

# DEMOCRATIZING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES GUIDELINES

By John Kurien

*Unlike formal conventions and declarations of the UN, voluntary guidelines provide an integral role for civil society actors and communities in shaping them. Focusing on the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines), this article underscores the importance of local-level implementation, given the significant contribution of small-scale fishing communities to national economies. It suggests that democratization requires active community participation, meaningful consultation, as well as identification of relevant indicators and participatory actions. Ultimately, successful implementation of the SSF Guidelines requires contemporaneous empowering of communities at the local level and recognizing the true value of small-scale fishing worldwide.*



Credit: FAO

In the early decades of the 21st century, the United Nations (UN) system witnessed an array of negotiations and the subsequent adoption of numerous voluntary guidelines. These discussions, largely facilitated by the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO/UN), have been pivotal in addressing the needs of communities reliant on the Earth's land and water resources.

Prominent among these guidelines were the following: the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security (VGRT); the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT); the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management (VGSMS); the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (VGSSEF); and the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems for Nutrition (VGSyN). While these

guidelines were adopted by collective consensus of participating States, the final decision regarding their adoption and implementation at the national level rests primarily with individual Member States of the UN system.

This article explores the significance of guidelines and underlines the pressing need to democratize their implementation and monitoring, with a specific focus on the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines).

## The negotiation process

One notable aspect of the negotiation process for these guidelines has been the diverse involvement of non-State, civil society actors. This category encompasses an array of groups, including social and environmental organizations, indigenous associations, trade unions, professional bodies

representing peasants, rural labourers, and fishermen, support groups, industry representatives, and academics. These actors have played instrumental roles in shaping the initial drafts of the guidelines, forming the bedrock upon which the final negotiated texts stand. Their active participation in the negotiation process has been invaluable.

A pertinent example is the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication, or SSF Guidelines. From the very outset, there was a remarkable grassroots effort to incorporate the concerns of the small-scale fisheries sector. Over 4 000 individuals, with a significant majority being fishers and fish workers—both women and men—alongside diverse civil society representatives from over 120 countries, took part in this process. They voiced their concerns and aspirations, ensuring that these Guidelines would be inclusive and representative.

## Post-adoption pressures

Following the adoption of these voluntary guidelines, divergent approaches and perspectives unfold regarding implementation.

UN organizations make quick steps that lead in providing technical guidance on how to implement the Guidelines and take measures to garner support from all relevant stakeholders. Monitoring mechanisms are put in place to ensure implementation progress is tracked, primarily at the national level.

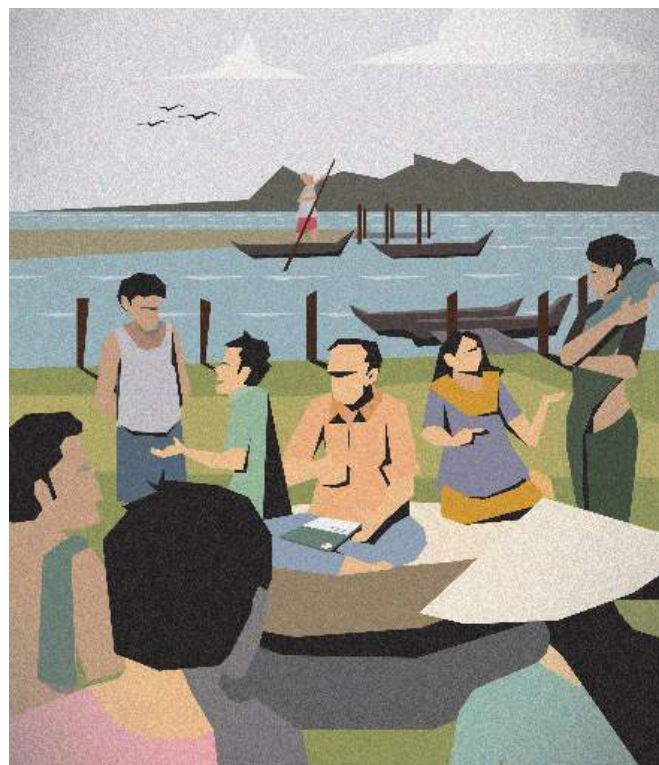
States on the other hand, may often merely adopt international agreements and guidelines, but without having clear strategies for national implementation. This can stem from their multitude of concerns spanning various economic sectors. Additionally, the commitment to implementation may be influenced by strategic considerations. Also, the absence of public pressure from the grassroots level can lead to inaction. Nevertheless, the moral pressure exerted by the UN system, pushing States to report on the actions taken, does compel some commitment to implementation.

