

Speaking points Mr Árni M. Mathiesen (ADG FI) COFI33 side event: Ensuring Socially, Environmentally and Commercially Sustainable Fisheries

More than 3 billion people rely on fish for animal protein, and more than 800 million people depend on aquaculture, fisheries and associated fish value chains for their livelihood. This number includes the 60 million people directly employed in marine and inland capture fisheries, 200 million people estimated to be employed in the postharvest or secondary sector, plus their families and dependants.

We agree with the organizers of this event: for sustainable development to happen, all three pillars of sustainability (Social, Ecological and Economic) require equal, well-balanced efforts. Otherwise, it is not true sustainability. And this includes paying more attention to the effective implementation of international law on working conditions, including safety at sea, as well as human rights for fish workers.

The fisheries sector has a mixed record when it comes to working conditions and human rights. While many employers treat their workers well and according to expected standards, modern-day slavery in the fisheries sector is also making headlines, as are other exploitative and abusive practices including violence, fraudulent recruitment, debt bondage and sexual abuse. Child labour also exists, as well as poor occupational safety and health.

Poverty is a key driver for labour abuses and human rights violations in fisheries. When stocks decline, operational costs increase, which reduces income per fisher. With limited alternative livelihoods –as is often the case in poor communities– to increase income, fishers may resort to practices like reducing mesh sizes, fishing in closed areas or during closed seasons, and also reducing other costs related to working conditions, like health and safety measures, food and accommodation, and of course incomes. This can result in employing children, including young migrants, or forced labour.

However, poverty is not the only driver. We also see cases where strong interests to increase profit margins in domestic and global value chains affects social conditions. Such selfish, if not greedy attitudes often disregard the basic ethical and social considerations towards fish workers, their families and communities. This obviously calls for more responsible business conduct to ensure respect of human and labour rights.

Examples of these conditions are observed all over the world, in developing and in more developed countries. As you can understand, once someone decides to break one law or management measure, it becomes easier to break other laws/regulations. For this reason we feel that there is a strong link between IUU fishing and labour abuses and human rights violations (including safety risks at sea).

FAO's Fisheries Department has a long history of working on safety at sea and decent work, in collaboration with partners, such as the FAO/IMO ad hoc Working Group on IUU fishing and related matters. This working group has worked on safety at sea and recently also called for due consideration of forced labour and other abuses. Other examples include : The joint event on IUU fishing and human rights with the Holy See during the 2016 world fisheries day, The Vigo dialogues on decent work in fisheries and aquaculture, multi-stakeholder meetings like the regional technical meeting called "Joining forces in the fisheries sector: promoting safety, decent work and the fight against IUU fishing" in Manila March this year.

This side event will discuss important international instruments, like the ILO Work in Fishing Convention (C188), IMO's Cape Town Agreement (on fishing vessel safety), and the Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing, which address these issues. Its aim is to find mechanisms to support the development of a roadmap towards widespread ratification of the international instruments for safety at sea in fishing and the protection of fishers' lives and livelihoods.

But we must not stop short of what really needs to be done - international treaties are not just to be ratified, they need to be implemented.

Therefore we need to work with countries to encourage their ratification of the relevant treaties, particularly ILO Convention 188, but also find ways to work together to implement the instruments. Cooperation across different international agencies as well as among national authorities is crucial.

As was said during the event on World Fisheries Day in 2016: it is time to move from words into action!