

Only collective and urgent action can make the Chennai Declaration truly meaningful

Challenging the might of the sea has always been a fascinating part of a fisherman's life. It is a boon as long as he gets a good harvest and returns home safe, a curse to his family if he perishes in the sea while fishing. Representatives of the seven member-countries, and experts from the Food and Agricultural Organisation, Rome, and other agencies who gathered in Chennai, India, discussed the issue of sea safety for artisanal and small-scale fisheries in a Regional Workshop during 8-12 October, 2001.

Developments the world over have threatened the very existence of small-scale fishermen, who have been reporting rapidly declining catches and earnings. Another casualty has been the marine resource itself, which has suffered seriously from the combined assault of over-fishing, destructive fishing practices and environmental degradation, largely from land-based activities. To complicate matters, further, illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing is taking place on the high seas. The plight of the small-scale fishermen, thus, poses a formidable challenge, the like of which the BOBP member-countries have, perhaps, never faced before. What is needed is urgent action to create a level playing field for the small fishers to survive and sustain their livelihood.

Although there is a Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries in place, it has little effect because regulation and implementation at the national level is poor. The Regional Workshop on Sea Safety raised all these issues and more. And after having considered various aspects of the problems the fishing industry faces, as well as the fact that fishing is the most dangerous occupation in the world, the delegates to the Regional Workshop strongly

endorsed a set of recommendations which finally emerged as the Chennai Declaration on Sea Safety for Artisanal and Small-scale Fishermen. At the end of the day, everybody agreed that although there were problems, they were not insurmountable if all the seven countries came together and worked as one. And that was what was most heartening.

The BOBP has always promoted and popularised people-oriented approaches to solving the problems of fisher folk. In fact, past attempts at introducing sea safety programmes for small-scale fishermen in the region had met with encouraging success. With the Chennai Regional Workshop, the BOBP member-countries have made a small but definite beginning on a mighty issue. An issue which is not confined to fisheries administration *per se* but cuts across various government departments and ministries, non-governmental organisations, fishermen associations and the community as a whole.

The delegates to the Regional Workshop resolved to address the issue as a matter of urgency and recommended that the sea safety aspects be comprehensively integrated into the member countries' fisheries

policy and management framework. This, they felt, could subsequently result in a harmonised and holistic fisheries management framework for the Bay of Bengal Region. To sustain and further catalyse this modest beginning, the member-countries felt the need for a sound technical programme backed by financial assistance. FAO's support to carry forward this regional initiative would indeed be very useful.

During the past 22 years, BOBP has effectively demonstrated what regional cooperation can achieve for fisheries development and management. The organisation has been a generator of ideas, and a promoter of the exchange of experiences between member-countries. The Regional Workshop has further vindicated this attribute of BOBP. It is, therefore, very necessary that the member-countries formally come together and forge their unity as an inter-governmental organisation which can carry forward the Chennai Declaration and provide vital support to the artisanal and small-scale fishermen towards making their lives safer at sea.

Y S Yadava

A long vigil – Fisherwomen waiting on the beach for their menfolk to return from the sea.

