



## editorial

# small-scale fishers: struggles and mobilisations



Illustration by Cara Penton, @CaraPenton

The United Nations has declared 2022 as the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA 2022) to highlight the importance of artisanal fishing and aquaculture.

Over the past ten years, and even more so since the pandemic, blue economy initiatives have been blooming. The 2021 UN Food Systems Summit advanced the notion of “Blue Foods”, which first and foremost means aquaculture. In 2021, the FAO Committee on Fisheries took unprecedented steps to advance aquaculture, giving birth to the “Shanghai Declaration” drafted by WorldFish, industry players, and other stakeholders (<https://aquaculture2020.org/declaration/>).

IYAFA is now also showcasing artisanal fishing. Some

prefer the term small-scale fishing, but regardless of the term used, it is always about the way of life that provides food and income for over a hundred million people globally. However, fisher people’s territories and resources are increasingly being grabbed: the entire blue economy agenda spanning from displacing people in the name of conservation (Marine Protected Areas -MPAs), to massive-scale investments for fish farming, to expanding ports to facilitate more global trade, and to unprecedented sound blasting and drilling for oil and gas, are examples of contemporary development that have and continue to dispossess fishing communities. We hope IYAFA will become the year for fisher people all over the world to scale up resistance and mobilise masses in demands for restitution and regeneration of nature.

*Transnational Institute and FIAN International*

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from the grassroots.*

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## who we are

In the last years hundreds of organisations and movements have been engaged in struggles, activities, and various kinds of work to defend and promote the right of people to Food Sovereignty around the world. Many of these organisations were present in the *International Nyéléni Forum 2007* and feel part of a broader **Food Sovereignty Movement**, that considers the Nyéléni 2007 declaration as its political platform. **The Nyéléni Newsletter is the voice of this international movement.**

Organisations involved: AFSA, FIAN, Focus on the Global South, Friends of the Earth International, GRAIN, Grassroots International, IPC for Food Sovereignty, La Via Campesina, Marcha Mundial de las Mujeres, Real World Radio, The World Forum Of Fish Harvesters & Fish Workers, Transnational Institute, VSFJusticia Alimentaria Global, WhyHunger, World Forum of Fisher People.

## now is time for food sovereignty !

## Masifundise and its work with small-scale fishing communities

Masifundise works with small-scale fishing communities in South Africa, which are amongst the poorest and most marginalised groups in the country. These communities are extremely vulnerable to climate change despite the fact that the sector's contribution to carbon emissions is insignificant (in comparison with tourism, industrial fishing, etc.).

The country's complex history of colonial and racially-based spatial planning and conservation has shaped current conservation efforts, resulting in conflict between traditional communities and conservation authorities, as well as the undermining of human rights, customary livelihood practices, and access rights. In the protection of marine and coastal biodiversity, the prioritization and support of indigenous fishing communities is almost non-existent, as the emphasis is on conservation rather than human rights. Of 231 coastal fishing communities, 60 are located within or adjacent to MPAs. South Africa's Small-scale Fisheries Policy (2012), which was developed hand-in-hand with small-scale fishers, has the primary goal of introducing "fundamental shifts in Government's approach to the small-scale fisheries sectors" with an emphasis on "community-based co-management" and a "community-based system of [fishing] rights allocation".

However, in areas within and adjacent to MPAs, the policy implementation is not in line with its objectives and principles, co-management is ignored, and community-based fishing rights are yet to be recognised by conservation authorities. Small-scale fishers in the Dwesa Nature Reserve, Eastern Cape, have expressed that they "do not have access to fish and collect wood and reeds to secure livelihoods", despite ongoing attempts to engage directly with the Reserve authorities as well as other stakeholders to find solutions. Since 2010, four recognised small-scale fishers have been shot and killed within MPAs, and in November 2021 alone, park rangers in the Isimangaliso World Heritage site, KwaZulu Natal, shot at four fishers. The South African case highlights the lack of inclusion of the voice and experiences of coastal communities in the journey towards the protection of marine resources.

# in the spotlight

## Should we speak of overfishing?

Over the last 20-30 years, the vast majority of debates around marine fisheries have hovered around Overfishing, especially commentaries from the Global North. The World Bank and FAO's *Sunken Billions* report in 2008 emphasised that the oceans are globally overexploited, to justify the increased adoption of State-led Fisheries Management Systems at international, regional, and national levels as part of fisheries reforms towards sustainability. The UN Sustainable Development Goal 14 demands ending Overfishing due to Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing with science-based fisheries management, as well as reducing fisheries subsidies. The World Trade Organisation has furthered this at the fisheries negotiations to cut down fisheries subsidies, as the most blatant use of environmental arguments to secure markets for western seafood companies. Thus, the notion of Overfishing and the need for Fisheries Reform constitute a globally dominant notion that traditional fishing communities are having to confront.

