Executive Summary

On July 2019, a National Workshop was organised by the International Collective in Support of Fisherworkers (ICSF Trust), supported by the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) to develop an implementation plan for India’s National Policy for Marine Fisheries, 2017, to discuss the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines/ VG-SSF).

Over 80 participants with 52 representatives of small-scale fishing communities from ten coastal states and union territories attended the three day workshop from 19th to 21st July 2019 at Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India...

The specific objectives were to:

- Develop long-term and short-term action points for the implementation plan of NPMF, with special emphasis on vulnerable and marginalised groups;
- Integrate elements of the SSF Guidelines into NPMF’s implementation plan within the framework of a human rights-based approach; and
- Empower fishers, fishworkers, and their organisations by building capacities and raising awareness to implement NPMF and SSF Guidelines.

There were six sessions with presentations from experts on various aspects of NPMF and its connect with the SSF Guidelines, group discussions, open forum and plenaries.

At the Inaugural session, Manas Roshan of ICSF Trust said this was the first in a series of consultation workshops. Narendra Ramachandra Patil, Chairperson, National Fishworkers Forum, recalling early discussions regarding the NPMF in Veraval said it was a good policy that needed to be taken forward.

In his overview, Sebastian Mathew, Executive Trustee, ICSF Trust, explained that the seven pillars of the policy could be clustered into three groups, the environmental–ecosystem dimension (sustainable development, inter-generational equity, precautionary approach), socio-economic upliftment of fishers and gender justice, while taking the guidelines to people through the principle of subsidiarity and partnership. Two important announcements made in the preamble to the policy were that fishers were the core of the policy and their actions would be guided by the Public Trust Doctrine.
He concluded it was important to promote and protect the human rights-based approach the SSF Guidelines espouse, consistent with the fundamental rights, duties and directive principles of the Constitution of India.

In the first session titled ‘Fisheries Management from the SSF Guidelines Perspective’, K. Sunil Mohamed, from Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI), Kochi, made a detailed presentation on the subject.

He analysed small-scale fishers and drew his conclusions based on the 2015 Marine Fisheries Census. Mohamed said specific areas reserved were based on the depth or distance from shore for traditional fishers where mechanised fishing was not permitted. These could be considered as territorial user rights for small-scale fisheries and states could consider extending the use of the full distance of territorial waters to them.

He highlighted some recent developments in Kerala where the MFR Act in 2017 and the KMFRA Rules in 2018 were amended.

Following the three-tiered co-management councils for Kerala based on the Ashtamudi short neck clam management plan, the CMFRI was now advocating a similar one at the national level based on a zonation of the country’s waters.

He appealed for better markets and price for catch by small-scale fishers through ecolabelling and certification and by ensuring cleaner and better products.

In the second session on Fisheries Post-Harvest and Trade, speaking from the perspective of the SSF Guidelines, Nikita Gopal, of the Central Institute of Fisheries Technology, Kochi, talked about Fisheries Post-Harvest and Trade related sections from the NMFP and SSF Guidelines.

While there were not many points with reference to post-harvest and trade, those that existed were very important as they would have long term impacts as post-harvest embraces the cultural, environmental, economic, institutional, social, technical and marketing aspects of the supply, demand, preservation, processing and distribution of fish and fish products.

She examined if and how primary infrastructure such as landing centres, harbours, net mending spaces, roads, markets; ancillary infrastructure such as ice plants required for post-harvest were mentioned in the instruments under discussion and said stakeholder involvement to govern such facilities and capacity building was essential to ensure they were used properly.

There should be minimisation of loss in the post-harvest phase. Traceability and chain-of-custody were important for both export and domestic markets. Cooperatives were a good way to ensure proper credit and marketing. Point 48 in the NMFP on gender equity which the VG-SSF referred to as gender equality related it to post-harvest as 66% of the workforce of post-harvest activities were done by women.
Session three was devoted to Mariculture, Deep Sea Fishing and Other New Initiatives from the SSF Guidelines Perspective. Gopakumar, formerly of CMFRI, made a strong case for mariculture as the only alternative to dwindling catches from capture fishers.

