Historic and Artisanal Coastal and Marine Rights of Traditional Fishing Communities: Conflicts and the Way Forward

A report of three webinars

Published by
World Forum of Fisher Peoples and Coastal Action Network
February 2026

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Introduction and Context

This is the report of a three-part global webinar series held as a build-up towards the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) General Assembly, that was scheduled to take place in Brazil from November 14–21, 2024. As in previous years, the Assembly coincides with World Fisheries Day on November 21, marking the founding day of the WFFP. The tradition of organizing the General Assembly around this date also enables the Forum to stage public rallies and mass mobilizations, celebrating and asserting the rights of fisher communities globally.

Background to the Webinar Series

The WFFP and its partners had been organizing various global and regional events leading up to the Assembly. A key milestone was the Blue Economy Tribunal in South Africa, part of a broader series of tribunals across five Indian Ocean countries. These initiatives, along with the Conference of the Ocean Peoples (since 2020), serve as counter-hegemonic spaces—people's alternatives to the official UN-FAO-led "Ocean Summits," which are often dominated by corporate and financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IFC.

In the coming time, the idea is to build a collective front against the ongoing "bluewashing" of coastal and ocean governance. The growing use of policy terms like **customary governance, small-scale fisheries, capture vs culture fisheries**, and **tenure rights**—all introduced into policy vocabularies over the past 10–15 years—has become central to these discussions. The need to reclaim these narratives, often co-opted under the rhetoric of **sustainability** within the SDG and post-MDG frameworks, has made these webinars crucial preparatory spaces.

The global webinar series, titled "Historic and Artisanal Coastal and Marine Rights of Traditional Fishing Communities: Conflicts and the Way Forward", focused on customary governance, tenure, and traditional rights of fisher people, with an emphasis on coastal land rights. It forms the first of three sessions:

1. Customary Governance, Tenure, and Traditional Rights – **September 9 and 10, 2024**
2. Capture vs Culture: The Politics of Industrial Push and Impacts on Fishing Communities – **September 27, 2024**

3. Reimagining Rights of Traditional Fishers: The Trajectory and Future of Small-Scale Fisheries – **October 18, 2024**

The goal was to collectively generate insights and advocacy materials leading up to the WFFP General Assembly in Brazil.

Historic and Artisanal Coastal and Marine Rights of Traditional Fishing Communities

Conflicts and Way forward
(with special focus on coastal land rights)

9 SEPTEMBER 2024

India: 9:30 am - 12:30 pm
Bangladesh: 10:00 am - 1:00 pm
Bangkok: 11:00 am - 2:00 pm

Zoom Meeting ID: **812 5344 0310**

Webinar 1

Customary Governance, Tenure, and Traditional Rights of Fisher People

Day 1 | Date: 9 September 2024

The opening session began with introductory remarks emphasizing that the webinars aim to document both the alienation of traditional coastal and marine rights and the communities' resistance and restoration efforts. Presenters were requested to focus on:

1. Policies and projects that alienate traditional fisher rights, and
2. Community strategies to reclaim customary governance and coastal land ownership.

The facilitator (M.J. Vijayan) announced that the presentations would be condensed within a 60-minute timeframe, covering six presentations—three detailed case studies (Bangladesh, India, Thailand) and three shorter country updates (Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia).

Country Presentations

Presentation 1: Bangladesh – Customary Governance and Coastal Land Rights

Speaker: Mohammed Zahidul Islam (COAST Foundation, Bangladesh)
Islam opened the presentation by situating Bangladesh's fisheries sector, noting that over 12% of the national population is engaged in fisheries, including 1.4 million women working in processing and related activities. The sector contributed 2.43% to national GDP in FY 2023, ranking Bangladesh second globally in open-water harvest and fifth in aquaculture production.

He then addressed the major challenges confronting small-scale fishers:

- Land alienation and Land Grab due to tourism projects, shrimp farming, and industrial expansion in coastal areas such as Cox's Bazar.
- Commercial trawling within 20 nautical miles threatens traditional fishers who lack deep-sea access.

- Depletion of fish stocks and biodiversity loss from overfishing and industrial operations.
- Weak legal protection and a lack of formal representation of small-scale fishers in policy making processes.
- Limited access to education, healthcare, and information about rights and entitlements.

Case Study A: Char Chotki Mara Island – Resolving a Boundary Dispute

The first case presented a successful local intervention from Char Chotki Mara, an island village situated between the Bhola and Barisal districts. The area had long suffered from administrative neglect, lacking schools, healthcare facilities, and transport infrastructure, while also facing a boundary dispute between the two district administrations.

The District Women's Networking Group, supported by COAST Foundation, brought the issue to the attention of local authorities. Following community advocacy, the District Commissioner constituted a high-level committee—including senior officials and law enforcement—to inspect and resolve the dispute. Joint visits by police and district officials resulted in demarcation and fencing of the disputed boundary, and the establishment of a police camp to ensure security and prevent future conflicts.

Islam emphasized that this intervention strengthened community empowerment and demonstrated how organized advocacy by fisher women's groups could influence governance outcomes.

Case Study B: The "Khurushkul Ashrayan Prokolpo" Resettlement Project

The second case involved the adverse impacts of a government housing project launched in 2020, which covered 253.59 acres in Cox's Bazar district. The project aimed to resettle 449 landless fisher families displaced by the 1991 cyclone, but implementation has been partial—only 20 out of 139 proposed buildings have been handed over to 600 families.

Islam outlined four major consequences:

1. Disruption of traditional livelihoods – The new settlement was built far from fishing harbours and fish drying areas, increasing transport time and costs.
2. Loss of income – Around 60% of relocated families experienced income reductions; 70% of men reported lower earnings, leading to youth migration to urban areas.
3. Impact on women fish workers – Women engaged in fish drying and processing lost access to workspaces, resulting in reduced livelihood opportunities and rising insecurity.
4. Social fragmentation and safety concerns – Relocation away from the coastal community has increased harassment and stalking incidents, particularly affecting adolescent girls.

He warned that such disruptions risk long-term impoverishment of coastal fishers and urged that any future relocation projects must be designed in consultation with communities.

Proposed Way Forward

Islam recommended:

- Building coalitions and community networks for continued advocacy.
- Expanding financial access and livelihood diversification.
- Promoting climate-resilient technologies in coastal agriculture and fisheries.
- Ensuring legal aid and recognition of customary rights.
- Strengthening the role of women fish workers in local governance structures.