The problem does not lie with traditional small-scale fisheries (SSF), but entirely from Industrial fishing, and the commodification of fish. Big Capital created extensive supply and value chains for seafood in western countries which fuelled the intensification of technology and targeted mono-species exploitation such as tuna liners, shrimp trawlers, etc. The overfishing arguments rely heavily on fish stock assessments and Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) models that historically evolved in water and forest resource management<sup>1</sup>, with questionable relevance for fisheries. This usage of MSY to restrict fishing activity also originates from the US to ensure their control of the Pacific oceanic fisheries as opposed to Japanese fleets<sup>2</sup> during the post-World War II era. This shows the historical geopolitical background of the overlapping discourse of Overfishing and Fisheries Reforms.

In India, the historical trend of fisheries policies from the 1970s has been to expand and exploit fisheries resources beyond 12 nautical miles (Nm) (termed Deepsea fisheries) in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)<sup>3</sup>, for export earnings and foreign exchange, which was promoted as Fisheries Development and Modernisation. Fishing vessels were imported, joint ventures of Indian and multinational corporates were encouraged in the 70s, foreign vessels were given direct fishing licences to fish in India's EEZ in the 80s, which was further deregulated after the 1991 neoliberal economic reforms. Led by the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF), India witnessed massive protests from fishing communities against these policies, and the government had to withdraw the licencing policy in 1994. It is from 2004 onwards that Indian policies began using explicit environmental language, invoking a need for conservation of fishery resources, and resumed promotion of deepsea fisheries technology touted as "sustainable development", while advocating for fisheries reforms.



1 - Naveen Namboothri and Madhuri Ramesh. "Maximum sustainable yield: a myth and its manifold effects." *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 41 (2018): 58-63.

2 - Liam and Alejandro Colas. "Capitalism and the sea: the maritime factor in the making of the modern world". Verso Books, 2021.

3 - The exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is an area where sovereign states have jurisdiction over resources.

# in the spotlight

The World Bank document of 2011 titled Transitions for Sustainable Development in Indian Marine Fisheries laid out a neat timeline for the rollout of 'fisheries reforms' in phases. For the last decade, the union government has argued that seas up to 12 Nm are overfished, with too many fisher conflicts, and promotes capital intensive deepsea fisheries (beyond 12 Nm) as the way out. It has launched deepsea fisheries schemes including subsidised mechanised longlining and gillnet vessels, specifically targeting tuna species, costing over INR. 1 crore (\$140,000). The government invites private capital to invest in mid-sea mother vessels, onshore seafood processing plants, as well as in direct-to-home online retail through start-ups funded by venture capitalists. Public funds have been invested in supporting infrastructure such as a network of deepsea fishing harbours, Seafood Parks, etc in all coastal states. The production based-policy initiatives India embarked on in the 1950s onwards with marine shrimp as its focus commodity, is being repeated with tuna in this Blue Economy era. It's a case of history repeating itself as a tragedy and a farce.

Under India's constitution, fisheries are listed as a state subject, falling under the provincial government. In the last decade, several coastal states have amended their respective state-based Marine Fisheries Regulation Acts. The Union government has also attempted to pass legislation to govern marine fisheries in India's EEZ, the latest of which was the Indian Marine Fisheries Bill, 2021 during the Covid lockdown. This was opposed by the NFF and the fishing community at large. These have brought in a governance system of boat registrations, fisheries licences with strict rules, and vast powers to officials in charge of implementing regulations. Taken together, these are an attack on the unrecognised customary governance institutions, as well as an attack on the constitutional separation of powers between the Union and state governments, while simultaneously promoting marine security and defence institutions. 'Fisheries Reform' in India represents centralisation as well as the militarisation of fisheries governance, which shifts power further away from the people.

In the context of the Blue Economy, terrestrial capital is increasingly expanding and intensifying its tentacle-like grasp on coastal and marine resources with different industrial components including ports, shipping, Coastal Economic Zones, offshore hydrocarbon, tourism, desalination, renewable energy, etc. Under the grand Blue Economy narrative, marine fisheries are envisaged as an industrialised deep-sea sector. Inevitable consequences are the criminalisation and steady dispossession of traditional fishers from coastal and oceanic commons. Blue Economy ultimately aims to clear the seas of marine capture fishers and make way for these sectors.

