



# BLUE CARBON: OCEAN GRABBING IN DISGUISE?

A public meeting organised by the WFFP and the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers during the COP21 climate negotiations in Paris.



FORO MUNDIAL DE PUEBLOS PESCADORES  
WORLD FORUM OF FISHER PEOPLES  
FORUM MONDIAL DES POPULATIONS DE PÊCHEURS

Report: 8 December  
2015, Paris

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The meeting was co-organised with:

Transnational Institute (TNI), [www.tni.org](http://www.tni.org)

Afrika Kontakt, [www.afrika.dk](http://www.afrika.dk)

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Design by Design for development

“Today, small-scale fishing communities from around the world are being displaced. Our environment is being destroyed and our human rights are taken away. In short, we are being eliminated from the system we live in. We are here today, to raise our voice and advance our solutions, which, contrary to the proposals by the political and economic elite negotiating the Paris agreement, are real solutions. We will continue our struggle and ultimately win the battle.”

**~ Opening statement by Herman Kumara, World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP)**

“When the global fisher movements were founded, the political fight was very much about the small-scale fisheries sector versus the large-scale industry. To date the grounds for contestation have expanded as small-scale fishers are losing access to fishing grounds because of corporate grabbing of land and water. The leaders of the world want to address climate change by putting in place mechanisms that ultimately takes away our access to fishing grounds and gives the rights to land and water to the corporate world.”

**~ Opening statement by Margaret Nakato, World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF)**

# Introduction

From 7-11 December, the Climate Action Zone (ZAC) was organised in Paris, as a parallel space to the official COP21 negotiations, and was initiated by the Coalition Climate 21 – an umbrella organisation that connects over 100 civil society organisations from around the world. This Coalition originated from the failure of the Copenhagen climate conference in 2009, and the hijacking of the 2013 Warsaw conference by industry interests. In the context of the COP21, this Coalition of organisations does not have faith in the official negotiations occurring between government leaders, and argues that the ‘solutions’ agreed on there, are false solutions that lead to more ‘green’ and ‘blue’ grabbing without addressing the causes and threats of climate change.

The ZAC became a hub of deep political conversations involving hundreds of representatives of social movements and other civil society groups from all over the world. Many burning topics were discussed at the ZAC, including a range of topics related to fisheries: the fight against corporate power, international trade and investment agreements, real solutions to climate change, system change, climate and environmental justice, agroecology, and the human rights of food producers and consumers.

One such event, which took place on 8 December, was the ‘Blue Carbon: Ocean Grabbing in Disguise?’ public meeting, which is discussed in this report. More than 100 enthusiastic participants attended the meeting, all packed into a small room, with many standing in the back or sitting on the floor wherever they could find space.

The Blue Carbon meeting was opened by Herman Kumara, the Special Convener of the Sri Lankan National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO), and one of the founding members of the WFFP. Kumara welcomed the audience and emphasised that the public meeting was important for WFF and WFFP in order to raise the voices of the world’s fisher peoples and to deepen our collective understanding of the strategies of the political and economic elites. Following Kumara, Margaret Nakato from Katosi Women Development Trust in Uganda, and the Executive Director of WFF, welcomed the audience and emphasised the need for the continued strengthening of cooperation between the two global fisher movements and their political allies.

The purpose of the Blue Carbon meeting was to discuss the necessity of fisher peoples’ control over land and water resources in the pursuit of climate justice. This meeting was organised into two introductory presentations, followed by two panel discussions with plenty of space to have conversations with the audience. In the opening presentation, Mads Barbesgaard, the chair of political affairs from Afrika Kontakt, explained the ideas behind Blue Carbon, who is pushing this agenda, and the consequences this will have for millions of small-scale fishers. A presentation from Riza Damanik, the Chairperson of the Indonesian Traditional Fisherfolk Union, followed. Damanik provided his perspective on how conservation agendas, including the Blue Carbon mechanism, affect fishing communities across Indonesia.

Following this introductory discussion, a first panel discussed a series of real solutions to mitigate climate change. The panel included Christiana Louwa from El Molo Forum in Kenya, Sherry Pictou from Bear River First Nation in Canada, and Manickam Ilango, the Chairperson of the National Fishworkers Forum in India. The panel session was moderated by Philip Seufert from FIAN International in Germany.

