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WE ARE THE GUARDIANS OF THE WATERS AND THE SEAS! VOICES FROM THE GROUND: CHALLENGES AND FUTURE OF TRADITIONAL FISHERFOLK

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and they have clear visions for the future.”*

INTRODUCTION

In recognition of the crucial role played by the world’s 482 million traditional fisher people in ensuring food sovereignty and guaranteeing the human right to adequate food and nutrition (RtFN), not only for themselves but for millions of others, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) declared 2022 the [International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture \(IYAFA 2022\)](#). IYAFA envisions a world in which “small-scale artisanal fishers [...] are fully recognized and empowered to continue their contributions to human well-being, healthy food systems and poverty eradication [...]” Yet, the 2019/2020 [Fishers’ Blue Economy Tribunal](#) brought to the fore the ever-increasing territory grabbing, and the competition among various actors for ocean spaces, driving away traditional fisherfolk from their fishing grounds and territories, and jeopardizing their ability to feed themselves and their families. This article is based on the voices and experiences shared by the traditional fisher people representatives who are members of the [World Forum of Fisher Peoples](#) in dialogues held on their relationships with oceanic ecologies, the multi-faceted challenges they continue to face, and the future they envision for themselves and for future generations in attaining food sovereignty.

FISHING AS TRADITIONAL FISHERFOLKS’ WAY OF LIFE

Fishing is more than just an economic activity for ensuring livelihoods. Fishing is an intrinsic part of the culture of fisherfolk, and the very soul of who they are. “I have never questioned what it means to be traditional fisherfolk. We have always

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fished and hunted, and that has been the essence of our lives”, says Elena Konoplianko ([Aborigin Forum, Russia](#)) who belongs to the Indigenous Peoples of Oroch (Орочи), Russia. Fishing is not only a profession, or a sector but it is what makes them who they are; it is their collective identity. “Our tribe is called *Maruka* and it means the people living by the sea”. This is echoed by David (Dauda) Ndiaye ([National Collective of Artisanal Fishermen in Senegal /CNPS](#)). “We are Lébou. We live in the western part of Senegal. Our families have been practicing various fishing techniques for generations. We have historical ties with the sea and marine resources. They are at the heart of our lives and our only means of subsistence, which also guarantees our social cohesion and our food sovereignty.” This view is equally shared by Jason Jarvis, a small-vessel fisherman from Rhode Island (USA) ([Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance/NAMA](#)) who says his relationship with water is ingrained in him since his childhood: “I feel connected to water in a way that is hard to explain. Being in and on the water is where I feel at home, at peace”. Fishing is passed down from generation to generation: “It is part of our genes, it is in our DNA. I see it in my son. The most amazing thing is for him to go to the sea with his father”, Nadine Nemhard from Belize ([Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organization/CNFO](#)) adds. Jason equally highlights how being a fisher is also about self-determination, which is also shared by Josana Costa ([Movimento de Pescadores e Pescadoras Artesanais do Brasil /MPP](#)) from Brazil: “It is about freedom and sovereignty, to be autonomous”. Siti Aisyah Amini ([Indonesia Traditional Fisherfolks Union/KNTI](#)) emphasizes the contribution of traditional fisherfolk to food security: “Indonesia is the largest island country. Of the fishers, 96% are small-scale. We are the national protein hero”. To be able to provide fresh and best quality fish gives fishers pride, as echoed by Jason and Nadine. Increasingly, however, fish is turned into ‘seafood’, a commodity, and an economic good that is regulated by the market, Jason laments.

CHALLENGES OF TRADITIONAL FISHERFOLK TODAY

Access to and control over water resources and coastal areas is a sine-qua-non for the realization of traditional fisherfolks’ RtFN and other related human rights. All representatives cited here denounce the loss of access to their waters and territories. The causes are manifold: Corporate interests and profit-driven agendas and policies are increasingly embodied in the so-called blue economy. In this context, the promotion of extractive industries (such as gas, oil, and mining), aquaculture, development of infrastructure, and tourism continues to push traditional fisher peoples to the margins.

Today, fishers face denial of their access to and governance over their waters and coastal lands, a decline in fish stocks, marine pollution caused by industrial and household wastes, and degradation of marine biodiversity, all of which jeopardize the realization of their RtFN.