In closing, he reiterated that Bangladesh’s small-scale fisher communities require both legal and developmental recognition of their coastal and marine rights to prevent further alienation.

Following the presentation, Vijayan thanked Islam for a “very comprehensive and lucid” account, acknowledging the clarity with which he linked land alienation and community-led responses. Vijayan noted that, in contrast to many regions where militarization has worsened conditions, in Chotki Mara, state intervention through policing had brought peace—a noteworthy reversal of the pattern.

Sarah from COAST Foundation added that the success in Chotki Mara represented a rare victory against local elites, achieved through the courage and persistence of fisher communities and women’s groups.

Presentation 2: Voices from Tamil Nadu – Struggles for Forest and Coastal Rights

The second presentation featured testimonies from Tamil Nadu’s traditional fishers, represented by Yoganathan and Suganya, who spoke about the communities’ historic relationship with their coastal ecosystems — the lagoons, mangroves, and forests — and the growing threats to their survival.

Suganya (Legal Aid for Women (LAW) Trust, Tamil Nadu)

Suganya, speaking from Thiruvarur district in Tamil Nadu, presented the situation of fishing communities in Muthupettai Taluk, where livelihoods, culture, and survival are deeply tied to mangroves and lagoon ecosystems. She explained that around 35,000 fishers from 13 fishing villages across five village panchayats depend on the mangrove–lagoon system where five tributaries of the Cauvery River meet the sea. These waters are not only a source of income but also the foundation of the community’s cultural and social life.

Within the nearly 12,000 hectares of lagoon area, only about 2,000 hectares still support healthy mangrove growth. Large parts of the ecosystem have been destroyed due to illegal occupation and conversion, pushing fishing families to the margins. As access to the lagoon shrinks, the community is losing both its livelihood base and its historical identity, which has been shaped over generations through sustainable use and stewardship of these waters.

Suganya described how, despite the community’s long-standing role in protecting and managing the mangroves, the forest department and the state now treat the lagoon as state property and criminalise the very people who depend on it. Fishers are routinely harassed, prevented from fishing, and subjected to intimidation. Nets and boats are damaged, fish are thrown away, and false cases are filed.

Physical violence and threats inside the forest areas have become common, amounting to repeated violations of human rights.

Women, she emphasised, face the harshest conditions. Many leave their homes at around three in the morning, walking along a single narrow path to reach the lagoon. They then crawl through water up to their necks to collect crabs and prawns with their bare hands, purely for subsistence. Yet even these minimal survival activities are punished. Forest officials impose fines of ₹50,000 or even ₹1 lakh, even though a woman's daily catch may be worth no more than ₹300. To avoid legal cases, families are forced to take loans to pay these fines, pushing them further into debt. This burden falls particularly on widowed and single women who have few other means of support.

The authorities, Suganya noted, deny the community's rights by claiming that without land titles they have no right to fish. This directly violates their right to food, livelihood, and dignified life. In response, the community has begun asserting its claims under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, with support from the Legal Aid for Women Trust.

She also highlighted how ecological degradation is being driven by commercial shrimp farming. Freshwater flows into the lagoon are being diverted to shrimp ponds, increasing salinity, reducing depth through siltation, and accelerating the decline of mangroves while invasive species spread. While the forest department presents itself as a protector of nature, Suganya concluded, it is the communities—historical guardians of these lands—who are being displaced and erased from the ecosystem they have sustained for generations.

Yoganathan (Fisher leader from Thoothukudi district, Tamil Nadu)

Yoganathan, a fisher leader from Thoothukudi district, began with a passionate reminder: "*This is our land, our ocean, our forest, our lagoon. For centuries, we have protected these resources.*" He explained that Tamil Nadu's fishers have long acted as custodians of the coastal ecosystem, ensuring sustainable use and intergenerational protection of marine biodiversity. However, he expressed deep frustration that government policies now threaten these very rights.

He noted that despite the introduction of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, its implementation in Tamil Nadu has been weak and misleading. "*The Forest Department is spreading false propaganda about forest rights,*" he said, adding that the department routinely prevents fisherfolk from entering mangrove areas such as Muthupet Lagoon and the Rameswaram coast, where rare mangrove species thrive. Fisher families, who have depended on these resources for generations, now face harassment and exclusion.

The community, he emphasized, is demanding recognition of its traditional and customary rights as guaranteed under the FRA. He also called for strict enforcement of the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification, which is routinely violated by the proliferation of aquaculture farms along the coast. These farms, he argued, not only violate environmental norms but also displace fishers from their traditional grounds.

Yoganathan further drew attention to the absence of meaningful protection for small-scale fishers at sea. *"We have no safety, no employment opportunities, and our rights over both land and ocean are being denied,"* he said. In response, fishers have begun forming forest protection groups and sending formal petitions to the government demanding that their coastal and forest rights be secured.

He also pointed out that while the government receives substantial international funding — including from Japan — for forest conservation and mangrove restoration, these efforts often bypass local communities. *"Because of our mangroves, even people in Japan benefit,"* he said, questioning why local fishers, who have preserved these ecosystems for centuries, are being marginalized instead of being made conservation partners.

Concluding his remarks. Yoganathan reiterated that fishers are not outsiders but rightful custodians of the coast: *"We are the protectors. We have rights over our land, our ocean, and our fishing. Implement the Forest Rights Act properly — not just for the forests, but for the fishers who live by them."*

Following his presentation, Suganya and other participants reflected on the deep social injustices underpinning these conflicts, particularly the intersection of caste discrimination and environmental dispossession in areas like Muthupet. Speakers noted that despite repeated appeals, fisher communities in the region remain alienated and underrepresented in both media and policy discussions. There was consensus on the urgent need for stronger advocacy and national-level attention to these local struggles.

Presentation 3: Thailand – Community Resistance to Legal and Industrial Encroachments

Pornchai Promlack (Traditional Fisherfolk Organization of Thailand)

The next presentation moved to Southeast Asia, where Pornchai Promlack, representing the Traditional Fisherfolk Organization of Thailand, spoke on behalf of coastal communities in Chumphon Province and other regions along the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand.

