

THE SSF GUIDELINES: REFLECTIONS ON THE FIRST DECADE

By Nicole Franz

The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines), adopted in 2014 at FAO's 31st meeting of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI), represents one of the most important documents linked to the sustainable development of small-scale fisheries and aquaculture. Next year (2024), which marks the 10th anniversary of the Guidelines, is an appropriate time for all stakeholders from artisanal communities to governments, to take stock of what works, what does not work and what is needed for the future of millions of small-scale fishers, fish farmers, and fish workers who toil to provide fish and fishery products to the world.



Most of Indonesia's fisheries production is artisanal

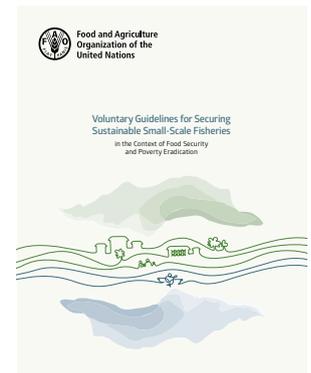
The week of 9-13 June 2014 in Rome was hot, not only in terms of the outside temperature, but also in terms of emotions inside FAO's main plenary hall, where members and observers of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) convened for its 31st session.

Agenda item 5.1 of that session was the endorsement of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines). The journey to get to this moment had been a long and organic one. It is difficult to pinpoint where it really started (and this is not the purpose of this reflection), but discussions on the need for increased attention to small-scale fisheries had intensified during the previous decade. And one could argue that the International Conference of Fishworkers, and their supporters held in Rome in 1984 in a way is what took us to where we are now.

The point here is that in the 31st session of COFI, the global fisheries community did reach an agreement on one

pending issue that allowed to turn what was submitted to the session as "Chairperson's report of the Technical Consultation on International Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries" into a new international normative instrument. It was dedicated to the late Chandrika Sharma, Executive Secretary of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), who played an indispensable role in bringing together social movements and civil society organizations for the development of these Guidelines.

A large group of COFI observers from ICSF, and the two global small-scale fisheries movements – World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF) - as well as from the African Confederation of Professional Organizations of Artisanal Fisheries (CAOPA) attended this COFI session. They proudly reaped the results of their collective action receiving recognition and support for small-scale fisheries in the context of the only global intergovernmental forum where major international fisheries and aquaculture problems are addressed.



The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) are the first international instrument dedicated to small-scale fisheries.

In that same session, the foundations for a Global Assistance Programme for implementation of the SSF Guidelines were also agreed, marking the beginning of a new process. This resulted in the establishment of an FAO Umbrella Programme for the promotion and application of the SSF Guidelines – 'Enhancing the contribution of small-scale fisheries to food security and sustainable livelihoods', complemented by a partnership mechanism, the Global Strategic Framework in support of the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, referred to further below.

Implementing the SSF Guidelines – approach, advances and challenges

Strategic approach

The overall proposed strategic approach for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines through FAO, as presented to COFI, was grounded in a stakeholder consultation workshop held in 2014 and a related e-consultation, held optimistically even before the official endorsement, at the end of 2013. It is worth copying the proposed implementation approach here: *'it should build on the inclusive and consensus-seeking spirit and environment that characterized the development process of the SSF Guidelines. Accordingly, future implementation of the SSF Guidelines should be based on participation and partnerships, with implementation anchored at the national and local levels within a framework of regional and international collaboration, awareness raising, policy support and capacity development. This will require support to, and collaboration with, many different actors including governments, development agencies and international financing institutions, NGOs, academia, civil society and the private sector.'*

Related to that, the following was proposed: *A Global Assistance Programme should be established covering four main streams of activities, which can be translated into interrelated programme components:*

- i) *Raising awareness: knowledge products and outreach;*
- ii) *Strengthening the science-policy interface: sharing of knowledge and supporting policy reform;*
- iii) *Empowering stakeholders: capacity development and institutional strengthening*
- iv) *Supporting implementation: programme management, collaboration and monitoring.*

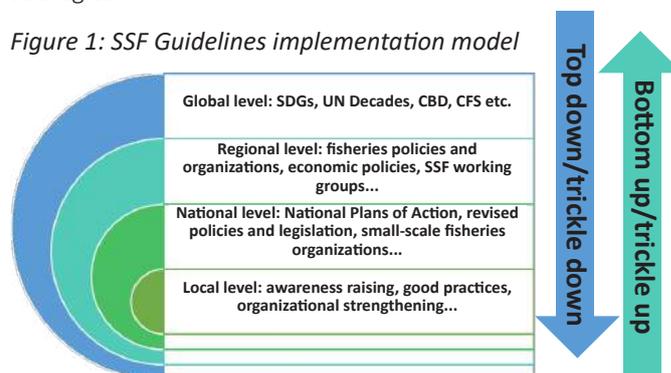
Advances in implementing the SSF Guidelines

First, funding support for the implementation was provided to FAO by Norway in 2015, and while generous, it was not enough to support a systematic implementation of the

SSF Guidelines at country level. A conscious choice in this initial phase directed FAO-led efforts to anchoring the SSF Guidelines in global, and in particular, regional processes and organizations, with the intention to catalyze uptake of the SSF Guidelines at national level, where change has to happen ultimately (see Figure 1).