Senegal’s recent oil and gas discoveries are attracting the arrival of extractive industries. An Australian oil exploration and production company has launched its first oil project: “The company’s drilling endangers the artisanal fishing zone designated for artisanal fishers, and they cannot access [fishing grounds](#)”, says Dauda. Josana emphasizes the nexus of land and water and the importance of tenure rights not just to water but also to adjacent land: “Our land and forests are grabbed, fertilizers and mercury contaminate our land. And capitalism has advanced into our waters too. This widespread evil is now impacting our fish production. [Agribusiness is building ports to export corn and soy and mining companies are taking away our beaches](#)”. Even in the landlocked country of Mali, Africa’s mightiest waterway,

the Niger River, is drying up due to the [upstream diversion of water](#) provided to foreign investors who are backed by agricultural development schemes. This loss of waterfronts is also echoed by Jason: “Much of our coastal property has been bought off by wealthy people. This real-estate grab is pushing us out. So we are losing our access to marine resources and places to park our boats”.

Top-down conservation measures, which fail to view people as part of nature, disrespect the customary rights of traditional fisherfolk’s access to waters. One example can be found in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), i.e. conservation areas set aside to rejuvenate marine biodiversity and fish stock that have limited communities’ fishing rights in many parts of the world. Their establishment is supported by global targets, such as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 14, and the so-called 30 x 30 Initiative, which calls for 30% of all land and marine ecosystem to be put under protection schemes. More often than not, MPAs are imposed without consultation with fisherfolk who are then criminalized for fishing in their waters. The recent [headline on Debt-for-Nature-Swaps \(DFNs\) in Belize](#) is an example of how so-called “nature-based solutions” such as MPAs meet the financialization of the blue economy. DFNs are a debt instrument that allow portions of a developing country’s foreign debt to be ‘written off’, in exchange for commitments to invest in biodiversity conservation and environmental policy measures. In short, a USA-based environmental NGO, the Nature Conservancy, in partnership with Credit Suisse, financed the purchase of USD \$533 million worth of debt. In return, Belize agreed to spend USD \$4 million a year on marine conservation until 2041, to legally enforce the “Marine Spatial Plan”, and designate up to 30% of its ocean as Biodiversity Protection Zones, and to develop a “high-value sustainable aquaculture and mariculture industry”. Belize will face financial penalties if it fails to abide by the agreement. Nadine criticizes the lack of consultation with and decision-making of the country’s 3000 fishers who depend on water for their survival. “I want to emphasize the deeply neo-colonial nature of this market-based approach. Because Belize is pushed into giving away its right to decide by itself on how to use its natural and financial resources. Not only is Belize’s debt the result of financial dependency from Northern countries, but now it is used to force us to address an ecological crisis, which has largely been caused by rich countries. The DFN is another form of domination from foreign financial interests to the detriment of our people.”

Encroachment of waters by foreign vessels jeopardizes the RtFN of traditional fishers, as narrated by Azrilnizam Omar ([Malaysian Coastal Fishermen’s Education and Welfare Association /Jaring](#)): “Foreign trawlers, primarily from Vietnam, are encroaching the fishing areas designated for local Malaysian trawlers, who, in return, enter our fishing zones. This affects our fish catch, source of income, and livelihood. The monthly financial aid provided by the government only benefitted registered licensed fishers but not us.” Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU) has become [one of the main maritime threats](#) faced by Senegal. Unauthorized industrial fishing ships, in particular, have been [plundering the country’s marine resources, taking advantage of the country’s weak surveillance system](#). Dauda explains: “Aquatic resources, which were once abundant, diverse, and rich in nutrients are overexploited. Many of us do not have a license to fish because the government has frozen the fishing permit since 2018.” Similarly, in Sri Lanka, Thadsajini (Thadsa) Thavachselvam ([National Fisheries Solidarity Movement/NAF-SO](#)) shares how fishers are confronted with illegal fishing trawlers poaching in Sri Lankan waters from its neighboring country, India. The [conflict between Sri Lanka and the Southern state of Tamil Nadu in India over fisheries](#) dates back to the 1970s.

A maritime boundary agreed upon by both countries in the 1970s continues to be disrespected by large Indian industrial fishers. In the USA, large draggers and trawlers come close so as to run down the boats that belong to small-scale fishers (SSF): “The big boats call us the mosquito fleet. We are just an annoyance to them”, says Jason.

