



International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty Working Group on Fisheries

Esteemed members of the Governmental Delegations,
Dear COFI observers,

As many countries grapple with second and third waves of COVID-19, this session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) is being held virtually for the first time in its history. Despite several disruptions in the fisheries value chain due to COVID-19 and pandemic control measures, small-scale fisheries have been resilient in many parts of the world. Others are still struggling to adapt to lockdown measures, restrictions on movement of workers, fisheries inputs, the commercialisation of fish products, increasing significantly food insecurity of families.

While fishers and fishworkers are back at work and fishing has resumed, longer-term problems persist, including a reduction in demand for fish and high prices of fisheries inputs. The movement of migrant fishworkers is still restricted in some cases. In some countries, sanitary measures for fish and aquatic foods have been reimposed, leaving export markets badly affected. This is even more the case for Indigenous peoples, whose communities are in many cases in remote areas, poorly served by basic infrastructure and services, and often overlooked by central governments. It is thus pertinent that COFI discusses the impacts of the crisis on the sector and provide guidance on how fishers and fishworkers can resume their fishing and fish marketing operations in a sustainable and equitable manner.

Today, we are faced by an unprecedented challenge to nutrition and food security. Prior to the spread of SARS-CoV-2, an estimated 690 million people, or 8.9 per cent of the global population, were undernourished in 2020. Disruptions in food production and distribution due to lockdowns and other pandemic control measures were projected to add an additional 132 million undernourished people. Small-scale fisheries (SSF) contribute to half of the global fish catches, most of which are destined for direct human consumption in local and domestic markets. In this time of the pandemic, SSF have played a crucial role in supplying affordable and nutritious fish to millions of people globally.

As we have emphasized throughout the pandemic, the universal human rights of all peoples, including small-scale fishing communities, need to be protected and enhanced. There is a need to value and support fisheries, the revival of production units and the marketing chain of sustainable small-scale food systems. Fishing communities need equitable access to health and diagnostic services during this crisis, in addition to access to decent work, sanitation and other essential services.

We welcome the recommendations by FAO (COFI/2020/Inf.3.2: Impacts of COVID-19 on fisheries and aquaculture) to designate fisher, processor and distribution workers as “Essential Workers”; to increase access for fishers and fishworkers to social protection measures, credit and other support; and to prioritize the most vulnerable, such as migrant workers and women, in such support measures. While small-scale fishworkers continue to use new technologies, such as social media, innovatively for marketing fish and other aquatic foods, such technologies may also exclude vulnerable workers in the fisheries value chain in many developing countries.



We recommend therefore that social protection measures need to be inclusive of all workers in the fisheries and aquaculture value chain – formal and informal, full-time and part-time – and should be extended to these workers during the entire duration of the pandemic. We urge that national governments create a COVID-19 social protection fund for fishworkers and their families.

The impacts of COVID-19 remind us of the connections between our food systems and health. It is thus important that FAO, OIE, WHO and other multilateral agencies work with governments to collaborate and jointly develop protocols and standards for zoonotic diseases and pandemics in the context of fisheries and aquaculture.

IPC also notes with concern the limitations imposed by the pandemic to the regular functioning of COFI and other bodies of the FAO. While we acknowledge the risks of meeting in person, we must recognize the challenges small-scale fisheries and civil society organizations (CSO) face in effectively engaging in virtual meetings. We urge the Committee to facilitate the full and effective participation of observer CSOs, including the submission of written and oral statements, in line with its rules of procedure.