Civil society actors, with their manifold objectives and commitments related to socio-economic, environmental, and political factors, may not always share common perspectives and strategies for advocating implementation. For instance, prominent environmental organizations usually lead the charge in advocating for resource conservation and environmental protection during international negotiations. Academics may focus on generating new research questions and facilitating knowledge-sharing and innovation in relevant sectors. On the other hand, social activists and community facilitators are typically eager to implement actions that improve conditions and ensure human rights for those involved in the sector.

## Local communities left out?

Surprisingly, the communities themselves, who are dependent on the land and water for their livelihoods, are often uninvolved in implementation. Generally, this is due to the lack of awareness of the content and significance of international guidelines designed to enhance their rights and capabilities for a better life. Several factors contribute to this situation. In some cases, the guidelines may not be available in a language or format

that is easily understandable to the community. Even when language barriers are overcome, understanding how to put the guidelines into action may remain unclear or challenging without proper guidance. These factors deter and discourage local communities from actively participating in the implementation of guidelines designed for their benefit.



*Go to the people*

*Credit: Deepak Sivan*

While communities may have actively contributed to the formulation of these guidelines by proposing inputs, as in the case of the SSF Guidelines, their role in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the adopted texts is often limited, if not entirely absent. At best, they may observe implementation, carried out in their name, as passive onlookers.

## Need for a transformative shift

A transformative shift is imperative to mainstream community participation in the implementation and monitoring of such guidelines. The call is for “taking back voluntary guidelines to the community”; de-mystifying their contents; consulting communities to determine the indicators they will use to evaluate progress; and collaborating with them to develop suitable tools for this purpose. Essentially, the aim is to democratize the implementation and monitoring of voluntary guidelines, making it a process by, for, and of the community.

Let us examine how local communities can undertake these tasks of democratization, with a specific focus on the SSF Guidelines.

## Implementation at the local level

The SSF Guidelines were officially adopted by Member Countries of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in June 2014. What



sets the SSF Guidelines apart is their origin in the long-standing struggles of small-scale fishworkers worldwide, advocating for recognition of their status and role in their respective countries' fisheries sector.

Small-scale fishers are the backbone of the fisheries sector in many countries worldwide; yet they have often been marginalized and neglected during the modernization of the sector. Despite this neglect, small-scale fishing communities continue to contribute significantly to national economies. However, this contribution is under-valued, and the communities themselves are left impoverished and deprived of their human rights for socio-economic and cultural development. The SSF Guidelines acknowledge this reality and aim to refocus attention on small-scale fisheries' development and management.

The SSF Guidelines also recognize the diverse nature of small-scale fisheries. They acknowledge that there is no single agreed-upon definition for small-scale fisheries, and that the Guidelines do not prescribe how they should be applied nationally.

Perhaps it is only in small island States where the role and economic contribution of small-scale fisheries are adequately recognized and accounted for at the national level. In most other countries, while small-scale fisheries may seem unimportant at the national level, they are often best acknowledged and addressed at the local level, where they are simply too significant to ignore socio-economically or culturally.

The SSF Guidelines, throughout its text, place considerable emphasis on the local context, referring to "local communities," "local economies," "local government," and similar terms.



SSF at the Local Level

Credit: Deepak Sivan

It is at the local level that the contributions of small-scale fishing communities to the economy, employment, nutrition, social and cultural heritage, knowledge, and technical skills are most readily perceived and recognized. This is where these communities interact most intimately with nature, each other, and the rest of society.

Thus, it is at the local level of governance, known by different terms across the world—*commune, municipalidad, desa, parishad, panchayat, barangay, phum, cunji, phuong, kampung*—and so forth, where small-scale fishing communities must be facilitated to engage and participate fully in the implementation and monitoring of their present status, continued welfare, and emerging future.

This is the governance scale where relevant indicators and participatory monitoring tools should be fostered to track changes in the lives of small-scale fishers. The SSF Guidelines serve as a guiding light and a Magna Carta of sorts.

## How to democratize implementation of the SSF Guidelines

As alluded to above, the effort to implement the SSF Guidelines is genuinely meaningful only at the realm where people are interacting between themselves and nature most intimately. At this local level, they need to comprehend the issues which are of consequence to their life and livelihoods, which engage the minds of community members. These can be fathomed by civil society facilitators who will be willing and able to enter into deep conversations with individuals and groups in the community.

In other words, democratizing the SSF Guidelines at the local level requires full and committed participation of the members of the community.

