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What does it mean to actually celebrate small-scale fisheries?

This September, at the 3rd Global Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF) Summit held at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome, Masifundise Director, Carmen Mannarino, representing the World Forum of Fishers People (WFFP) opened Day Two with reflections on what fisher leaders from across the world brought into the room: the realities of climate and biodiversity breakdown, threats to fishing territories and livelihoods, shrinking civic space, and the continued gap between commitments of our governments and institutions and their implementation of the SSF Guidelines.

It was a simple message: **small-scale fisheries cannot be celebrated through words alone.**

A guideline cannot protect a fishing ground by itself and a commitment does not automatically become a right. Inviting fisher people into a room is not the same thing as giving them power over the decisions being made in it. Implementation requires political will, recognition of customary and collective rights, resources, accountability and meaningful representation of fisher peoples in the decisions that shape their lives and territories.

Carmen also called on academics, NGOs, donors and FAO to reflect on what genuine partnership means and to support fisher peoples' leadership rather than speaking for them, respecting their knowledge systems, autonomy and self-determination.

The address concludes with five interconnected calls: **Recognition. Restitution. Redistribution. Regeneration. Representation.**

We share the full address below.

Address: Day Two Opening Reflections

3rd Global Small-Scale Fisheries Summit

Good morning everyone,

It is a pleasure to welcome you all to Day Two of this 3rd SSF Summit: fisher leaders and organisations, academics, NGOs, donors, and FAO officials. Thank you for being here, and for the energy and commitment you bring to this space.

In setting up the scene for today, I want to share some reflections that have emerged from the discussions with fisher leaders who over the past days have travelled here from across the world.

This SSF Summit takes place at a moment of real uncertainty, against converging crises: climate and biodiversity breakdown, economic, social and geopolitical instability are having profound consequences for the right to food, tenure over land and water territories, and fisher peoples' livelihoods.

The climate crisis is now an everyday reality with floods that destroy homes and take lives in coastal and riparian communities, territories lost to rising sea levels, rivers and lakes drying up and species fisher peoples have depended on for centuries dying off.

Yesterday's session brought together global fisher and Indigenous Peoples organisations and regional networks from Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North America and the Arctic, who shared their priorities and experiences on implementing the SSF Guidelines, on protecting fishing territories and rights, on sustainable fisheries, gender and youth, and on the impact of climate change and the so-called Blue Economy on fisher people and communities.

A common thread ran through every intervention: the need to move from commitments to real implementation and political action.

Implementation of the SSF Guidelines remains a major gap. What is needed now is concrete national and regional action, legal recognition of rights, resourcing, monitoring, accountability and, above all, political will.

Fishing communities need stronger protection of their territories, customary rights and livelihoods against industrial fishing and aquaculture, coastal development, extractive industries and conservation initiatives. Participation must go beyond consultation: rights-holders must define their own priorities. Women and youth are, and must remain, central to small-scale fisheries: their leadership and generational renewal are core to our shared future, and **NOT peripheral concerns.**

Colleagues, this is what weighs on the minds of fisher leaders as we gather here. We experience the climate crisis, ocean, water and land grabbing, carried out in the name of the Blue Economy, Blue Transformation, and the 30x30 agenda. Fisher peoples are experiencing this as displacement and erosion of customary tenure and Indigenous knowledge systems. The space for defending human rights, and social, economic and environmental justice keeps shrinking, at national and UN level.

As human rights and environmental defenders, many fisher leaders face real risks for their safety. Fishers are witnessing the militarisation of their territories, whether this is framed as environmental protection, as fight against illegal fishing, or is the result of conflict. The ongoing genocide and expansion of wars continues to be on our mind as they impact fisher people and communities in Palestine, Sudan and many other territories.

We recognise this Summit is meant to celebrate small-scale fisheries and advance the SSF Guidelines' implementation. We share that aspiration. But we cannot proceed with business as usual: fishing communities in many parts of the world are fighting for their survival.

