

International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF)

STATEMENT ON SMALL-SCALE AQUACULTURE

Technical Meeting on the Future of Work in Aquaculture in the Context of the Rural Economy, ILO Geneva, Switzerland (hybrid) 13-17 December 2021

The aquaculture sector has emerged as a major source of employment in many developing countries and it is expected to increase its share in the future. Major aquaculture producers have a larger proportion of small-scale, integrated, household operations (75-80 per cent). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), small farms and related value chains are estimated to provide more employment than medium and large farms. However, aquaculture workers in most of these countries are part-time, seasonal, informal, and unorganized. Most aquaculture workers do not figure in any national employment statistics, and current estimates are likely much lower than the reality. At a juncture where aquaculture is set to grow, with more labour absorbed into the sector, this gap should be addressed with alacrity.

The ILO Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work adopted in 1998, strives for a global strategy for economic and social development to reinforce broad-based sustainable development. It highlights the need to attend to the special needs of groups such as the unemployed and migrant workers and to promote job creation. The background paper of this tripartite meeting rightly points out that inclusive growth and decent work are important to achieve sustainable development. ICSF endorses this view. Fair wages, occupational health and safety, and decent work are important for workers in both export and domestic market-oriented aquaculture value chains.

In this context, ICSF urges ILO to promote small-scale aquaculture, wherever possible, so that its salient aspects, such as greater employment opportunities; equitable distribution of wealth; improved food security and nutrition; greater involvement of women; and the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, are better realized.

Monitoring and control should be enhanced to avoid indiscriminate intensification of aquaculture that leads to the destruction of natural resources, including mangroves, and land and water contamination from the aquaculture effluent. In addition to environmental externalities, such intensification also changes land use patterns and diminishes employment opportunities in agriculture and allied activities. Where food crops give way to large-scale intensive aquaculture, local food security and nutrition sometimes suffer setbacks. The current lack of knowledge on how local livelihoods are impacted due to the expansion of aquaculture needs to be addressed.

Indigenous species, rather than exotic ones, should be encouraged in aquaculture. Often escaped exotic fish species have caused havoc in the surrounding environment and affected the livelihoods of local communities.

Policies to promote multitrophic, multispecies approaches to aquaculture, over single species culture, should be considered, especially in rural areas. The multitrophic approach helped local farming communities to seek income security during the COVID-19 pandemic. A single species

approach often leads to intensification for the market, catalysing vertical integration, which leads to labour being replaced by technology. Multitrophic species aquaculture also has a smaller ecological footprint than intensive single species systems.

Women's engagement in aquaculture should be enhanced. In this context, small-scale, family-owned aquaculture should be promoted. Women's livelihoods and equity should be protected from the impacts of intensive aquaculture.

Casual labour (short-term employment without formal contracts) forms the majority of workers in the sector. Adequate protection of casual workers should be ensured. These workers should be able to enjoy benefits equivalent to organized workers, including leave benefits, festive bonus and relief in cases of natural disasters.

Studies of aquaculture from a social and human-rights perspective need to be undertaken, in order to understand facets of the sector that are currently unknown, including on occupational safety and health of workers in diverse production systems.

Appropriate policies and measures need to be developed, adopted and implemented for social protection, including social security, of all aquaculture workers, whether formal or informal labour, part-time or full-time, and their families.

Aquaculture workers need capacity building to strengthen their associations and organizations, to support their full enjoyment of rights at the workplace and their human rights.

Finally, ICSF urges the ILO and its member states to undertake periodic censuses of all aquaculture operations and workers. It is crucial that the various types and categories of workers in the sector are documented and counted, so as to meaningfully recognize the contributions of the sector to rural livelihoods and well-being, and to help formulate policies to safeguard the rights of workers.

ICSF welcomes this technical meeting on the future of work in aquaculture and wishes it success.