Sharing his personal experience of five decades as a fisher. Promlack described how, half a century ago, Thailand's coastal waters were rich and abundant. *"Just 500 meters from the shore, we could catch fish, prawns, and crabs with simple nets and rods,"* he recalled. However, over the years, coastal abundance has sharply declined due to industrial fishing, urban expansion, and unsustainable shrimp farming.

He noted that the expansion of large-scale commercial fisheries — equipped with mechanized boats and massive nets — has decimated marine life and captured juvenile fish that are essential for ecosystem regeneration. Meanwhile, small-scale fishers who depend on traditional knowledge and simple gear have been increasingly pushed out of their livelihoods.

Promlack observed that laws and regulations have become key instruments of exclusion. In Thailand, most fisheries and coastal management laws are written by policymakers aligned with the interests of big business rather than by or for fisherfolk. *"The law has become a tool of control,"* he said. *"They use the word 'prohibit' again and again — prohibiting us from fishing, from collecting, from living as we always have."*

He criticized the government's Forest and Fisheries Departments for enforcing prohibitive measures that restrict community access to traditional fishing grounds, particularly within newly declared "protected areas." These laws, he argued, arrived centuries after local fishing cultures had already developed sustainable systems of coexistence with the sea.

The result has been widespread livelihood disruption and loss of community autonomy. Despite being the majority of Thailand's coastal population, small-scale fishers lack political representation: *"The people who write our laws are not fishers. They are parliamentarians* *representing corporations. We have no seat at the table, no one to speak for us."*

Promlack also raised the alarm over industrial encroachments into mangrove forests, with tens of thousands of hectares converted into shrimp farms and industrial estates. These developments have destroyed critical habitats and undermined local resilience to climate change. He further cited the recent controversy over invasive species, such as **Plao Hang**, introduced for aquaculture despite ecological risks. Once these non-native species escaped into natural waters, they began consuming native fish eggs and spreading rapidly — yet government response has remained minimal.

"When problems arise, they give us small compensation to keep us quiet. But they never hold big business accountable," he concluded. His testimony underlined the shared experience of fisher communities across South and Southeast Asia — of losing control over their resources to state and corporate interests, and of struggling to reclaim their rights through collective action and advocacy.

The Land Bridge Project and the Fight for Coastal Survival

Pornchai Promlack continued the earlier discussion by sharing the latest and most alarming threat facing fisher communities — the government's massive Land Bridge Project and the associated Southern Economic Corridor (SEC).

He began by recalling how Thailand's small-scale fishers have already been devastated by the encroachment of industrial fisheries, reclamation projects, and destructive aquaculture. Despite this, fisherfolk continue to be ignored by policymakers and mainstream media. *"No matter how big the problem — whether it is factory pollution or invasive species — it never becomes big news,"* he said.

Promlack explained that while the government occasionally distributes minor financial aid to pacify affected fishers, there is no accountability for the destruction caused by large corporations. *"They give us small help to keep us quiet, but they never hold big business accountable,"* he remarked.

He then turned to the Land Bridge and Southern Economic Corridor (SEC) — described as the largest industrial development project in Thailand's history. The plan aims to connect the Andaman Sea on the west coast with the Gulf of Thailand on the east, creating a 10,000-hectare economic zone spanning multiple provinces. To achieve this, the project proposes massive land reclamation by dumping rocks and soil into the sea to build artificial industrial zones.

"They will explode our mountains to mine stones for filling the sea," Promlack said, calling it an ecological catastrophe in the making. The construction of ports, logistics hubs, and industrial parks along both coasts would consume vast marine areas — displacing fishing communities and destroying coral reefs, seagrass beds, and coastal habitats vital for juvenile fish populations.

He warned that the project is not merely local but global in scope, as the Thai government is actively seeking international investors and offering 99-year land leases to foreign corporations. *"Think about it — 99 years. They would have everything over our provinces. What will happen to our sea, to our people?"*

Local fisherfolk in provinces like Chumphon and Ranong are organizing collectively to oppose the project, despite facing intimidation and limited access to information. Pronglad emphasized that these communities are not anti-development but are defending their right to sustainable livelihoods.

"We are not destroyers," he said firmly. *"We are custodians and stewards of the environment. We protect it — for everyone, for the world."* He called for global solidarity and for fisherfolk to be included in all decision-making processes that affect their future. *"Our voices must be heard — in Thailand and internationally. We are small people, but together we can make our voices reach the powerful."*

Following his intervention, Vijayan thanked him for highlighting the "blue economy push" — a global trend that has already harmed fishers in countries like Thailand and India. Vijayan described it as a "corporate revolution" falsely labeled as progress, warning that it risks displacing traditional fishing communities under the guise of modernization.

Presentation 4: Indonesia – Coastal Evictions and the Fight for Communal Land Rights

Arman Manila (Indonesian Traditional Fisherfolk)

The discussion then moved to Indonesia, where. Arman Manila from the Indonesian Traditional Fisherfolk Union presented a series of recent cases of land grabs and forced evictions from coastal and small island communities.

He began by explaining that across Indonesia's coastal regions, communities face eviction due to government-backed industrial projects that seize ancestral lands for development. Notable examples include Rempang Island (Riau Province), Pari Island (Thousand Islands, Jakarta), Wangi-Wangi Island (Southeast Sulawesi), and Sayong Island (East Nusa Tenggara).

In each case, local communities were displaced without consultation, compensation, or legal recognition of their customary land rights. On Rempang Island, the government has proposed building Indonesia's largest industrial zone, threatening thousands of livelihoods. In Pari Island, over 80% of residents are small-scale fishers and seaweed cultivators, yet their communal land — which has existed for centuries — is being sold to private investors under unclear and often fraudulent land titles.

"The land on these islands has always been communal," Manila said. *"But now, because of investors, the government is creating new poor people who once had everything but are now being made landless."*

He noted that Indonesia's legal framework — including the Land Law No. 5 of 1960 and Law No. 1 on Coastal and Small Island Management — does not adequately protect the interests of indigenous or traditional fisherfolk. Despite a Constitutional Court ruling mandating recognition of customary marine rights, implementation remains absent.

The result, he said, is not only state-versus-community conflict but also community-versus-community divisions, as some groups side with government projects in exchange for short-term gains. He warned that these divisions are eroding social cohesion within island societies that have historically thrived on shared stewardship of land and sea.

