



International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty Working Group on Fisheries

Esteemed members of the Governmental Delegations,
Dear COFI observers,

We, the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF), the World Forum of Fisher People (WFFP), the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), La Via Campesina (LVC), members of the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), representing millions of small-scale fishers and their communities, including Indigenous Peoples, from coastal and inland regions all over the globe, are still struggling for our human rights, for our rights to catch fish and access our territories, and for our rights to retain livelihoods for men, women, and youth involved in small-scale fishing.

COFI34 is taking place as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread around the world. This pandemic and the socio-economic impact of the measures that governments have taken to address it have had devastating consequences on small-scale fishers, Indigenous Peoples, fisherwomen and our communities. Our livelihoods as small-scale fishers have been adversely affected and, in many cases, our human rights have been violated. The pandemic has thus further exacerbated structural discrimination, inequalities, marginalisation, and widespread human rights abuses. Many of our communities, whose very survival is at stake, suffer dramatically from the lack of healthcare, loss of work and livelihoods, and harsh lockdowns. Despite this problematic situation, small-scale fisher people have remained the only ones contributing to eradicating poverty and hunger to guarantee their communities healthy and nutritious fish and a source of income and livelihood.

COFI cannot take place in this context without taking into account the major changes and issues at stake that this edition brings. Even though its mandate predates COVID-19, our discussions this week cannot fail to consider that the pandemic and the resulting global crisis have irreversibly changed our way of life. For the same reasons, these discussions cannot take place without the intervention of civil society, the voice of millions of workers in the sector.

The virtual modalities of this meeting entail severe limitations that need to be taken into consideration. Many small-scale fishers living in remote areas have great difficulties in actively participating in online meetings over an extended time due to limited access to the internet, unstable connection, and lack of equipment. Different time zones and language issues further hamper our effective participation as representatives of small-scale fishers and CSOs worldwide. Moreover, the limitations on the right to speak granted to COFI observers will not allow us to effectively participate in COFI and bring small scale fishers' voice into the plenary sessions. This only increases inequalities, at a time when there is a dire need to listen to the contributions and testimonies of civil society.



Therefore, we consider that this week's exchanges should consider the lack of space given to social movements to engage in a meaningful way and guarantee, more than ever, the full and effective participation in the discussion and decision-making, in line with the principles of participatory governance.

Considering the above, and the lack of decisions that will characterise this edition of COFI, doubts remain on the future of global fisheries policies. Notably, on where and when these will be taken. We convey our concern about a lack of transparency and accountability in policy decisions, and a lack of space for civil society participation into the policy debate.

We call on FAO to continue its support to the Global Strategic Framework in support of the implementation of the SSF Guidelines (SSF-GSF) by reaffirming small-scale fishers as the real agents for change and as rightsholder.