This led to the organization of a total of seven regional consultations on the implementation of the SSF Guidelines between 2015 and 2018. Almost all of these were co-organized with relevant regional organizations, who have embraced the SSF Guidelines in their own policies and strategies.

Figure 1: SSF Guidelines implementation model



Source: adapted from Jentoft, 2014¹ and FAO, 2020²

In parallel with the regional work, various other activities were initiated and implemented by FAO and others, based on demand and identified priorities. The common element of the various initiatives is to support an enabling environment to secure sustainable small-scale fisheries (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Big Numbers on the uptake of the SSF Guidelines, 2020



Source: <https://www.fao.org/3/cb7657en/cb7657en.pdf>

¹ <https://munin.uit.no/bitstream/handle/10037/7578/articlepdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

² <https://www.fao.org/3/cb7657en/cb7657en.pdf>

The combined efforts of small-scale fisheries advocates from different stakeholder groups (social movements and civil society, NGOs, research/academia, inter-governmental organizations, governments etc.) to implement the SSF Guidelines have, without doubt, played a role in re-positioning small-scale fisheries higher on the agenda and in promoting the human-rights based approach, in which the SSF Guidelines are grounded. The declaration of 2022 as the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA 2022) by the UN General Assembly and the establishment of a dedicated funding stream for small-scale fisheries by the Oak Foundation are examples of the former, while the inclusion of small-scale fisheries and the SSF Guidelines in the UN Declaration of the Rights of Peasants, in a number of new guidelines by the Committee on Global Food Security and in recommendations of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples, demonstrate the latter.

The 10-year Regional Plan of Action for Small-Scale Fisheries in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean which is well-funded and under implementation is an important example how political will can turn global agreements into concrete action. In research, the Too Big To Ignore research partnership has been a leader in catalyzing research around the SSF Guidelines and the recent FAO, Duke University and WorldFish study *Illuminating Hidden Harvests. The contributions of small-scale fisheries to sustainable development* provides a new global baseline for small-scale fisheries. Also, NGOs have agreed to put aside their organizational identities and to join forces as SSF Hub which is a global electronic interactive platform that pulls together resources on different topics addressed in the SSF Guidelines, and facilitates webinars, interest groups etc.

Implementation challenges

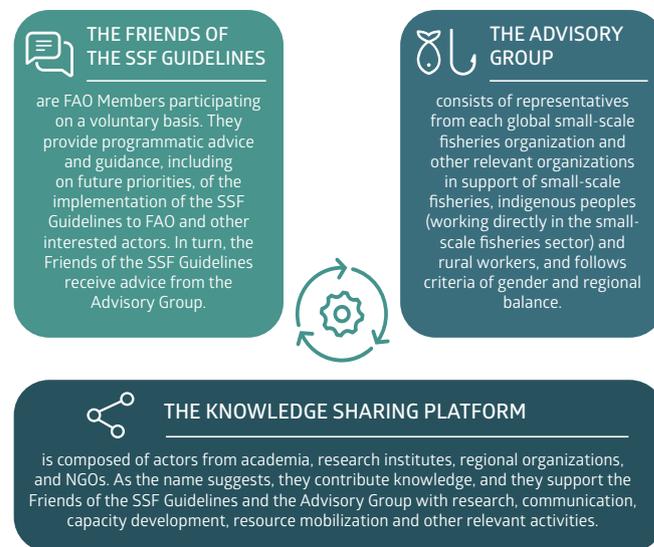
The last decade has seen the emergence of 'blue' developments, which have not always included small-scale fisheries, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic has put a brake on the world as we knew it. All of this has had important impacts on the support and attention given to securing sustainable small-scale fisheries.