The SSF Guidelines frequently mention the term "participation" and the need for "participatory" processes. One of its guiding principles (Principle 6) specifically emphasizes consultation and participation, highlighting the importance of active, free, effective, meaningful, and informed participation of small-scale fishing communities, including indigenous peoples, in decision-making processes related to fishery resources. Participation is not a passive activity; it involves judicious collective action.

Effective and meaningful participation requires facilitation and fostering. People's participation in any process may initially be hesitant and apprehensive; but with respectful facilitation, information-sharing, opportunities, and experiential learning, attitudes and barriers can gradually change. Participation becomes effective and meaningful when individuals and communities gain knowledge, strength, confidence, and a vision to work together for positive change and empowerment.

The first task is to identify the processes, policies, and activities mentioned in the SSF Guidelines, which need to be monitored. The attempt should be to identify the overlaps between people's issues and relevant paragraphs in the Guidelines.

The second task is to consider what issues/questions arise regarding the processes, policies, and activities discussed in the relevant paragraphs.



<https://www.fao.org/voluntary-guidelines-small-scale-fisheries/en/>

FAO. 2015. Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication. Rome.

### Box 1: What is in the SSF Guidelines

The SSF Guidelines contains a Preface and three Parts, composed of 13 chapters and a total of 100 paragraphs

The Preface describes and situates small-scale fisheries in the context of global fisheries.

**Part 1** is an Introduction, composed of four Chapters and ten paragraphs. They contain the objectives, nature, and scope, provide the guiding principles, and elaborate on the relationships with other international instruments.

**Part 2** containing five Chapters and 61 paragraphs deal with the realm of responsible fisheries and sustainable development and relate to processes, policies and events that are of important material consequence to the small-scale fisheries. These include the crucial issues of tenure, resource management, social development, work, post-harvest, trade, risks of disaster, climate change and gender equality across them all. It is here that the overlaps between people's lives and livelihood concerns and this internationally-negotiated instrument are obviously evident.

**Part 3** containing four Chapters and 29 paragraphs elaborates on how to support an enabling environment and ensure implementation. This Part covers the need for policy coherence and coordination, while stressing the need for information, research, communications, and capacity development to aid implementation and monitoring of progress towards achieving the objectives spelt out in **Part 1**.



Main thematic areas of the SSF Guidelines

Undoubtedly, the levels of participation of the community in each of these tasks will vary. But what we need to remember is that participation – of a community or any group within it – to monitor processes, policies and activities which affect their lives should be premised on a collective human-centered and human-rights approach that affirms both the specificity of context and cultural and socio-economic diversity.

Effective and meaningful participation is ultimately about people gaining knowledge, strength, confidence, and vision to work together towards positive change. It is about empowerment. This is the sure approach to ensure democratization of the SSF Guidelines.

To achieve the aspirations outlined in the SSF Guidelines regarding monitoring and implementation, efforts must begin at the local community level and then extend to higher levels of governance. Only such a nested and contemporaneous approach can lead to building the pressures at the national and global levels to recognize the true, often hidden significance and value of small-scale fishing and the millions of women and men who are joyfully and earnestly engaged in it.

**“Go and meet your people, live and stay with them, love them, work with them. Begin with what they have, plan and develop from what they know, and in the end, when the work is over, they will say: we did it ourselves.”**

Chinese philosopher Lao Tsu (600 BC)

The third task is then to suggest the relevant indicators which can be used to assess/measure the status and changes which occur regarding these issues/questions, and ascertain with the real actors in the small-scale fishery, what and how they will measure them.

And finally, the fourth task is to spell out the participatory actions, methods, tools which can be used to monitor these indicators. Fathoming the way communities collectively undertake and resolve certain local social issues; for example, solving disputes, implementing tenurial practices, assessing new technologies or delineating boundaries, can provide key insights into methods and practices which are customarily in use. While this task may be creatively facilitated by civil society animators, respecting and retaining the ethos and customary practices of the community is paramount.



**Dr John Kurien** is a reflective practitioner. His involvement with small-scale fishing communities started five decades ago in Kerala State, India, living and working with them to organize local-level cooperative institutions for fish marketing. Moving later into action-oriented research, he helped to highlight the true significance of small-scale fisheries from various perspectives. In 1984 he took the initiative to organize

the first international conference of fishworkers and their supporters which was held in Rome. He later founded the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) in 1986. He has worked with the FAO/UN in various capacities in Cambodia and Indonesia and was also the Vice-Chair of the FAO/UN Advisory Committee for Fisheries Research (ACFR) for a decade. He retired as Professor from the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, India.