Manila concluded by calling on the state to recognize and implement the court's decision protecting traditional fish cultivators, and to halt all investor-led land acquisitions on small islands. *"We only ask for our space to live," he said. "The law of the state and the law of the community must not contradict each other. We need harmony — not eviction."*

Presentation 5: Sri Lanka – Development, Pollution, and the Silencing of Coastal Voices

Singarasa Pirthas (Sri Lanka)
Singarasa Pirthas from Sri Lanka spoke about the multiple challenges facing coastal communities — from pollution and port expansion to exclusion from policy spaces.

He described how the government's rapid infrastructure development — including new ports, aquaculture farms, and industrial complexes — has led to widespread destruction of marine ecosystems and the displacement of traditional fishers. *"Our lagoons and coastal waters are being polluted. Our livelihoods are disappearing,"* he said.

Fisherfolk are not only losing access to their fishing grounds but also face unfair market practices. Merchants buy their catch at low prices and sell it at exorbitant rates, leaving fishers trapped in debt and poverty. He also noted the absence of insurance schemes, subsidies, or social protection, which makes fisher families highly vulnerable to economic shocks.

Moreover, fishers are caught in cross-border conflicts with foreign fleets — particularly Indian trawlers — while the government remains indifferent. *"We are losing our resources, our crafts are damaged, and our protests are silenced,"* he said, emphasizing that ecological degradation, social exclusion, and militarization have all converged to destabilize Sri Lanka's coastal communities.

Despite these challenges, Pirthas reaffirmed the community's commitment to raising its voice in both national and international forums. *"We are thankful to the organizers for giving us this opportunity to be heard. We will continue our struggle for recognition and rights,"* he concluded.

Vijayan acknowledged how Sri Lanka's situation reflects a broader regional pattern of customary rights being eroded by militarization and corporate expansion. He noted that the testimonies reveal a deliberate creation of conflict in coastal zones — a tactic that allows governments and corporations to justify control over land and sea.

Presentation 6: Malaysia – Land Reclamation and the Penang South Islands Project

Jamaluddin Mohamad (Malaysia)
The final presentation came from Jamaluddin Mohamad of Malaysia, who spoke about the long-standing and expanding problem of coastal reclamation.

He explained that land ownership in Malaysia is divided into three categories — inherited land, state or royal land, and private land — and that small-scale fishers are often excluded from these systems. While zoning regulations theoretically protect nearshore fishing areas, enforcement is weak, leading to frequent zone violations by industrial fishers.

The most severe issue, however, is the large-scale land reclamation projects, particularly the Penang South Reclamation (PSR) project. This initiative aims to create three artificial islands, covering about 4,000 hectares, to host industrial and real estate developments. Construction, expected to continue for 50 years, threatens to destroy marine habitats, disrupt coastal ecosystems, and permanently displace fishing communities.

"I have already lost 70% of my income," Mohamad shared, highlighting the human toll of these developments. The government, he noted, continues to justify such projects in the name of modernization and foreign investment, even offering long-term leases to international corporations.

He warned that the impacts of these reclamation projects extend beyond Malaysia, affecting regional ecosystems shared with neighbouring countries like Indonesia. *"This is not only about Malaysia — what happens here will affect the entire region,"* he said.

Despite limited influence, fisher communities continue to organize and voice their opposition. *"We may not have done as much as our Indonesian friends, but we are learning. We will continue to fight for our islands and our rights,"* Mohamad concluded.

Vijayan thanked him for his comprehensive presentation, noting that the Penang case demonstrates how blue economy projects — under the pretext of development — have become a central driver of displacement and environmental degradation across Southeast Asia.

Closing Reflections and Way Forward

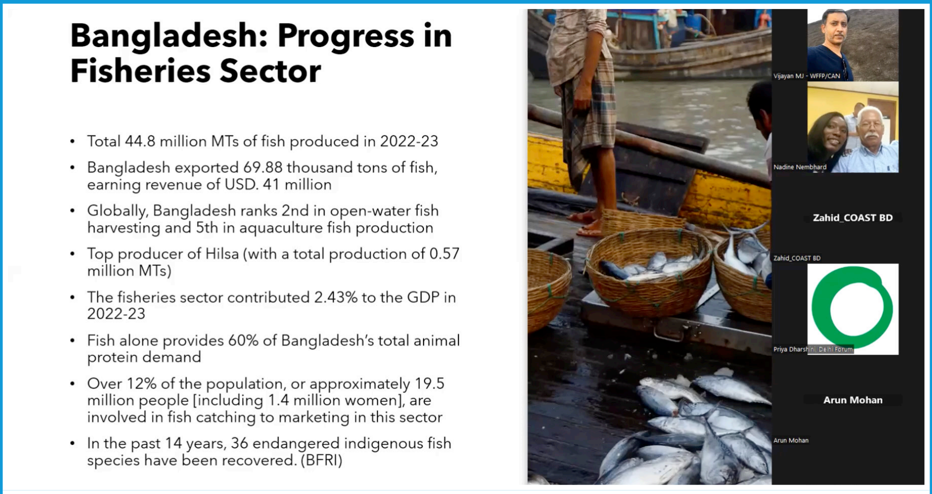
The session concluded with a set of reflections and closing remarks that tied together the powerful presentations from across Asia. Vijayan thanked the supporting organizations for their continued solidarity in strengthening community-based understanding in the region.

While acknowledging the depth of the presentations, he emphasized that certain issues — such as the Penang reclamation project in Malaysia and related industrial developments — require further in-depth exploration. It was proposed that the Asia Continental Forum consider organizing country-specific presentations in the run-up to the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) General Assembly, allowing each national context to be examined in greater detail. He suggested that this could be done through monthly webinars, each dedicated to a single country, to study comprehensively the intersecting challenges of land reclamation, aquaculture expansion, and the blue economy push. These, he noted, are recurring themes across Asia and must be analyzed from each country's perspective to build collective advocacy positions.

Vijayan also noted that while Pakistan could not be represented in this session, the country faces a situation equally pressing and precarious. He pointed out that Pakistan has recently entered the blue economy framework, and though its coasts have historically been less polluted compared to India's heavily industrialized western shoreline, they are now witnessing increased pressures from foreign corporate fishing fleets, including large-scale trawlers operating under Taiwanese ownership.