The second panel discussed ways forward in the struggle for climate justice. This panel included Margaret Nakato, Jorge Adalberto Varela Marquez, a Special Invitee of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples from Honduras, Herman Kumara from NAFSO, and Christian Adams, the national Chairperson of Coastal Links South Africa. The panel session was moderated by Zoe Brent from the Transnational Institute in the Netherlands.

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1 <https://www.tni.org/en/article/green-grabbing>

# Blue Carbon – a False Solution!

Mads Barbesgaard opened the session by explaining how the Copenhagen-based social justice organisation, Afrika Kontakt, has worked closely together with fisher peoples' movements to uncover the global ocean grab, which dispossesses fisher folk of coastal and inland resources across the world. Barbesgaard's presentation, and the following debate, revealed how such ocean grabbing processes are increasingly taking place through market-based conservation and climate change mitigation schemes – such as one of the lesser-known schemes, Blue Carbon<sup>2</sup>.

The Blue Carbon agenda was introduced in 2009 by a set of UN-affiliated institutions and organisations, but was later picked up by many different actors, including multinational corporations like Danone, and environmental organisations like Conservation International. Blue Carbon proponents highlight the need to protect wetland areas, especially mangroves and sea grass areas, because of the ability of such ecosystems to act as carbon sinks. Through natural processes, wetland areas capture and store carbon, and therefore the above-mentioned actors are looking for ways to include wetland areas in mitigation efforts aiming to lessen the impact of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Proponents argue that the best way to address this is through the introduction of market-based mechanisms similar to those aimed at forests (e.g. REDD+). In tune with the increasingly dominant approach in climate change mitigation of 'selling nature to save it'<sup>3</sup>, blue carbon projects put a monetary value on wetland areas based on how much carbon they can capture and store. Investors, multinationals, governments, and individuals, are then offered the possibility to invest in them, under the assumption that this will ensure conservation of the wetlands. In return, the investors receive 'carbon credits', which can then 'offset' carbon emissions elsewhere. As Barbesgaard stressed throughout his presentation, this fundamentally changes nothing, but instead entrenches the status quo through yet another market-based solution, whereby pollution and environmental destruction can continue in one place as long as wetland areas are protected somewhere else. According to Barbesgaard, this diverts attention away from the necessity of profound systemic change, arguing that, "blue carbon is a symptom of the problem of COP21 negotiations: they will never be about tackling the systemic drivers of climate change."

In addition to diverting attention away from systemic change, Barbesgaard also stressed how blue carbon needs to be understood as part of broader processes of the privatisation of nature, and grabbing resources under the guise of conservation – or what social movements are calling 'green grabbing'. Barbesgaard argued that, "blue carbon could have the same effects in wetland areas as REDD+ has had in forest areas, for example, the expulsion of communities, reducing customary or community access rights, or shifting community labour away from fishing towards carbon sequestration activities." Riza Damanik (Indonesia Traditional Fisherfolks Union) summed this up by saying, "in Indonesia, the fishers say: 'the sea is our mother who provides, protects and loves us'. The Blue Carbon project asks us to sell our mother."

In this way, blue carbon programmes are not just another false solution, but are likely to cause even more damage, meaning that the UN institutions, multinational corporations and environmental organisations pushing these conservation and blue carbon agendas are also part of the problem. In the context of Indonesia, Damanik pointed out that fishing communities are the most vulnerable to the negative impacts of such conservation agendas and programmes, because both their living and working environments are being targeted. When a conservation project is set up, coastal areas and inland wetlands are enclosed with the intention of protecting them, but this can also mean that local inhabitants are forced out of the areas. This illustrates another form of ocean grabbing, which causes fisher peoples' access to their traditional fishing grounds to be cut off.

Damanik further argued that small-scale fishing communities are particularly impacted by these projects because their rights are much less visible and most often overlooked by governments in pursuit of economic growth. Their voices are also rarely heard in policy and governmental decision-making processes, making it difficult for them to influence the content of the policies that directly affect their communities. That is why it is crucial for small-scale fishers to be aware of their rights and work together to prevent damaging policies from being implemented – since, as Damanik noted, once these destructive policies are on paper, it is nearly impossible to reverse them.

