

Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication

IYAFA: interview with Jackie Sunde, senior researcher for the One Ocean Hub small-scale fisheries research team at the University of Cape Town



In your opinion, what are the main human rights issues facing small-scale fishers and fish farmers, fish workers, and their communities?

Globally small-scale fishers, fish farmers, fish workers and their communities are experiencing increasing pressures, with many of them finding themselves at the nexus of intersecting socio-economic and environmental crises. In this context, we can understand the slogan of fishers from the global south who developed the slogan ‘Fishers rights are human rights’. Indeed, in the current experiences of many small-scale fishing communities

we see the real meaning of the term ‘the indivisibility of human rights’ as it is becoming increasingly impossible to separate the many human rights’ challenges that they experience. The right to adequate food, the right to secure tenure and the recognition of customary tenure systems, the right to culture, the right to a healthy, sustainable environment and the right to participate in decision-making are key inter-dependent rights from the perspective of small-scale fishers, fish farmers, fish workers and their communities but may also hold the key to sustainable use of our ocean commons for all humanity.

In many countries small-scale fishers and aquatic producers have often been marginalised and their human rights ignored. Several issues are now exacerbating this marginalization. Fishers and aquatic producers find themselves competing with multiple other users in the ocean and aquatic space, in a contest where neo-liberal growth and industrial development policies often favour the more powerful industrial sectors. For small-scale fishers and other aquatic small-scale producers, secure tenure to their traditional waters and access to resources is critical for their livelihoods. Without this access and control they are unable to secure their access to adequate food, develop their livelihoods, contribute to the food system and maximise the potential for local poverty alleviation. In addition, for indigenous peoples, customary and local fisher communities, recognition of their customary tenure systems and rights arising in terms of these customary systems is critical not only for their access to food, but also for their cultural identity and systems of knowledge which in turn govern their resources and sustain their communities.

Very few countries have escaped the extreme climate events of the past five years, with flash floods, severe droughts, hurricanes,

and tornados having left vast regions of the world struggling to meet the basic needs of the population for clean water, access to food, adequate shelter and basic disaster relief. Rising food and oil prices due to the conflict in Ukraine have hit hard just as people had begun to rebuild their livelihoods after the devastating impact of Covid on many families and neighbourhoods, as well as on local and international markets. Yet despite contributing the least to the drivers of these problems, small-scale aquatic producers and peasants are often at the forefront of the impact of these processes that leave them even more vulnerable. As small-scale producers their contribution to carbon emissions and hence climate destruction is considerably less than large, industrial enterprises. Yet the specific needs and interests of small-scale fishers and fish workers are seldom first in line in disaster situations, notwithstanding the important contribution that they make to our knowledge of biodiversity and nature-human interactions and local food security. Although there is growing recognition that fishers' biocultural diversity with its finely tuned local knowledge can play a critical role in biodiversity protection, climate resilience and adaptation, many national jurisdictions have been slow to recognise customary tenure systems, their contribution to sustainable governance and food security. Increased efforts are needed to develop the co-management and other mechanisms that can secure small-scale fishers' and other aquatic producers' full and effective participation in decision-making and environmental governance and thereby maximise the contribution that they can bring to addressing these climate impacts, mitigating disasters, modelling sustainable use and ensuring food security.

How can the protection of the human rights of small-scale fishers and aquatic producers guarantee the achievement of SDGs?

Perhaps most worrying from the perspective of the human rights of small-scale fishers and small-scale aquatic producers, is the evidence now emerging from both the north and the south, from developed and developing nations, that the global turn to the ocean for solutions to this climate change and other challenges faced by humanity, known internationally as “Blue Growth” or the ‘Blue Economy’, is heightening fishers’ precarious tenure and access rights to their traditional waters and resources. Reports from several regions that the implementation of ‘Blue Economy’ strategies is leading to the economic exploitation of the ocean and water bodies without the necessary governance and management processes in place to ensure sustainable, socially just development are extremely worrying as this threatens not only fishers’ rights of access, tenure and food security, but destruction of the ocean and aquatic commons may threaten humanities’ collective right to a healthy and sustainable environment as we all depend on healthy oceans for water and oxygen.

Critical ocean ecosystems services provide the foundation for our well-being through provisioning oxygen, water and contributing towards carbon sequestration. The sea provides food for millions of people, and ocean-linked ecosystem services provide livelihood opportunities in several key economic sectors such as energy, marine shipping and transport, aquaculture and tourism. Recognition of the importance of ‘Life under water’ and the need to conserve and use ocean, seas and marine resources sustainably (Sustainable Development Goal 14) in order that this potential for access to food and to livelihood opportunities that can address

poverty can be enjoyed is growing. To ensure that the development of ocean economies is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), FAO has released a [roadmap for the transformation of aquatic food systems](#) called ‘Blue Transformation’. This approach provides a vision and guidance on how to maximise the contribution of aquatic food systems to the SDGs.