This situation, he said, is part of a broader "criminalization of fishing" trend across the subcontinent — a consequence of ecological collapse and industrial pollution in Indian coastal waters, particularly in Gujarat, where chemical and thermal power plants have raised sea temperatures and depleted fisheries. The result has been frequent cross-border conflicts, with Indian fishworkers being imprisoned in Pakistan and vice versa. He described this as a tragic outcome of environmental degradation and unsustainable industrialization, which puts traditional fishers against one another in a struggle created by corporate and state neglect.

Returning to the theme of regional solidarity, Vijayan reiterated that all countries — Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan — are witnessing different scales of the blue economy expansion, which, while framed as development, is effectively leading to dispossession. “*We are all witnessing different scales of this push,*” he said, thanking the presenters for their in-depth, insightful, and courageous interventions.



Bangladesh: Progress in Fisheries Sector

- Total 44.8 million MTs of fish produced in 2022-23
- Bangladesh exported 69.88 thousand tons of fish, earning revenue of USD. 41 million
- Globally, Bangladesh ranks 2nd in open-water fish harvesting and 5th in aquaculture fish production
- Top producer of Hilsa (with a total production of 0.57 million MTs)
- The fisheries sector contributed 2.43% to the GDP in 2022-23
- Fish alone provides 60% of Bangladesh's total animal protein demand
- Over 12% of the population, or approximately 19.5 million people [including 1.4 million women], are involved in fish catching to marketing in this sector
- In the past 14 years, 36 endangered indigenous fish species have been recovered. (BFRI)

Vijayan MJ - WFFP/CAN
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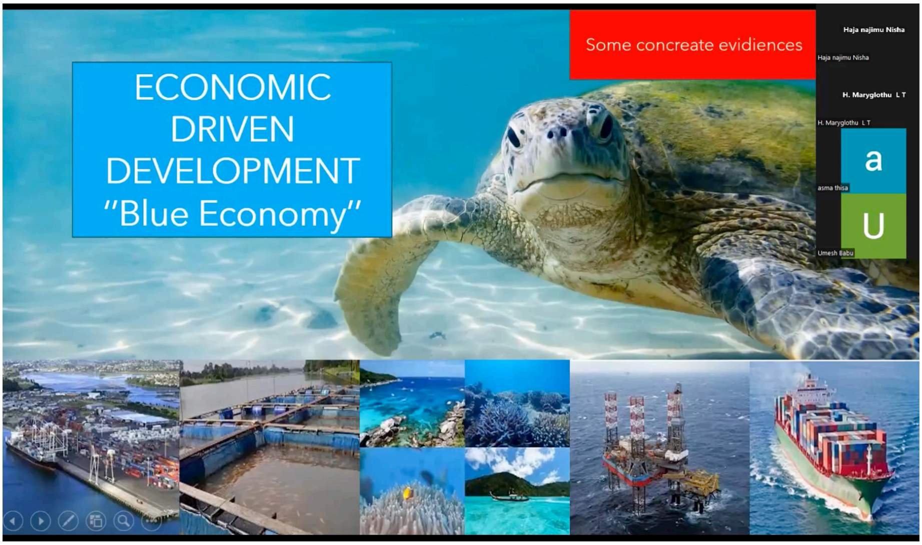

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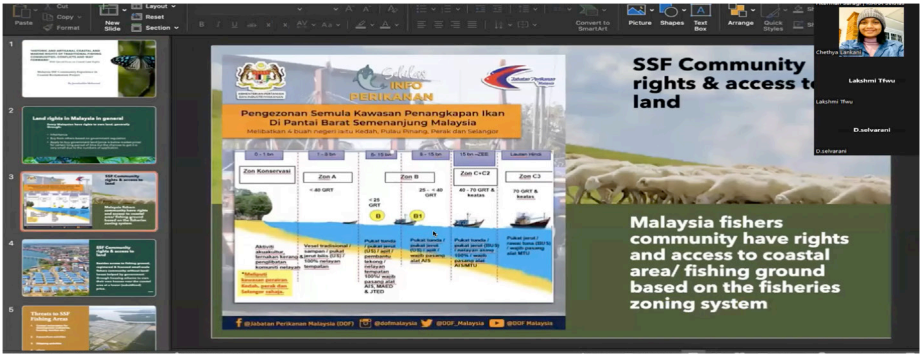

SSF Community rights & access t
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Malaysia fishers community have rights and access to coastal area/ fishing ground based on the fisheries zoning system

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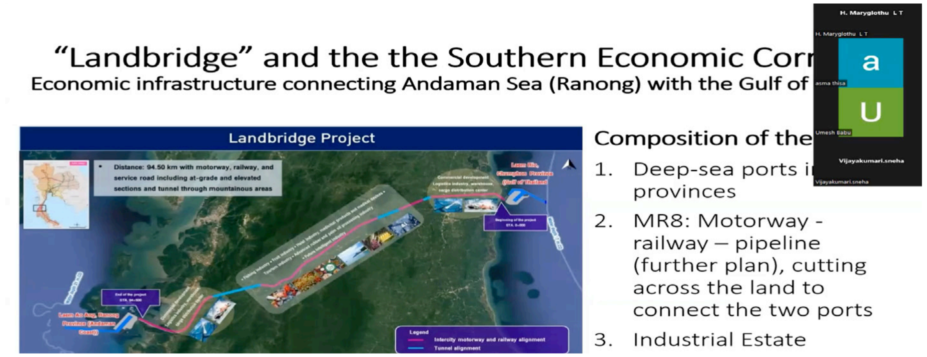

“Landbridge” and the the Southern Economic Corr

Economic infrastructure connecting Andaman Sea (Ranong) with the Gulf of

Landbridge Project

- Distance: 94.50 km with motorway, railway, and service road including at-grade and elevated sections and tunnel through mountainous areas