While the uptake of the SSF Guidelines at global and regional level can certainly be considered as important advancements in the last decade, it is also true that the global small-scale fisheries movements who stood united behind the development of the SSF Guidelines have since struggled to maintain a similar sense of cohesion and impact. A new partnership mechanism for small-scale fisheries organizations and movements, governments and other interested stakeholders in the form of a *Global Strategic Framework in*

support of the implementation of the SSF Guidelines (SSF-GSF) that was expected to provide new impetus for global small-scale fisheries actors' engagement has not yet succeeded in becoming fully operational.

How the Global Strategic Framework functions

The SSF-GSF is made up of an Advisory Group, the Friends of the SSF Guidelines, and a Knowledge Sharing Platform. Their work is facilitated by a Secretariat in FAO. The FAO Secretariat supports the SSF-GSF administratively and technically. It consults with representatives from the SSF-GSF on a regular basis, gaining valuable input for FAO's work to implement the SSF Guidelines.



The SSF-GSF is a partnership mechanism giving small-scale fishery actors, government representatives and other stakeholders a space to collaborate at a global level.

Credit: FAO

One major legacy of the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022 is the establishment of an SSF Summit, as a moment for, in particular, small-scale fisheries organizations and social movements to come together. The first SSF Summit took place just prior to the FAO COFI session in September 2022, and COFI members welcomed the organization of more Summits every two years. Building towards a shared vision and trust to make good use of SSF Summits as an opportunity to collectively explore and address challenges and opportunities for small-scale fisheries and to influence related processes is an important task at hand for the next Summit in 2024.

Challenges in the implementation of the SSF Guidelines lie in particular at national and local level. Changes in governments, for example, often require renewed efforts of capacity building to recreate a sense of ownership. Similarly, even small-scale fisheries organizations at country or local level

often still need awareness-raising about the SSF Guidelines and may not be ready to engage in participatory processes even when the opportunity arises. This was, for example, the case for Tanzania and Namibia, where women in fisheries were not organized to fully take part in the development of National Plans of Action to implement the SSF Guidelines (NPOA-SSF). In response to this, the Tanzanian Women Fish Workers Association was set up in Tanzania (TAWFA) and is a national chapter of the African Women Fish Processors and Traders Network (AWFISHnet). A Namibian chapter (NAMFISHNET) of AWFISHnet has also been established in the context of the NPOA-SSF process, showing the capacity of the sector to turn challenges into opportunities. The list of examples of activities could be long here, including those aiming to improve conditions in the post-harvest sector or access to social protection, just to name a few.

The challenge ahead now for NPOA-SSF implementation and strengthening women organizations – as well as for SSF Guidelines-related initiatives more in general – is to stand the test of time: participatory processes underlying the NPOA-SSFs as well as small-scale fisheries organizations require time, political will, enabling institutions and organizational-human-financial capacities and resources. This applies equally to many of the other initiatives around the world which aim to implement the SSF Guidelines, led by FAO or by the growing number of organizations and individuals embracing them.

It is therefore even more encouraging to see that Malawi, Uganda, the Philippines and Madagascar have embraced the challenges and are also in the process of developing National Plans of Action to implement the SSF Guidelines.

Quo vadis SSF Guidelines: the way forward

2024 provides the global small-scale fisheries community – intended in the broad sense of encompassing all different players – with an important opportunity to take stock of what has happened so far and to understand what works, what does not work and what is needed for the future.

Some key partners are already planning some specific activities for 2024:

- ICSF is planning for a commemorative celebration of the 40th anniversary of the International conference of fishworkers and their supporters held in Rome in 1984, which in many ways set in motion the path of global collective action in support of small-scale fisheries and towards the SSF Guidelines;
- The International Planning Committee (IPC) Working Group on Fisheries has developed a strategy for the 10-year anniversary that aims to foster collaboration with governments and inter-governmental institutions to support the SSF Guidelines' implementation and to raise awareness about the benefits of the SSF Guidelines for communities. Among the planned activities are increasing media coverage of IPC small-scale fisheries organizations to amplify their voices and preparing region-specific recommendations, informed by results of people-centered assessments of the implementation of the SSF Guidelines in Asia, Africa and Latin America;
- The Too Big Too Ignore research network is finalizing a book reviewing the implementation of the SSF Guidelines through a legal lens; and
- This INFOFISH magazine will include features and updates about the SSF Guidelines throughout 2024.

FAO will gather testimonies from those that played a role in the development and implementation of the SSF Guidelines, to ensure that the awareness about the struggles, but also the achievements behind them are handed on to the next generation of leaders and decision-makers, within small-scale fishing communities, governments, NGOs, academia and research, as well as all others who together can make a change towards securing sustainable small-scale fisheries.

All are invited to join these efforts, and to realize what was called for at the closing of the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022: a new era of support for small-scale fisheries. 🌊



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