Mariculture zones need to be defined based on various criteria and leasing or permissions should be relatively easy and made available at the panchayat level. While a number of technologies are available from CMFRI, currently there were constraints in the form of seed and feed availability as the sector had not yet taken off.

Marianne Manuel of Dakshin Foundation felt it was important to look at the actual language of the policy. While NPMF was clearly aimed at the fisher community, the mariculture policy appeared to treat fishers only as part of a group.

She expressed concern that the section on ornamental fish trade, included a statement regarding a mechanism to ‘detect, pre-empt and regulate trade of wild-caught ornamentals’ when it was well known that it was quite difficult to differentiate between cultured and captured animals.

Instead of suggesting capture-based mariculture as seeds were in short supply, the policy should actually have stated that culture activities should start only after seed viability was achieved. At a time when fish stocks were declining and fleets were plagued by overcapacity and overfishing, extracting wild seed was questionable.

Manas Roshan presented points related to deep sea fishing on behalf of C.M. Muralidharan, Fisheries Management Consultant, by flagging points from the NPMF and suggesting precautions to protect the rights and resource base of small-scale fishers.

The most encouraging provision for SSF to be made best use of in the NPMF is that the Government will introduce new scheme(s) to enhance the skills and capabilities of traditional fishermen to undertake and popularise deep sea fishing.

E. Vivekanandan, formerly of CMFRI, was the speaker in the fourth session on ‘Coastal and Marine Environment, Climate Change and Blue Growth from the SSF Guidelines Perspective’. Explaining that ‘fish’ are deeply embedded in the ecosystem, a healthy environment was essential for the health of fish and hence protecting, conserving and increasing fish population required a look into the entire ecosystem. Healthy environments and ecosystems translated to happy fish habitats which were also resilient to climate change. Right places and right species needed protection for which an assessment of vulnerable and critical habitats and the status of vulnerable species was required.

V. Vivekanandan, Trustee, ICSF Trust spoke about ‘Social Development of Fishing Communities from the SSF Guidelines Perspective’ in the fifth session. He pointed out that the NPMF did not actually have “social development” as an agenda and had a limited “Welfare and Institutional” plan.
The policy had provisions to support livelihood restoration after natural and man-made calamities and current benefits and failures of the welfare measures needed to be better understood such as who was benefitting from them. There was also a need to see if fisheries schemes could ignore conventional BPL classification and consider small-scale fishermen (non-motorised and motorised), fish vending women and crew on the mechanised sector for welfare schemes. The BPL category excluded the deserving and included those who did not really need them.

The NPMF, had failed to grasp the nature of fisheries ‘cooperatives’ which did not satisfy the principles formulated by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and were instead largely used for channeling government benefits. Fishery cooperatives needed evaluation to assess how they were functioning as the effective ones were the genuine people’s organisations for doing business.

The major gaps in the policy vis-à-vis SSF Guidelines could be summarised as being mainly aimed at fishermen with only a limited concern for the community as a whole.

Session 6 was titled ‘Gender Equity in Fisheries from the SSF Guidelines Perspective’ and the speaker was Nalini Nayak, Trustee, ICSF Trust. She said in the SSF guidelines, while there were a few places where men alone were referred to, the reference everywhere was to fishing communities. The reason was that fishing was seen as complementary work, involving both men and women. To protect small-scale fisheries, women’s rights to safety and livelihood security need to be protected.

Women’s work in fisheries should receive inputs similar to that of men. The SSF Guidelines state that the State should ensure that the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is put into practice. There was good legislation in India to control harassment and discrimination, which fisherwomen faced constantly. Yet no mention of this had been made in the policy.

In the ‘Open Forum’, one member of each state made a presentation on the NPMF, the SSF Guidelines and other related matters. Six speakers spoke in the Plenary on FWO-CSO Perspectives on the Implementation of the National Policy on Marine Fisheries 2017. There were also three sets of concurrent discussions where the participants sat in groups to suggest short-term and long-term action points from the SSF Guidelines perspective, many of which found their way into the action plan presented at the end of the workshop.

In the closing session, Sebastian Mathew, Executive Trustee, ICSF Trust along with E. Vivekanandan, Principal Scientist (Retd.), CMFRI, presented the Short-term and Long-term Action Points for the Implementation of the NPMF, 2017.