Laem Rio, Chumphon Province (Gulf of Thailand)
Commercial development Logistics industry, warehouse, sargo distribution center
Beginning of the project STA. 0+000
• Fishing industry • Fruit industry • Halal industry, medicinal products and medical devices • Tourism industry • Advanced rubber and palm oil processing industry • Future intelligent industry
End of the project STA. 94+500
Laem Ao Ang, Ranong Province (Andaman Coast)
Legend
Intercity motorway and railway alignment
Tunnel alignment
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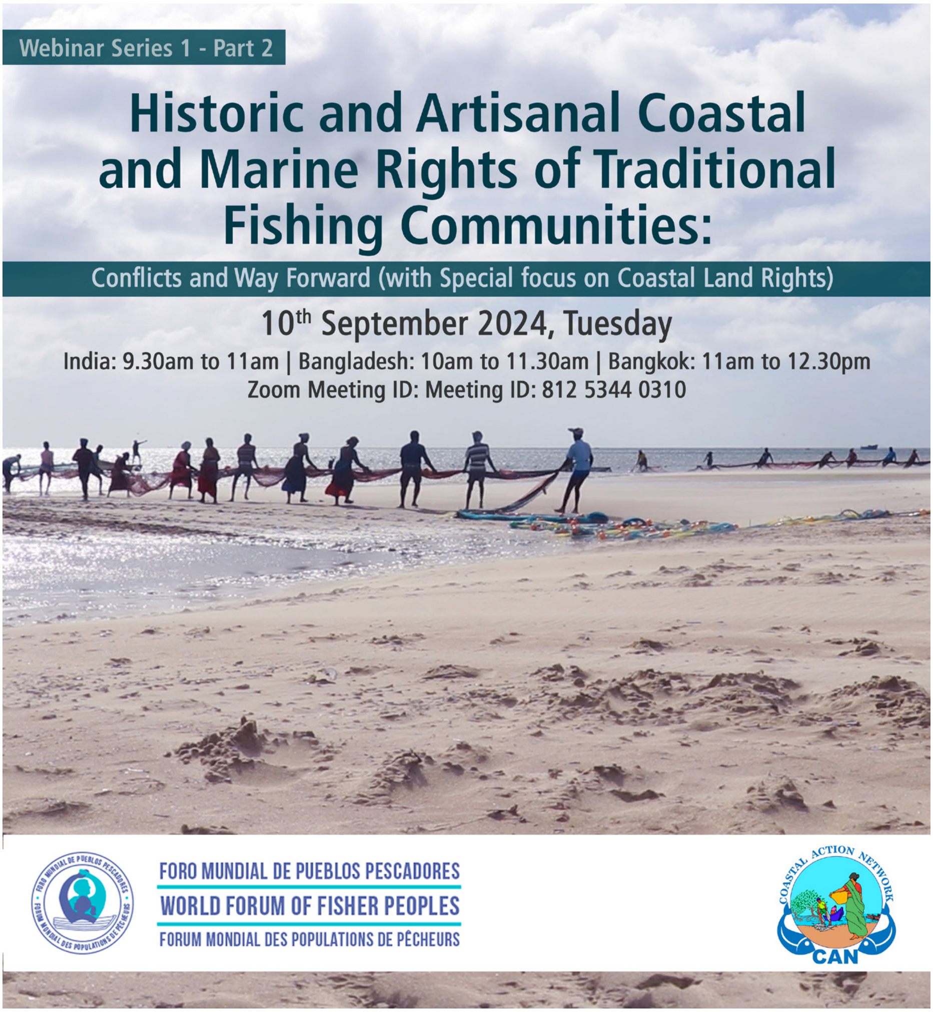
Composition of the

1. Deep-sea ports i provinces
2. MR8: Motorway - railway – pipeline (further plan), cutting across the land to connect the two ports
3. Industrial Estate



Webinar Series 1 - Part 2

Historic and Artisanal Coastal and Marine Rights of Traditional Fishing Communities:

Conflicts and Way Forward (with Special focus on Coastal Land Rights)

10th September 2024, Tuesday

India: 9.30am to 11am | Bangladesh: 10am to 11.30am | Bangkok: 11am to 12.30pm

Zoom Meeting ID: Meeting ID: 812 5344 0310

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

COASTAL ACTION NETWORK
CAN

Webinar 1

Customary Governance, Tenure, and Traditional Rights of Fisher People

Day 2 | Date: 10 September 2024

Responses and Inputs by Experts

The second day of the webinar opened with the facilitators, Susan Gui (KIARA) and Priya Dharshini (Delhi Forum), underlining that this session was a continuation of the dialogue initiated on the first day, aimed at deepening the collective understanding of ocean governance, customary rights, and the escalating threats faced by fishing communities across regions.

Speakers reflected on the previous day's discussions, noting the strong convergence of experiences across countries. Despite differing political and geographical contexts, coastal and fishing communities were confronting remarkably similar challenges—most notably ocean grabbing, large-scale development projects, conservation-led displacement, and the erosion of customary governance systems. At the same time, emphasis was placed on the resilience of communities who continue to defend their relationship with the ocean, often framed as Mother Sea or Mother Earth, against extractive and exclusionary development models.

The session contextualised these struggles within broader global processes. Water was described not merely as a natural resource but as the connective tissue of life—linking ecosystems, cultures, and livelihoods. Yet over the last decade, oceans have increasingly been transformed into sites of intensified capital accumulation under the banner of development, sustainability, and a space for extracting benefits under the blue economy. Participants highlighted how this shift has systematically dispossessed communities of access, control, and decision making power over their marine territories.

The discussion moved to the framing of the blue economy as a new phase of capitalism, particularly in countries such as Indonesia, where state-led development policies have facilitated large-scale tourism, extractive industries, renewable energy projects, and mineral mining under sustainability narratives. Speakers pointed out the contradiction between climate action rhetoric and ground realities, where renewable energy and conservation projects have resulted in displacement, livelihood loss, and ecological damage. Conservation initiatives such as "30 by 30" were cited as further examples where externally imposed frameworks undermine long-standing community-led stewardship practices.

Following this contextual framing, the session transitioned to thematic interventions.

Response to presentations:

Yifang Tang, FIAN International
The first response was delivered by Yifang Tang, who offered reflections grounded in a human rights perspective based on the country case studies presented on the first day.

Drawing from the presentations, she mapped the range of projects impacting fishing communities—ports, land reclamation, industrial infrastructure, aquaculture expansion, and conservation zones—and identified the actors involved, including state agencies, private investors, and foreign governments. She emphasised that the cumulative impacts described—loss of livelihood, land dispossession, pollution, overfishing, criminalisation, lack of consultation, and exclusion from decision-making—constitute clear violations of human rights. These included the right to food, housing, health, and participation, as well as violations of core human rights principles such as transparency and accountability.

She noted that resistance strategies discussed by communities included legal action, administrative petitions, memoranda submissions, protests, and collective mobilisation. However, she posed questions for future deliberation: how demands are articulated, how strategies are designed to confront multiple actors simultaneously, and how transnational accountability—particularly of foreign governments and investors—can be strengthened. She suggested that the global nature of these violations requires cross-border solidarity and coordinated advocacy, especially within the framework of WFFP as a global movement.