Profit-driven agendas also threaten the lives of the traditional fisherfolk in the Far East Region of Russia. The government turns a deaf ear to the plight of the Indigenous fisher peoples but heeds to the industrial interests and their lobbying. The Orochi fisherfolk are witnessing the overexploitation of various salmon species by industrial fishers. Despite the legal recognition of the right to traditional fishing of Indigenous Peoples, there is a set quota for the amount of salmon that can be fished. “We are only permitted to fish 100 kg of salmon per year. This amount is too little for us to sustain our livelihood. We fish because our land is not suitable for farming.” Such a quota system, known as individual fishing quotas (IFQs) or individual transferable quotas (ITQs), is often applied by governments to regulate fishing. For fisherfolk, however, this is the privatization of their fishing rights. Also in the USA, Jason is fighting against the quota system: “In 2010, fish was commodified and turned into stocks and bonds. A simple way of putting it: It has become a commodity market and anyone with money can buy the fishing quota.”

The rapid decline in fish stocks is harming the ability of small-scale fishers to feed themselves and their families. Water that is rich in biodiversity and essential for the mere survival of fishers is undergoing global warming, thereby further impacting oceanic resources. In Sendou, Senegal, Dauda shares how a coal-fired power plant has been established in an area where small-scale fishers fish, [affecting the health of the local population, particularly women who are workers of a nearby fish-processing site](#). Climate change affects the weather, and fishers are putting their lives at risk to go fishing further into the ocean, Jason adds. Elena reminds us of the interconnectedness of nature, fisherfolk, and the surrounding environment: “Everything is interconnected: Sea, flora, and fauna. Today we use different fishing tools, nets, and boats, but we believe in nature’s spirit and never overfish or overexploit our territories.” Josana points to the social implications linked to territory grabbing: “With the Brazilian government’s promotion of mining, we are witnessing the entry of more drugs, more trafficking, rape, and prostitution. Women are the main victims and bear the brunt. The government has liberalized guns and uses artificial intelligence to detect who is rejecting its policies and actions, and then criminalizes us.”

An additional challenge relates to accessing subsidized diesel fuel for small-scale fisheries. In Indonesia, it is due to [administrative hurdles and the distances fishers must travel to fuel stations](#). In Sri Lanka, [as the country faces the nation’s worst economic crisis since independence in 1948 and with inflation running rampant, the cost of diesel has almost doubled in a few months](#), while official figures show that the average price of food shot up by 25% in January 2022. Thadsa denounces the situation: “The crisis has left local fishing communities short of fuel to send their vessels out to the ocean to fish. This has a huge implication for our RtFN because we are not able to buy food. With an average wage of 500-600 Sri Lankan Rupees (equivalent to USD \$ 1,54), we are unable to pay for medical fees and send our children to school.”

VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Despite seemingly insurmountable challenges the world over, traditional fisherfolk are not silent. They are deploying various strategies and combined actions to challenge policies and currents against them. Elena and Jason are raising their voices against the quota system by engaging directly with policymakers in Russia and the USA, while Thadsa conducts aware-raising programs with traditional fisherfolk to engage in direct actions, and to nationalize the protest of Sri Lankan fisherfolk. Nadine also highlights the importance of capacity-building for fishers to demand their rights in policy-making spaces in the Caribbean. Siti demands the direct involvement of fisherfolk in policy and law-making processes in Indonesia, and calls for fishers to make recommendations of their own, based on their data. In Brazil, fisherfolk themselves are already engaged in data collection to counter the “lies” of the government, which favors industrial fishing based on the claim that it catches more. Azrilnizam continues to monitor the Malaysian government’s phase-by-phase plan to stop the operation of large trawlers in national waters. Aminata calls for the transformation of local food systems in Mali with a much stronger focus on locally produced fish, for example, through small-scale fish farming that can be easily done by women and elderly.

Traditional fisherfolk are agents of change, and they have clear visions for the future. The federal government of Rhode Island is now increasingly sourcing local fish caught by small-scale fishers through a collective, thanks to Jason and his fellow fishers’ advocacy. Nadine highlights the endorsement of the UN [small-scale fisheries guidelines](#) as an achievement of fisherfolk, and reminds us of the need to monitor its implementation by national governments. Lastly, fisherfolk must organize to defend the recognition of their peoples’ rights and their traditional customary rights over their territories for all future generations. Dauda concludes: “This year, a coalition of small-scale fishers was built to represent us. This coalition will contest at the upcoming legislative elections to defend the rights of small-scale fishers, which is the first attempt not only in Senegal, but in the whole of Africa. Think of us fishers as actors!”

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