In conclusion, the overfishing debate has been centred upon fishery resources. It views fish stocks as mere commodities to exploit and regulate through State-led techno-managerial tools, whereas traditional fishing communities' relationship with the coast and sea is as Home and fisheries as a livelihood. The struggle against the overfishing debate is not merely about claiming a share in the global fish stock for fisherfolk. It goes beyond the 'right to fish' but about reclaiming our status as the stewards of the coasts and oceans. Fishers do not claim the seas as their asset, but that they belong to the sea. The World Forum of Fisher People's slogan of "We are the Ocean" stems from this spirit of belonging. Fishers cannot allow the takeover of this belonging through intellectual mythologies like Overfishing.

## voices from the field 1

### Reflection from a young fisher

*Tylon Joseph, Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organizations (CNFO), Grenada*

I am a young fisherman and fisherfolk leader from the community of Gouyave, the fishing capital of a Caribbean Island called Grenada. I have been fishing ever since I was a child, casting lines from the shore and our local jetty: catching Scad (or as we locally call it jacks), other Carangidae species and small finfish in general. My father is a fisherman by profession. I learnt a lot of what I know about fishing from him and being in that environment. I have truly learnt to appreciate my innate understanding of the marine environment, which stemmed from being a fisherman while pursuing a marine and wildlife conversation biology degree at St George's University. Being a fisherman is what primarily pays for my tuition to attend school. Initially, I never thought about going to university; after I spent around 5 years fishing for a living, I realized that my country started to regress rapidly despite industry development. There is little to no government systems and staff in place to help the industry move forward nor are fishers involved in the big policy decisions and the local exporters who I sell to started taking more and more advantage of our fishers. I then decided that if I want to build a home and to be able to provide for my future family, then I had to branch out into another field and I choose one close to fish and fishing.

**one does not sell  
the earth upon which  
the people walk**

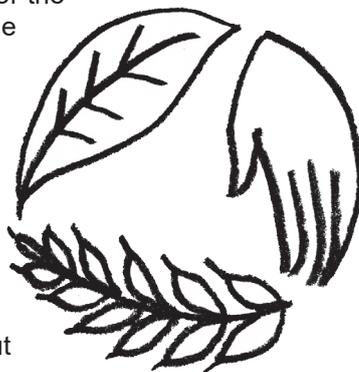
Tashunka Witko, 1840 –1877

## box 2

### Climate change and the Ocean- are Marine Protected Areas a just solution to the climate crisis for fishing communities?

Coastal fishing communities are among the most vulnerable groups globally, bearing the brunt of the climate crisis and changing climate conditions which alter the ocean and marine resources. However, in the decision-making processes and discussions on impacts and solutions for the oceans, the voices and experiences of small-scale fishers and their communities are largely absent, with little regard for the possibility of any pre-existing system of customary law or customary fishing rights to govern, manage, and conserve the resources.

The COP26 negotiations of November 2021 illustrated the lack of inclusion of the voices of marginal communities. The same false solutions to the climate crisis that have been punted in the past in order to help countries meet their Nationally Determined Contributions and achieve a 1.5°C future were adopted. One such solution is that of the push for carbon markets as a technical and financial solution to achieve net-zero emissions. Although COP26 has attempted to close some of the loopholes of the carbon market, such as double counting emissions, through the development of a rulebook, the voluntary market is still uncontrolled and resembles greenwashing, with no real results and rather shifting CO2 credits from one side of the world to the other. The offsetting of carbon credits through the carbon market is a simplistic solution to a complex issue, allowing developed nations and the big polluters to continue emitting carbon, and further impacting vulnerable communities, without any benefit for the environment.



In the ocean space, the financing and expansion of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) is considered a form of carbon offsetting and gaining carbon credits ("Blue Carbons"). Environmental NGOs and large industries and corporations are pushing this narrative as a solution to the climate impacts on the oceans. However, MPAs lead to ocean grabbing and the marginalization of fishing communities, as small-scale fishers are excluded and denied access from traditional fishing grounds and criminalized for undertaking customary and traditional livelihood activities for the sake of conservation and biodiversity protection. The democratic participation of small-scale fishers in decision-making processes relating to marine protection should be promoted in line with the principles Food Sovereignty as well as the concept of Other Effective area-based conservation measures' (OECMs), including preferential areas of access for small-scale fishers. OECMs are a conservation designation for areas that are achieving the effective in-situ conservation of biodiversity outside of protected areas.

