

# *BOBP and small-scale fisherfolk:*

## IT'S TIME TO ACT!

Twenty-one years ago, the BOBP started its tryst with small-scale fisherfolk in the Bay of Bengal region. Three phases later — with a record of hundreds of activities in the seven countries, many successes and a few failures as well — the tryst acquires a new meaning. Hope emerges of a stronger, more enduring partnership — with fisherfolk, with member-countries, with the international community.

The bulk of the fish harvested in the Bay of Bengal comes from the small-scale sector. The Bay's many million fisherfolk toil with little reward to catch fish that feed not only people in the region, but outside it too. They belong to the lowest, the least privileged strata of society; they generally earn far less than the national average. With hamlets scattered along the coastline and the interior reaches of the estuaries, the fisher community is the last to receive basic amenities and services such as roads, water, electricity, education, health care. Generally illiterate as a community, the fishers are ever at the mercy of exploitative middlemen.

Sandwiched between land on the one side and the deep sea on the other, the small-scale fisher has very few options. If the land is totally alien to him, the deep sea is inscrutable, unpredictable, enigmatic. The narrow territorial waters and their contiguous areas have been his home and hearth for centuries. His ancestors have for countless decades treasured the near-shore waters. Anything outside the coastal waters is still beyond his ken.

Contemporary global developments have threatened the existence of small-scale fishers. Major marine fishery resources have suffered from the combined assault of overfishing, destructive fishing practices and a burgeoning fishing fleet. The fisherman is the biggest casualty, with a cruel fall

in catches and earnings. To make matters far worse, illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing is on the rise, especially in the high seas. Sustaining the livelihood of small-scale fishers in the Bay of Bengal region has therefore become a formidable challenge.

A strong and collective response to the plight of the small-scale fisherman from all fisheries stakeholders — most importantly, from the governments of the BOBP member-countries — is urgent and vital. What's needed is not just support but action. A level playing field has to be created to enable small-scale fishers to survive. Apathy and inaction at this stage may be calamitous, compelling bigger and more complex remedies at a later stage.

The BOBP has always been a valuable forum in the Bay of Bengal region for co-operation in raising common issues and challenges and meeting them head-on. There are no quick fixes to managing natural resources or sustaining the livelihood of small-scale fishers. Strong and sustained support is vital. The BOBP provides a mechanism for such support.

Over the past two decades, the BOBP has always promoted and popularised people-oriented approaches to solving the problems of fisherfolk. It was RRA during the first two phases, it was stakeholder analysis in the third phase. While development will continue to be participatory, new tools and techniques must be developed to solve increasingly complex resource management

problems. The BOBP's mechanism for regional and international co-operation is an opportunity that member-countries must seize.

Way back in 1979, the BOBP held a workshop on "social feasibility in small-scale fisheries development" in Chennai. Its report is still very valid today. The workshop concluded that "both human and economic factors need to be considered conjointly to ensure the social feasibility of a development programme". "Human factors, because most fishermen are still very poor and disadvantaged. Economic considerations, because the large majority of small-scale fishermen who still produce most of our fish represent a vast potential force."

About change in fishing communities, the workshop pointed out that "Change **has** occurred, new methods **have** been accepted, in fisheries as in agriculture. What is needed is more empathy with the fisherman, more effective extension work, more time for change to be understood and absorbed."

Yes, BOBP's tryst has been eventful. The tryst will continue. Thanks to member-countries — their initiatives, their foresight, their support — we will bring about change for the better. We owe it the doughty small-scale fisherman. We owe it also to fisheries, to fishery resources, to the national economies of the Bay of Bengal region.

**Y S Yadava**

*"For fishers to become effective partners in management, a better understanding of their communities' culture is essential.... Reaching a better understanding of such cultures is key to fisheries management and food security in most artisanal and small-scale fisheries."*

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