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2 [www.tni.org/en/publication/blue-carbon-ocean-grabbing-in-disguise](http://www.tni.org/en/publication/blue-carbon-ocean-grabbing-in-disguise)

3 <https://www.tni.org/en/article/green-grabbing>

# Real Solutions

When criticising the political projects of the economic and political elites – including their pursuit of carbon trading schemes – social movements are often told that they have misunderstood the rationale and purpose of such projects, or are criticised for not being able to put forward alternatives. The Blue Carbon meeting dismissed such claims by critically analysing the purpose and effects of carbon trading schemes, and by explaining the real solutions to climate change. It was also clear from the panel session that WFFP and WFF leaders spoke about *real* solutions and not of *alternative* solutions. The following account of the meeting emphasises these real solutions, how small-scale food producers have practised and refined these solutions for generations, and how they are rooted in principles of environmental and social justice.

## 1) Respecting nature, not exploiting it

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Indigenous and local small-scale food producing communities have a long tradition of respecting nature. While continuously developing and adapting practices, the traditions often build on centuries of local knowledge and wisdom. As emphasised by Christiana Louwa, an El Molo leader from the shores of Lake Turkana in Northern Kenya, small-scale fishing communities do not see fishing simply as an extractive activity, but as a way of life. “We, the El Molo people, co-exist with nature. Our livelihoods and traditions are connected with nature and the lake [Turkana] where we fish. In El Molo, we have a saying: ‘conserve, protect and sustain the lake so it can serve your family and your community.’ It is the source of your life; it is a two-way relationship. There is no commercial aspect, it’s about surviving.”

## 2) Traditional and Indigenous knowledge

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Thousands of miles from Kenya in Canada, the fishers of Bear River First Nation have caught eel, salmon and other fish for maybe just as long as the El Molo people have set their traps or cast their nets in the turquoise waters of Lake Turkana. Sherry Pictou explained how the Canadian indigenous fishers have passed on their traditions and knowledge from generation to generation, and how this wealth of accumulated wisdom and cultural practices provides the very basis for sustaining nature and indigenous life. However, traditional and indigenous knowledge is rarely acknowledged in governance and management processes. Pictou explains that “there is a spectrum – at one end there are conservation schemes, and at the other there is pure neo-liberalism. Indigenous people are caught somewhere in the middle – we are expected to commodify our relationship with nature, or we are expected to stay out of protected areas or natural reserves completely. But who actually benefits from these schemes? And how does that lead to well-being for communities already living in these areas?” Both the eco-centric conservation schemes and the commodification or privatisation policies ignore, at best, and suppress, at worst, the traditional and indigenous knowledge upon which peoples rely in order to conserve and protect nature.

### 3) Democratic governance and community-driven natural resource management

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Closely connected to traditional and indigenous knowledge as part of the solution, is the need for democratic governance and community driven resource management. As emphasised by the Chairperson of the National Fishworkers Federation, Ilango Manickam, “coastal management at the national level should be decided by the people concerned – any kind of management involving lakes and oceans should include consultation with the people living in the villages who know what is happening. They have very good knowledge but are not being consulted.” This particular view of democratic governance was echoed by other panellists, such as Louwa, who emphasised that governance based on the inclusion of fishing communities and their cultural practices “is basically the solution to these [climate change] challenges.”

### 4) Human Rights, not corporate rights

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To protect, promote and fulfil the human rights of fisher people is not only an obligation of nation states; it is also an intrinsic part of the solution to climate change and other environmental challenges. As explained by Pictou, by protecting the human rights of fisher peoples, especially indigenous fishers, the natural environment is conserved implicitly (see real solutions 1 and 2). Pictou further noted that the number of cases where the corporate exploitation of natural resources has resulted in human rights violations and environmental destruction, have increased over the last few years, emphasising that in this context, “human rights should be a priority over corporate rights”.

The moderator, Philip Seufert, rounded off the panel session by observing that all of these concrete solutions have been highlighted as key principles in some international instruments – such as *the International Guidelines on Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries and the Tenure Guidelines*.

# The Way Forward

Understanding that political struggles for social and environmental justice take different forms in different national settings – depending on the ‘political space’ of civil society – the second panel session explored some strategies on the way forward. While the national context differs from South Africa to Uganda, and from Honduras to Sri Lanka, the conversations facilitated by Zoe Brent also highlighted commonalities.

## 1) Building alliances and converging

One important aspect is the convergence between land and water issues, which illuminates the common struggle between those who have lost access to both land and water rights. While their experiences may be different, the challenges they face are the same, and combining their efforts can create a stronger and more effective alliance. As Margaret Nakato argued, “we don’t need to separate the issues, we need a comprehensive manner of addressing these issues.” This means that both small-scale fishers and farmers should come together to figure out ways in which they can work together to organise collective actions, and to gain control and access to the natural resources on which their livelihoods depend.