A just and real solution to the climate crisis in the marine environment must involve and prioritize the voice of small-scale fishing communities in decision-making processes in working towards achieving both social development and environmental protection. Fishing communities need to actively take part in the governance, management, and conservation of coastal and marine resources. This inclusion could result in the improved resilience to climate change-related risks for vulnerable coastal communities, improved governance, management, and protection of MPAs and OECMs, as well as improved livelihood conditions and food sovereignty.

## voices from the field 2

### Struggles of small-scale fishers: A perspective from a Brazilian small-scale fisherwoman

*Josana Pinto da Costa, Movimento de Pescadores e Pescadoras Artesanais do Brasil (MPP), WFFP*

I am a fisherwoman and I live in the Amador community in the municipality of Óbidos in the state of Pará. I speak from the perspective of a small-scale fisherwoman. I have witnessed losses in our territories and the main threats are the expansion of agribusiness, hydro-business, and mining, as well as the privatization of our waters. As a way to solve this type of problem, we small-scale fisher people have organised collectively as Movimento de Pescadores e Pescadoras Artesanais do Brasil (MPP).

We have also joined the World Forum of Fishers Peoples (WFFP) and I currently serve on its coordinating committee. In both MPP and WFFP, we have embraced the challenge to launch the ocean grabbing peoples' tribunal in 2021<sup>1</sup>. We recognize it as one of the main tools of information and education in the struggle against capitalism in our waters. The relevance of the tribunal must be recognized by all, galvanizing our social struggles and the preservation of the environment. Our aim is to always have free lands and wholesome food.

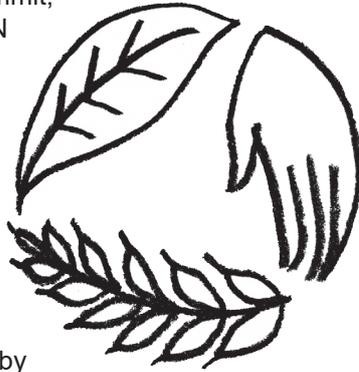
1 - <http://blueeconomytribunal.org/>

## box 3

### Small-scale fishers rising with the ocean

Two years of the pandemic have pushed fishing communities further to the fringes of society: Fishers are struggling to make ends meet, while all the 'usual' problems remain or have worsened. We are witnessing the culmination of political marginalisation of fisher movements, evident from the countless plans and policies being rolled out at national to international levels without any meaningful participation of fisher peoples and their allies. The new catch of the day is "multistakeholder" initiatives (MSIs) used by powerful elites such as transnational corporations and many environmental conservation organisations to work hand-in-hand with our governments. The High Ambition Coalition is one such MSI set up to eliminate human activity within 30% of the planet's surface, and hence, accelerate the problems mentioned in this newsletter.

Another example of a multistakeholder process is the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, orchestrated by the UN together with the World Economic Forum and a wide range of corporations and organisations. Aquaculture, in a new 'Blue Food' disguise, was presented as a solution to the multiple crises. The High Level Panel on a Sustainable Ocean Economy, launched by the conservative Norwegian prime minister in 2017, is yet another multistakeholder space. This panel also promotes aquaculture as the solution to food insecurity and argues that the ocean economy is a triple win (good for nature, for the economy and people). These spaces and processes, amongst others, all contribute to the shaping of the agenda of the UN Ocean Conference that will be held in Lisbon in June 2022. Fisher movements, on the other hand, have not had a chance to influence the agenda.



In response to the deepening crisis affecting all small-scale food producers and other working people, several fisher movements and allies are embarking on a different strategy. Following the path-breaking peoples' tribunals on the ocean economy held<sup>1</sup> in five Asian countries in 2020/2021, movements from around the world are stepping up in collecting testimonies and conducting more peoples' tribunals on ocean and fisheries issues to highlight the plight of fishers and hold responsible actors accountable. The IYAFA can serve as the key moment.

1 - <http://blueeconomytribunal.org/>

## box 4

### Ocean grabbing: a political narrative for small-scale fishers

In 2012, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and allies embarked on a path-breaking attempt to discuss ocean grabbing, raise consciousness, and build global resistance against the ever-increasing expropriation of fisher communities and destruction of nature. The outcome produced in a report also predicted the rise and the threat of the blue economy paradigm. Since then, this 'emerging mantra' has captured almost all spaces and institutions that address the ocean: countless 'blue' conferences, and numerous governments, NGOs, and academic institutions are actively facilitating the growth of the 'blue' paradigms. The pandemic also provided an opportunity for these actors and the corporate world to 'seize the moment' and entrench the blue narrative through new legislations with no democratic process. The global blue spaces such as the UN Ocean Conference in 2022 have also been 'captured', while the recognition and the representation of small-scale fishers and fisher workers remain largely ignored, or outright excluded.