Expanding the lens, she drew parallels between the struggles of fisher peoples and agrarian communities. Both face corporate capture of commons, climate-driven dispossession, conservation-induced displacement, land and water concentration, and conflict arising from unequal resource distribution. She highlighted financialisation as a key driver, explaining how land, water, fisheries, and forests are increasingly treated as financial assets by banks, pension funds, and investment funds, making accountability more opaque and dispossession more systematic.

She also introduced the emerging concern of digitalisation of land and resource governance, where digital registries and platforms convert commons into data accessible to global investors, often exacerbating exclusion. Drawing from experiences in Colombia and Brazil, she cautioned that such processes could further marginalise communities.

To conclude, she shared examples of successful resistance from agrarian movements, including the passage of Mali’s Agricultural Land Law recognising customary tenure and the global achievement of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP). She emphasised that UNDROP’s principles and provisions are equally relevant to fisher peoples and can be strategically used to assert customary marine and coastal rights.

Following this intervention, facilitators reflected on the growing commodification of climate solutions and the increasing role of climate risk narratives in justifying relocation and dispossession. Participants noted contradictions where communities are displaced in the name of safety or conservation, while industrial and corporate projects continue in high-risk zones. The need for holistic, people-centred approaches to resistance and advocacy was reiterated.

Thematic Presentations

Presentation 1: State Expropriation of Fisher Peoples under the garb of Sustainable Ocean Economy

Carsten Pedersen (Transnational Institute)

Cartsen began by acknowledging the strength of collective documentation emerging from the case studies, stressing the importance of recording not only individual cases but also the scale of dispossession. While official narratives frequently quantify economic outputs, he noted that the number of fisher peoples displaced, criminalised, or deprived of access is rarely documented, despite running into tens of thousands across regions.

Situating ocean grabbing within broader political economy frameworks, he argued that states are structurally dependent on private investment to generate revenue, making them deeply aligned with capitalist interests. Drawing on the work of political economist Vivek Chibber, he explained how this dependence limits the state’s ability to act as a counterbalance to corporate power. This dynamic was evident in multiple country cases, particularly where large-scale aquaculture, industrial fishing, and coastal infrastructure were prioritised over community rights.

He further linked this development model to escalating debt crises in the Global South, citing research showing that debt servicing now consumes a significant portion of state revenues, crowding out spending on health, education, social protection, and climate adaptation. Despite evidence that growth-oriented, investment-driven development has failed to deliver social and ecological well-being, governments continue to promote the same model, deepening dispossession in the process.

Turning to conservation and climate governance, he examined the rise of blue carbon initiatives. He explained how coastal ecosystems such as mangroves and lagoons are increasingly enclosed and converted into carbon assets, traded in financial markets. While framed as climate solutions, these mechanisms effectively privatise nature and often exclude communities that have historically protected these ecosystems. He cautioned that the defence of such private carbon assets by the state frequently involves coercion and violence.

He concluded by highlighting that ocean grabbing, whether through development, conservation, or climate finance, represents a systematic conversion of customary rights into private property, backed by state power. This process, he argued, must be challenged through sustained documentation, political mobilisation, and collective international advocacy.

The session proceeded with the remaining thematic interventions and discussions, setting the stage for expert responses, collective strategising, and the articulation of pathways forward in the subsequent segments of the webinar series.

Presentation 2: Recognition of Coastal Rights of Fisher People: Assertion of Customary Governance in Line with Human Rights Principles

Jones T Spartegus (Participatory Action Research Coalition India)
The discussion then moved to a substantive intervention on the recognition of customary governance and fisher peoples' rights within human rights frameworks. The speaker, Jones T Spartegus, emphasised that this webinar itself marked a historic moment—the activation of the Asia–Pacific regional process within WFFP in the lead-up to General Assembly 8.

Drawing from decades of movement-building, the intervention traced how fisher peoples' struggles have been documented through reports such as Ocean Grab and advanced through people's tribunals addressing blue economy-driven dispossession. These processes, it was stressed, clearly establish that customary rights are not sectoral or occupational entitlements but fundamental political rights.

A central concern raised was the persistent reduction of fisher peoples' rights to "fishing rights" within policy discourse. This framing, speakers argued, strips communities of their relationship to land, sea, rivers, and forests, and denies their identity as peoples with civilisational histories. Parallels were drawn with the evolution of other movements—indigenous peoples and peasants—whose collective identities emerged from struggle rather than institutional categorisation.

The term "fisher peoples" was reaffirmed as a political identity encompassing marine and inland fishers, coastal communities, and indigenous peoples dependent on aquatic ecosystems. Speakers cautioned against terminologies imposed by states and international bodies, arguing that language itself has become a tool of marginalisation. The normalisation of terms such as "small-scale fisheries," "harvesting," and "resource management" was challenged as obscuring lived realities and reinforcing bureaucratic control.

The intervention outlined a clear political framework centred on recognition, redistribution, and representation. Recognition of fisher peoples as peoples was described as the foundational demand, without which redistribution of resources and political representation remain impossible. Redistribution was articulated as extending beyond fisheries to land, water, and coastal territories.

Representation, it was argued, must operate from local governance structures to global institutions, enabling fisher peoples to reclaim political identity and shape their futures.

Spartegus further highlighted how international conventions routinely call for documentation of traditional knowledge and territories, yet states fail to act on these commitments. This failure, it was asserted, constitutes an ongoing violation of fisher peoples' fundamental rights.

Presentation 3: Fisher Sovereignty, Legal Recognition of Fisher Peoples' Customary Governance over their Resources

Herman Kumara (General Secretary, World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP))
Herman Kumara emphasised that the discussion must be framed around fisher peoples' commons, recognising both men and women as collective custodians of aquatic ecosystems. While men are largely engaged in fishing activities, fisherwomen sustain the socio-economic foundations of communities and play a central role in post-harvest work and ecological care.

He argued that fisher peoples historically govern seas, lagoons, inland waters, and adjacent ecosystems through customary systems, yet these rights are systematically excluded from state and UN-led governance frameworks. The global push for the so-called blue transition, particularly the expansion of industrial aquaculture, is accelerating corporate control over fisheries and undermining community authority over resources.