And it is precisely because of this that we must celebrate fisher peoples, their livelihoods, culture, and role in nurturing both people and the environment. And it is worth asking, together: **what does it mean to truly celebrate fisher peoples, and small-scale fisheries?**

I would like to offer a few thoughts for the different actors gathered here.

To the academics: your role matters deeply. I know this from the history of my own organisation and how alliance between fishers organisations and researchers to advance the struggle of traditional fishers ultimately gave us the South African Small-scale Fisheries Policy, one of the most progressive fisheries policy worldwide, that also inspired some the content of the SSF Guidelines.

Your work can respond to the needs and requests of Indigenous Peoples and fishers as opposed to a science that ignores their knowledge systems. We also know how academic work can be extractive of the knowledge of fishing communities. Reflect on how, and for what purpose, you engage, and bring critical scholarship to questions of dispossession, and to how "blue" economy agendas can render fishing communities invisible in their own demand for people-centred governance.

To NGO colleagues: ours is an important, if sometimes complicated, relationship, and one that varies greatly in practice. In South Africa, NGO support recently helped us secure a landmark Constitutional Court victory against Shell's attempt to explore for oil and gas off the Wild Coast, a reminder of what real partnership can achieve.

Many of you, of us, come to this work from a genuine desire to help. What matters is how you support: do so without imposing your own worldview, and without compromising fisher peoples' self-determination. You hold influence in shaping narratives and governance processes fisher peoples engage in. See fishers as partners, not beneficiaries or as means to advance your career or access grant. Support their leadership, autonomy and sovereignty, never substitute it.

To donors: you are playing an important role in supporting our organising and shared vision, especially as institutional funding shrinks. We ask not only for financial support but for genuine partnership: multi-year, core, trust-based funding that recognises that organising is a long-term process. We call for you not to unilaterally set funding agendas and priorities, but engage with fisher people on their needs, and provide long-term support as processes of empowerment, organising, building real solutions are not quick fixes, but long term efforts.

And to our FAO colleagues: we appreciate the space this institution has opened for small-scale fishers, and recognise the breadth and diversity of its mandate. We ask that FAO as an institution questions production as the main measure of good food and nutrition outcomes, and reckon honestly with the limits of coexistence between small-scale and industrial fisheries

and aquaculture, including by critically examining Blue Transformation as the flagship strategy for FAO's fisheries and aquaculture work.

From research developed using FAO and the International Aid Transparency Initiative databases, it emerged that of the total FAO's allocated budget to the Blue Transformation Strategy, 15% comes from mandatory member states contribution and 85% from voluntary contributions. Of this entire budget, sitting around 500 millions USD for 2022-2027, only roughly 2% is actually allocated to SSF Guidelines implementation. This raises questions of where is the political will to implement the SSF guidelines, especially in relation to states.

We also note, with concern, that FAO's State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture Report-SOFIA- celebrates Blue Transformation and rising industrial aquaculture production without adequately questioning its sustainability, while the contribution of small-scale and Indigenous fisheries remains comparatively overlooked.

Commitment to small-scale fisheries must go beyond words and beyond three days of the Summit: it must genuinely support fisher organisations to advance implementation of the SSF Guidelines on their own terms, at every level.

In that spirit, we call for commitment towards:

Recognition of fisher peoples' customary and collective rights over their territories, waters and knowledge.

Restitution where displacement has already occurred.

Redistribution of access, resources and decision-making power away from industrial and extractive interests and towards the communities who depend on these ecosystems.

Regeneration of the aquatic environments, and the social fabric that sustain fisher peoples' ways of life through Aquaecology.

And **Representation**: the meaningful, self-determined presence of fisher peoples in every space where decisions about their future are made.

These principles, that we share with many other organisations in the food sovereignty movements, are already central to fisher peoples' struggles for land, water, oceans and nature. We ask each of you, in your respective roles, to become genuine partners in realising them.

In closing, I wish you a successful and productive Summit, one that becomes a space of reflection, solidarity and decision-making, carrying through into the COFI process itself. Fishers who travelled here are bringing the realities of their communities into this room, in the hope of real change: true implementation of the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines, and the full realisation of their human rights.

Thank you.

Rome, 5 September 2026