According to Naseegh Jaffer, former WFFP General Secretary, "the conversations on the ocean have been co-opted by others. Governments and corporates are using a blue 'ocean' language that is now dominating. Many spaces where the fisher movements managed to articulate their interpretations have been taken over by others. FAO is inviting entities who are less struggle-oriented and more theoretical and academic to be the voice of the movements, while the representation of the movements is becoming suppressed". Nadine Nembhard, WFFP General Secretary, encouraged that "this is the moment for us to revitalise ocean grabbing as a narrative. We are in IYAFA and also in the year leading up to our next general assembly. That is a good moment to bring conversations on ocean grabbing to life".

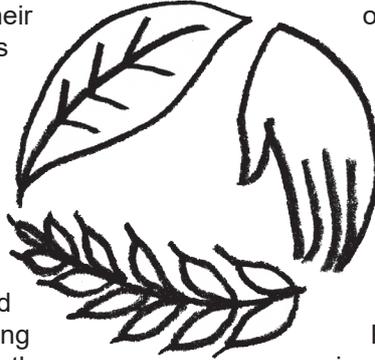
In India, ocean grabbing is the narrative used by fisher movements in their resistance and in demanding redress for human rights violations and restoration of nature and territories. As Jones Spartagus, the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) puts, "Ocean grabbing should be placed at the centre of the Peoples Tribunals. Through People's Tribunals we can bring back our language to assert our fisher people's sovereignty".

# voices from the field 3

## A view from a non-fisher on small-scale fishers

Ravindu Gunaratne, Sri Lanka

I live in a village where most of my neighbours and friends make a living from fishing, but I am not involved in fishing. I come from a middle-class family and go to university. As I see it, small-scale fisheries are diverse, dynamic, and attached to the livelihoods and culture of the local communities. I'm an advocate for small-scale fisheries and support fishers for their betterment. The fishing industry contributes to less than 2% of the country's gross domestic product, but small-scale fishing is of great importance for providing food on the table, and also for social functions such as providing work in rural areas. The majority of small-scale fisheries in Sri Lanka are traditional fisheries. I am a person who associates with small-scale fishers and understands the sector as I live in a fishing village. When it comes to the youth, I see how they struggle with both poverty and unawareness. Small scale fishing is eco-friendly, but there is a huge threat with garbage and plastic wastes near the shore. I'm working with the youth to promote environmental well-being and to make others understand that small-scale fishers do less harm to the sea and the environment because



of their use of more nature-friendly fishing practices. When it comes to the challenges faced by the fishing community, I think of resource depletion, poor economic performance, food and nutritional insecurity and social and cultural stress among defenceless people. Small-scale fishing is a sustainable oriented livelihood occupation. I have noticed while working with SSF community that small scale fisheries have received relatively little attention or support from our government. It is contended that both the assessment and management of small scale fisheries increased effort in understanding and developing processes, mechanisms and methods that are more attuned to the issues faced by small scale fisheries. Promotion of the small-scale fishery is very important based on the principles of social, climate and economic justice, which empowers our fishing villages. All of these justices are part of food sovereignty. I stand for food sovereignty!

## to read, listen, watch and share

- *International People's Tribunal on the Impacts of Blue Economy*, <http://blueeconomytribunal.org/> The website includes many country reports and verdicts from the People's Tribunal.
- *Troubled Waters. How the 'blue economy' perpetuates historical injustices in Mauritius*, [https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/mauritius\\_en\\_web\\_final.pdf](https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/mauritius_en_web_final.pdf)
- *How do communities support fishers? The who, what, why and how of community supported fisheries*, [https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/csf\\_english\\_web.pdf](https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/csf_english_web.pdf)
- *Aquaculture, Financialization, and Impacts on Small-scale Fishing Communities*, [https://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/files/rtfn\\_watch\\_art.02-2021\\_eng\\_web-2.pdf](https://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/files/rtfn_watch_art.02-2021_eng_web-2.pdf)
- *The Global Ocean Grab: A Primer*, [https://www.tni.org/files/download/the\\_global\\_ocean\\_grab.pdf](https://www.tni.org/files/download/the_global_ocean_grab.pdf)
- *Human Rights vs. Property Rights. Implementation and Interpretation of the SSF Guidelines*, [https://www.tni.org/files/article-downloads/human\\_rights\\_versus\\_property\\_rights\\_implementation\\_of\\_the\\_ssf\\_guidelines\\_en.pdf](https://www.tni.org/files/article-downloads/human_rights_versus_property_rights_implementation_of_the_ssf_guidelines_en.pdf)