## 2) Mass mobilisation

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Jorge Varela, Special Invitee of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples, echoed this sentiment in saying that, “we need mass mobilisations to create awareness. Without massive mobilisation from people, we can’t change things because large corporations are controlling and manipulating our governments.”

## 3) Women leading the local struggle

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Strong alliances are already being formed between social movements, NGOs and other civil society organisations. According to Herman Kumara, these alliances are critical in order to avoid the isolation or criminalisation of individual groups. He emphasised that, “women are at the core of these alliances, they have the courage to come forward, to go house to house, to meet with leaders, to speak out in the media and say what the issues are and what needs to be done.”

Another example of women leading the struggle is from Uganda. Here, women in fishing communities have developed strong organisations to lead the struggle for control and access to fishing grounds, and to fight the exclusion of women from fishing activities due to unequal gender relations. According to Margaret Nakato, women play a crucial role in all areas of small-scale fishing, and are the caregivers in their families. Women are also progressive guardians of social relations, and of the cultural values and practices in fishing communities. In many cases, men in the communities are now beginning to join the women’s organisations because they too are increasingly being marginalised, and are realising the importance of creating alliances and converging with other community members.



## 4) Taking legal action against governments and companies

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These alliances should particularly emphasise respect for human rights and the fight against the criminalisation of communities, particularly those of small-scale food producers. In South Africa, small-scale fishers are constantly being arrested for engaging in the fishing activities that they have practiced for hundreds of years. Christian Adams, Chairperson of Coastal Links South Africa, explained that in his community, “industrial boats and fishermen are never threatened, while we [small-scale fishers] get arrested just for fishing in our regular areas. But in South Africa we are quite lucky in that we were able to take our government to court and it was found that our human rights were violated”. In a landmark order of the High Court in 2007, the court instructed the Minister for Fisheries to develop a new fisheries policy recognising the Human Rights of small-scale fishers in the country. While not yet implemented, Adams emphasised that the fishers “will continue to be involved in defiance campaigns and civil disobedience” in order to pressure the government to speed up the process of policy implementation.

## 5) Human Rights and United Nations Instruments

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From the Honduran perspective, Jorge Varela argued that, “we are facing an ethnocide, a legal genocide that brings human rights violations to a whole new level because governments are adapting laws to serve their own purposes.” This agenda prioritises corporate rights over human rights purely for economic gain. Addressing these human rights violations requires alliance and capacity building, and educating people in the communities about their rights, as well as how they can resist against being moved from one area to another, and against having their access to resources taken away.

As Margaret Nakato further argued, “we don’t only want to align fisher folk, we don’t want to individualise this issue. When we build alliances, we are working with all small-scale producers – farmers, fishers and pastoralists. This requires networking with various organisations and building alliances beyond our local communities.” One concrete tool that is already being implemented to facilitate these alliances, and which highlights the ways in which small-scale fishers’ rights should be recognised, is the *International Guidelines on Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries* (SSF Guidelines). Where and how these guidelines are implemented must be done collaboratively and in a manner that specifically addresses the communities and the individuals involved.

In her brief summary of the panel session, Zoe Brent highlighted the focus on human rights and the use of United Nations instruments as one particular way forward, which was mentioned by all panellists. The SSF Guidelines received particular attention in the debates – and in the context of inland fisheries, the UN *Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests* was also emphasised.

# Concluding remarks

At the end of the three-hour meeting, which included many in-depth discussions on false and real solutions and lively interactions with the 100+ participants, the two leaders of WFF and WFFP closed the afternoon with some concluding statements.

“Our struggle for fishing rights on the lakes has drawn attention to the relation of access to land and water on securing livelihoods, where access to land in some parts translates to restriction of fishers to access fishing grounds. Fishers are being displaced from their land where they have lived for centuries because of corporate power and false climate solutions. This meeting has highlighted the importance of the two global fishers’ movements [WFF and WFFP] working together, and to strengthen the networks with other allies. Together we can protect fishing as a way of life and secure livelihoods.”

~ **Margaret Nakato (WFF)**

“We thank you all for your participation in our meeting. This has been a critical step in the fight against the Blue Carbon mechanism and other false solutions of the UNFCCC. Together with our partners from the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers, Afrika Kontakt, Transnational Institute, Focus on the Global South, and FIAN, we will take this struggle forward. We have to fight the evils of capitalism and one of our tools in this fight is the *International Guidelines on Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries*.”

~ **Herman Kumara (WFFP)**





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