

SSF Guidelines: Vital momentum for small-scale fishers

With its Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines), FAO has created a tool that is to help small-scale fisheries stakeholders empower themselves. Our authors describe its strengths and weaknesses and how it is being put into practice.



*The majority of workers depending on commercial capture fisheries value chains operate in the small-scale fisheries sector.
Photo: N. Franz*

This is changing. The 10th June 2014 represented a landmark event for global small-scale fisheries which occurred during FAO's Committee on Fisheries, the leading global inter-governmental forum on fisheries and aquaculture issues. On that day, representatives of over 100 countries as well as observers from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), regional organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) welcomed the **Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication** (SSF Guidelines). This new international instrument is the first one dedicated entirely to the sector, and it represents a global consensus on principles and guidance for small-scale fisheries governance and development.

Sea-cucumber collectors in the Solomon Islands, women smoking fish in Côte d'Ivoire, gillnetters from Corsica harvesting finfish, rock lobster fishers in Chile, members of the Community Fisheries organisations operating in the Cambodian Tonlé Sap – they all belong to what we call small-scale fisheries. The diversity of small-scale

fisheries in various countries does not allow for a global definition of the sector, but there are many commonalities among these people, be it from marine waters or inland waters, in developing countries or in developed countries.

The often informal nature of operations, the frequently remote and scattered location of small-scale fishing communities as well as a prevalence of social, economic and political marginalisation of its actors have resulted in a lack of attention to small-scale fisheries at all levels. As it is estimated that over 90 per cent of the about 120 million full-time and part-time workers directly depending on commercial capture fisheries value chains operate in the small-scale fisheries sector, it means we are inadvertently neglecting an enormous portion of our fisheries stakeholders.

■ Why are the SSF Guidelines needed?

The small-scale fisheries sector contributes to food security and poverty eradication. It provides food, both for direct consumption and to supply markets. It delivers income and employment to millions of people, with women comprising about 50 per cent of the total workforce in small-scale fisheries, particularly in relation to processing and trade. Despite these positive aspects, the small-scale fisheries sector faces a number of important challenges to being able to fully contribute to food security and poverty eradication. Fisheries resources are often declining, aquatic habitats are de-

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grading and competition over space from other, more powerful sectors like mining, industry or tourism are threatening small-scale fishing communities' access to land and water. Small-scale fishers, fish workers and their communities also face a myriad of other challenges, including unequal power relations, lack of access to services and limited participation in decision-making processes, which may lead to unfavourable policies and practices within the fisheries sector and beyond. Weak tenure systems, inadequate fisheries governance structures and non-inclusive management styles exacerbate these problems.

The SSF Guidelines provide an important tool that small-scale stakeholders can use to empower themselves, get their needs addressed and secure sustainable small-scale fisheries. They complement the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries adopted in 1995, as well as other related international instruments, in particular the 2012 Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forestry in the Context of National Food Security and the 2004 Voluntary Guidelines to support the Progressive Realizations of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security. The SSF Guidelines offer guidance and encouragement for governments, fishing communities and other stakeholders to work together and ensure secure and sustainable small-scale fisheries, for the benefit of small-scale fishing communities and society at large.

■ Strengths and weaknesses

Let's start with some weaknesses.

The SSF Guidelines are voluntary in nature. This means that not all countries will necessarily review their approach to small-scale fisheries in light of the principles of the SSF Guidelines.

The SSF Guidelines go beyond what is usually covered in fisheries instruments. There are chapters dedicated to issues such as social development, employment and decent work, gender equality, disaster risk and cli-

mate change, and the SSF Guidelines are promoting a human rights-based approach. These topics pose challenges for fisheries stakeholders who may not be accustomed to reaching out to those outside the fisheries sector because embracing the human rights-based approach to development means analysing inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redressing discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress.

But there are plenty of strengths.

The SSF Guidelines were developed through a participatory process, directly involving over 4,000 stakeholders from more than 120 countries representing fishing communities, governments, CSOs, regional organisations, international organisations, academia and NGOs. This high level of participation has generated a powerful sense of ownership of and commitment to the SSF Guidelines that continues to grow.

The SSF Guidelines go beyond what is usually dealt with in fisheries instruments. As much as this is a weakness, it is also an opportunity. Small-scale fisheries do not exist in isolation. They are embedded in wider societal and institutional dynamics which, if shaped appropriately, can provide the enabling environment the sector needs to thrive.

■ Making it happen: implementing the SSF Guidelines

Mainstreaming the principles of the SSF Guidelines in policies, strategies and actions at all levels will require ongoing collaboration among a diverse group of actors, and there is already evidence of important steps in the right direction. For example, at global level the SSF Guidelines have been incorporated in principle 5 of the *Principles of Responsible Investment in Agriculture* that was adopted by the Committee for Global Food Security in 2014. Members of the research community have connected through the "Too Big To Ignore" network on small-

scale fisheries, which has a cluster dedicated specifically to SSF Guidelines activities. CSOs like the *International Collective in Support of Fishworkers*, the *World Forum of Fisher Peoples* and the *World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers* have organised workshops to strategise in relation to their role in facilitating and ensuring uptake of the SSF Guidelines. And FAO is organising regional workshops for South East Asia, East Africa and North Africa and the Near East to work towards regional action plans and facilitate the development of national action plans.

At **regional level**, a number of organisations have already integrated the SSF Guidelines in their strategies including, for example: NEPAD's policy framework and reform strategy for fisheries and aquaculture in Africa, Resolution 15/2014/8 of the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission, the Central America Fisheries and Aquaculture Organization's fisheries and aquaculture policy for Central America 2015–25 and the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean's Regional Programme on small-scale fisheries. At **national level**, Costa Rica has included the SSF Guidelines in the National Development Plan 2015–18, CSOs in Mauritania, India, Sri Lanka and Costa Rica have organised workshops and prepared local language versions and videos of the SSF Guidelines to facilitate the fisheries stakeholders' understanding of the principles.

All of these developments are encouraging, and FAO is working to ensure this work continues to happen by setting up a Global Assistance Programme. Partners are encouraged to contribute to this programme to support the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, thereby helping to reverse the history of neglecting an enormous portion of our fisheries stakeholders and enabling the small-scale fisheries sector to make vibrant and sustainable contributions to food security and nutrition, livelihoods and poverty alleviation.

For more information and downloading the SSF Guidelines, see:

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