



Statement of the WFFP to the working group of the Human Rights Council on the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas

Delivered by Mr. Muhammad Ali Shah, Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum

November 2014, Geneva

Excellencies and Comrades,

My plea is simple -- to reject the commodification of nature. Land grabs were the start of market-led colonisation; now it's the turn of water, including oceans. The natural commons, on which depend livelihoods of tens of millions, should not be allowed to become hostage to market greed and predatory states.

It is a personal honour to represent the World Forum of Fisher Peoples, which recognises the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum as a significant contributor to global movements for social justice. It is also a privilege to be accorded membership by FIAN in the Right to Food Watch Consortium.

We salute the organisers for including us in deliberations upon the Charter of Peasant Rights. These deliberations are particularly significant in light of FAO Guidelines for Tenure and for Sustainable Fisheries. As we struggle for global implementation we must keep in mind that context is most important, specially in contentious parts, and that context can only be consistent within the framework of rights.

For nearly two decades we have been focusing on mobilising and organising artisan and subsistence fisherfolk in rivers, lakes and coasts of across the world. I am happy to share with you that several millions fisherfolk and peasants have entrusted leadership to the WFFP.

Just as human rights are indivisible, natural resources cannot be partitioned when striving for economic justice. This was brought home to us by the enormous floods that arrived in recent years, where the WFFP and his member PFF shared extensive efforts in mitigating suffering.

Our advocacy work and movement in the world is therefore expanding significantly to include additional categories of landless peasants such as sharecroppers on farms, marginal farm owners, and livestock holders in forests.

Tragedies have taught us lessons that many of you know of better than myself. The central lesson is that man can only prosper in harmony with Nature. This has increasingly led the Forum to emphasise the necessity of accepting the rights of all life, not just of humans. As you can well imagine, it is not easy to convince people to stop thinking of Nature as something created only for humans, to be destroyed if need be. We repeat the cautious reminder used in a recent note on Human Rights & Environment: 'Nowadays, people know the price of everything and the value of nothing' (attributed to Oscar Wilde).

The need of the hour is to be morally conscious in dealing with nature. If one may say so, the Precautionary Principle of Ecology has to be recognised as a moral responsibility towards all life in Nature. Mother Earth calls for much respect, as is evident from the revenge she can take when badly treated.

The human world is characterised by enormous inequity – such as of mass hunger -- which should not be tolerated any longer. Nature offers opportunities to mitigate now and finally eradicate such inequity forever. In fact, one may say that justice can be achieved rapidly and sustained forever only when humans enter into a respectful social contract that includes Nature.

We can think of many examples that have significant implications for realising human rights universally and securely. Consider the right to food as a central plank of fulfilling the fundamental right to life. After the abolition of slavery and forced labour, no one can be permitted to argue that provisioning of food can be left to the arbitrary whims of a minority controlling markets and state. Livelihoods of dignity must be made possible universally.

Decent livelihoods require equitable access to natural resources, including protections against vulnerability of access and of yields. To achieve similar outcomes for all humans, it may well be necessary to have differentiated access between people that accounts for variations in needs, productivity and production because of cultural preferences. Acknowledgement of gender rights is likely to be among the comprehensive illustrations of socially required differentiation.

These thoughts lead us to reiterate that local public actions, performed globally, must be well thought out. They will obviously include measures directed at those denied full access to natural resources as part of their right to full citizenship. But we believe that removing inequity will also require actions against those who have historically impeded realisation of universal rights. These are likely to remain obstacles to full access and to realising potential of newly acquired access. Two examples make our point. Agrarian reform will be only partially successful – ecologically and economically -- if very large farms retain private ownership. Small fisheries cannot prosper in the face of industrial fishing companies which routinely destroy seafood stocks.

We feel it essential to emphasise that actions for realising human rights must take into account the rights of nature. For example, land redistribution that is urgently needed in South Asia must create the right environment for agro-ecology rather than miniature versions of unsustainable industrial farming.

