisheries would severely impact the food security and national economy of the BOB countries. While governments in the region have recognized the need for better fisheries management and adoption of the Code, action has been lacking. Ignorance and lack of understanding are largely responsible. The constraints include not merely a lack of resources and technical expertise, but also the will and the determination to implement the Code.

The Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, which was unanimously adopted on 31 October 1995 by the FAO Conference, is now five years old. Beginning with the 23rd Session of the Committee on Fisheries held at Rome during February 1999, FAO has also started reporting the progress achieved by member-countries in implementing the Code.

The recent Workshop in India and discussions with officials in Sri Lanka and the Maldives reflect the state of preparedness for implementing the Code in countries on the western side of the Bay. The situation is largely similar in member-countries on the eastern side (Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia) of the Bay. In sum, implementation of the Code in most member-countries of the BOBP falls short of what is required. Massive efforts are needed on many fronts to help these countries put their act together.

The FAO is fully committed to assisting Member States in the efficient implementation of the Code. Special measures are needed to address the needs of developing countries, especially in the areas of financial and technical assistance, technology transfer, training and scientific co-operation. Developing countries must also enhance the ability to develop their own fisheries, participate in high sea fisheries, and improve their access to such fisheries.

BOBP, as a catalyst, facilitator and neutral coordinator, has been instrumental in sensitizing national governments on the needs of the Code from time to time. With its excellent networking, BOBP as an IGO can also be an ideal mechanism for assisting member-countries to implement the Code in areas relevant to its mandate in future.

This issue of *Bay of Bengal News* has attempted to popularise the Code and the FAO's nine Guidelines on the various articles of the Code. We hope that it helps better understanding of the Code and the promotion of sustainable practices. These could yield rich dividends by reducing poverty and enhancing food security in the Bay of Bengal region.

Y S Yadava