By highlighting the important contribution that small-scale fishers and aquatic producers make to the customary sustainable use of resources, we can draw attention to the synergies between the human rights of these producers and the achievement of the SDGs. In many countries there has been little statutory recognition to date of this nuanced link between a community’s right to access to ocean and aquatic resources, their rights to culture and their customary system of governance of these resources and the significance of this for biodiversity protection and the right to a healthy, sustainable environment. However, our understanding of the inextricability of the right to a healthy, sustainable environment from other rights has come into sharp focus more recently with climate change. Thanks to the extraordinary efforts and sacrifices of many indigenous and small-scale environmental defenders, coupled with indigenous peoples and local communities around the world, together with that of the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on Human Rights and the Environment, on the right to Food and on Human Rights and Climate Change, we have deepened our understanding of this critical connection and the contribution of small-scale fishers and aquatic producers as ocean and environmental stewards and defenders at the front line of conservation and sustainable use.

The interconnectedness of this imperative to both conserve and use resources sustainably from the protection of certain human rights has gained increased visibility through the development of the SDGs. The work that is being done across the United Nations international institutions and platforms such as the Committee on World Food Security, the Committee on Fisheries and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Conference of Parties amongst others is highlighting the linkages between human rights such as the right to food and the right to a healthy, sustainable environment and the achievement of the SDGs. If our oceans and marine resources are not managed sustainably, and the health and well-being of fisheries resources and other ecosystem processes is undermined, access to these food sources and life-sustaining services will be undermined. It thus follows that the protection of biodiversity through sustainable use and effective governance tools is indivisible from that of small-scale fishers and aquatic producers enjoying their human rights to access resources, give expression to their culture and knowledge systems and their governance of these resources.

How can small-scale aquatic food producers be empowered to claim their human rights?

Evidence on the status of the human rights of small-scale fishers and aquatic producers emerging from different parts of the world highlights the necessity for diverse strategies for the protection of human rights at different scales, but importantly, in contextually specific ways. It is clear that no ‘one size fits all’ but rather, mutually reinforcing activities at different levels, across a wide range of diverse public and private actors in small-scale fisheries and aquaculture are necessary to ensure impact. At a recent 4th World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress for Africa held in Cape

Town, South Africa, fishers, researchers, academics, government officials and human rights lawyers shared and reflected the multitude of opportunities to empower and support small-scale fisher and aquatic producers' abilities to claim and defend their human rights. Support at local, national, regional and international level is important. In several countries the support of international institutions such as FAO has enabled training and capacity building on the SSF Guidelines at both grassroots level and for government officials. International sharing of best practice and tools for the development of legal and policy frameworks that reflect compliance with the SSF Guidelines has further assisted small-scale producers in some countries to secure recognition of their rights. Targeted activities that aim to raise awareness of women's roles, rights and gender equity, particularly in relation to access to resources and markets has enabled the building of a powerful network of women marketers across the African continent. Enabling these women to then share their experiences and ensure that their voices are heard in policy and governance in regional activities has inspired other women and given additional momentum to this process of raising awareness and empowering women to claim their rights. In South Africa small-scale fishers have come together with other social movements, non-governmental organisations, researchers, marine scientists and human rights lawyers to defend their rights and protect the ocean from exploitation by oil and gas multinationals through human rights litigation. In two recent court cases against the Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy and these multinationals, indigenous and small-scale fisher communities argued that exploration for oil and gas would harm not only the ocean and marine life but would impact their human rights to food, to practice their culture and spiritual connection to

the ocean and would impact climate change. Significantly they also argued that their right to their customary system of law and their right to culture included their obligation to protect the ocean from harm and the failure to recognise their customary system and consult them accordingly was thus a violation of these customary and cultural rights. In two powerful judgements the courts have found in the fishers' favour. These court cases have deepened understanding of fishers' human rights and the connection with ocean well-being. They highlight the importance of fishers' building solidarity across different sectors and enabling the co-creation of knowledge that can be presented as powerful evidence in order to claim the rights of fishers and argue the interdependence of our human rights and the well-being of our oceans.

Biography

Dr Jackie Sunde is a senior researcher for the One Ocean Hub Small-scale Fisheries Research Team at the University of Cape Town and a member of the Coastal Justice Network.