Ecology teaches us the interdependence of land and water. Hence state actions for implementing rights to equitable livelihoods should acknowledge such interrelationships. It is a matter of profound regret, and tragic for many, that such inter-dependency is generally ignored with contempt by most states, leading to uncompensated damages and, increasingly, to dispossession as development.

Policy actions to promote equity and ecology can be weakened by contradictory macroeconomic objectives. Maximising economic growth per se is an example of bad policy that we are all familiar with. But simple obsessions with exports too can have dire consequences when such exports place enormous stress upon the ecology of complementary natural resources. As a lethal example, consider the craziness of promoting textile exports. Fresh water is diverted from local food crops; chemically laden effluents poison the coast, thereby compelling overfishing to meet export targets. It is sad that the EU among others feeds fish to its people cheaply by de facto imposition of ecological ravages upon the Indian Ocean.

My friends, there is only one way to summarise what the situation demands. Ethics must take priority i.e. planet before profits. Resisting land grabs will be enormously weakened if we permit water grabs, including ocean grabs. The grabs come in different disguises, of which the most current are calls for energy equity through waste, waste and waste – in application (such as air-conditioning villas and shopping malls); in use (such as large centralised plants needing transmission grids); and in pollution and risk (e.g. coal landing jetties, coal turbines and nuclear turbines).

Accepting devious calls for international finance to achieve profit-led 'sustainable' fisheries, such as by the US-based Environmental Defense Fund, should be seen as accepting cobras for securing homes.

A recent report by Transnational Institute, on Ocean Grabbing shows how the rise of market-based fishing policies that favour large-scale aqua-industries is systematically dispossessing fishers of the means to livelihood. The reports cites examples of luxury beach-resorts in Sri Lanka where fishermen can no longer get to the coast, the destruction of mangrove areas in Ecuador to promote export-oriented shrimp aquaculture that has destroyed fishing habitats, and the dramatic rise of Rights Based Fishery (RBF) policies that have handed over large tracts of ocean to industrial fishing companies in Europe, Canada and elsewhere.

The common denominator in all of these cases is the exclusion of small-scale fishers from access to fisheries and other natural resources. In nearly every case, the grabs are technically 'legal', hidden inside policy documents, trade agreements, conservation mandates and fishing policies. What is left out is the impact of these decisions on our natural heritage and the livelihoods and food sovereignty of over half a billion people around the world who depend on small-scale fishing.

The World Bank's Global Partnership for Oceans (GPO) is one-such legal framework for 'grabbing'. Bringing together a set of powerful actors – from USAID to the Walton Family Foundation (the family behind Walmart) to big environmental NGOs such as the World Wildlife Fund and the Environmental Defense Fund, GPO's goal is to spread private property rights over the ocean's fish resources.

Its premise is that the lack of economic and environmental 'sustainability' in fisheries around the world is due to a lack of property rights, rather than an issue of equity or justice. The effect of this one-size-fits-all solution is that it strengthens powerful political actors at the expense of the majority and leads to a market for the new owners to trade away these rights as they please.

The World Forum of Fisher Peoples General Assembly met in South Africa in September 2014, a global social movement and federation of fisherfolk, representing over 100 million people from across the world, made clear in their deliberations that neoliberal market policies and global inequity are the fundamental causes of ocean grabbing. The assembly issued a clarion call for an end to the privatisation of the oceans and proposed new fishing policies that put small-scale fishers at the heart of governing and caring for our oceans. Not only are these communities best placed to ensure food sovereignty, but they are also the starting point for any serious transition towards an ecologically and socially just food regime. This certainly entails a revolution, but this time one of the poor – one that seeks to end corporate enclosures and bring oceans back into the global commons.

At the generous invitation of organisers we have prepared specific suggestions for the Declaration, and included these in the circulated speech. They rest upon the ethical goal of maximizing *food sovereignty* for people and their communities.