Drawing from Sri Lanka, he cited the example of proposed fisheries legislation that seeks to centralise control under the state, reflecting a broader pattern where policies prioritise corporate interests over livelihoods. At the same time, he highlighted functioning customary governance systems—such as stake-net fisheries in the Negombo Lagoon—that demonstrate sustainable, community-led resource governance.

Herman stressed that while international instruments like the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT) and SSF Guidelines offer important openings, fisher peoples must document and assert their customary governance systems to defend sovereignty. He concluded by calling for global unity across regions and highlighted the upcoming WFFP General Assembly as a critical moment to consolidate collective strategies for advancing fisher sovereignty.

Responses from Regional and International Participants

Subsequent interventions brought perspectives from Bangladesh, South Africa, and other regions, illustrating how mechanised fishing, industrial trawling, oil and gas exploration, and restrictive regulatory frameworks are criminalising traditional fishing practices. Speakers from Bangladesh highlighted the encroachment of industrial trawlers into nearshore waters, depriving small-scale fishers of livelihoods and calling for collective action at GA8.

From South Africa, participants described how state-imposed cooperative systems and certain regulations conflict directly with indigenous fishing practices. Communities are increasingly criminalised for catching species outside prescribed categories, even when such catches align with ecological realities. These interventions reinforced the argument that imposed terminologies and regulatory models actively dismantle customary governance systems.

A critical question was raised regarding the limited impact of the FAO's Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines, despite a decade since their adoption. Participants questioned why these instruments have failed to translate into material change and called for a reassessment of political strategies.

Strategic Reflections and Movement Direction

In response, speakers emphasised the need for diversified political strategies—what was repeatedly described through the metaphor of "sharpening hooks and nets" for different terrains of struggle. These included:

- Strategic engagement with UN human rights mechanisms, including Special Rapporteurs and the Human Rights Council
- Parallel processes and counter-spaces alongside official summits and conferences
- Systematic documentation of violations as human rights cases
- Strengthening regional and global working groups within WFFP

- Building alliances with other social movements, including peasants, workers, women's movements, and environmental justice groups

It was acknowledged that states are often primary violators of fisher peoples' rights and cannot be relied upon to implement voluntary guidelines. Instead, pressure must be applied simultaneously at local, national, and international levels, supported by political education and mass mobilisation.

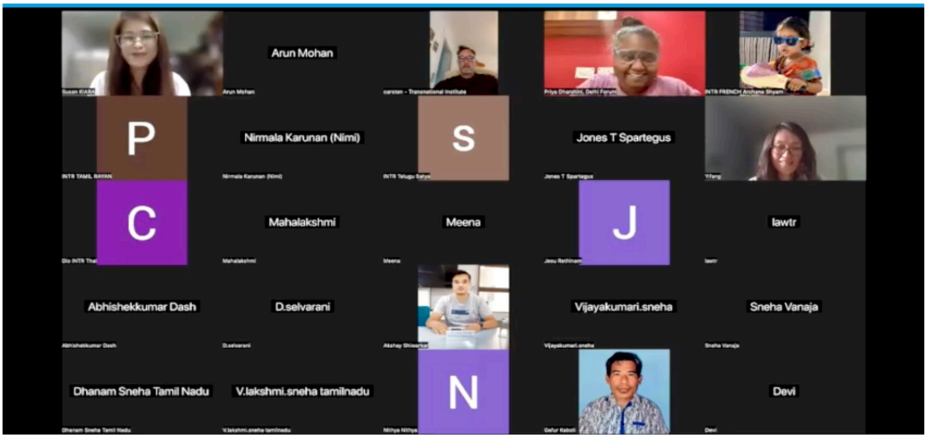
Concluding Reflections and Way Forward

In the concluding intervention, Jesu Rethinam emphasised on reclaiming language, narrative, and imagination. She stressed that fisher peoples must speak in their own terms, reject imposed vocabularies, and foreground lived governance systems rooted in care, reciprocity, and ecological balance. Women's leadership and visibility were highlighted as central to this process, not peripheral.

The importance of documenting customary governance practices across the region was reiterated—not as managerial models, but as living systems of governance that protect ecosystems and sustain communities. She underlined that governance, unlike management, is rooted in equality, autonomy, and collective decision-making.

The Asia–Pacific regional process was recognised as a critical space for building momentum toward GA8, strengthening continental coordination, and contributing to a unified global voice. Participants were encouraged to carry forward the discussions into the General Assembly, where strategies, demands, and collective direction would be sharpened further.

The second day was concluded by Priya Dharshini with an acknowledgement of the depth and political clarity of the discussions, noting that the continuation had added critical context and strategic direction to the webinar series. She expressed appreciation to all speakers, participants, interpreters, and facilitators for sustaining engagement across time zones and regions.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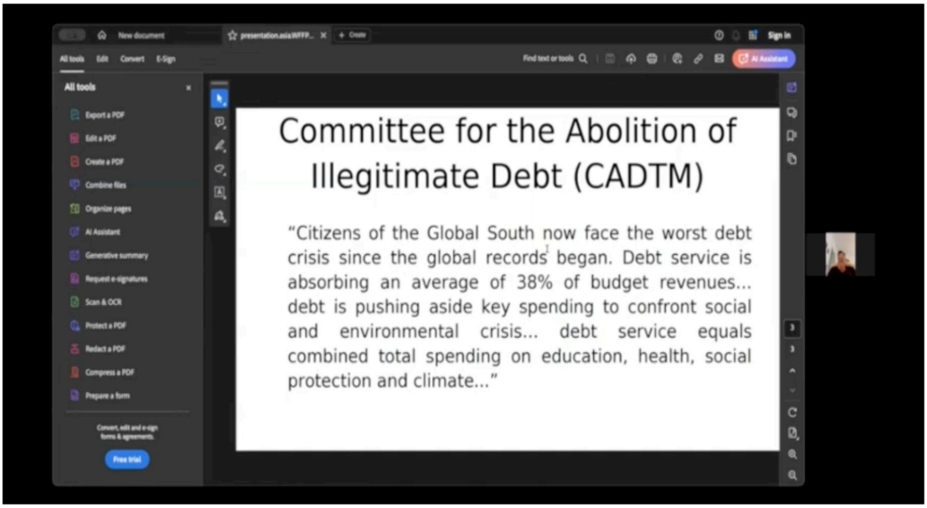
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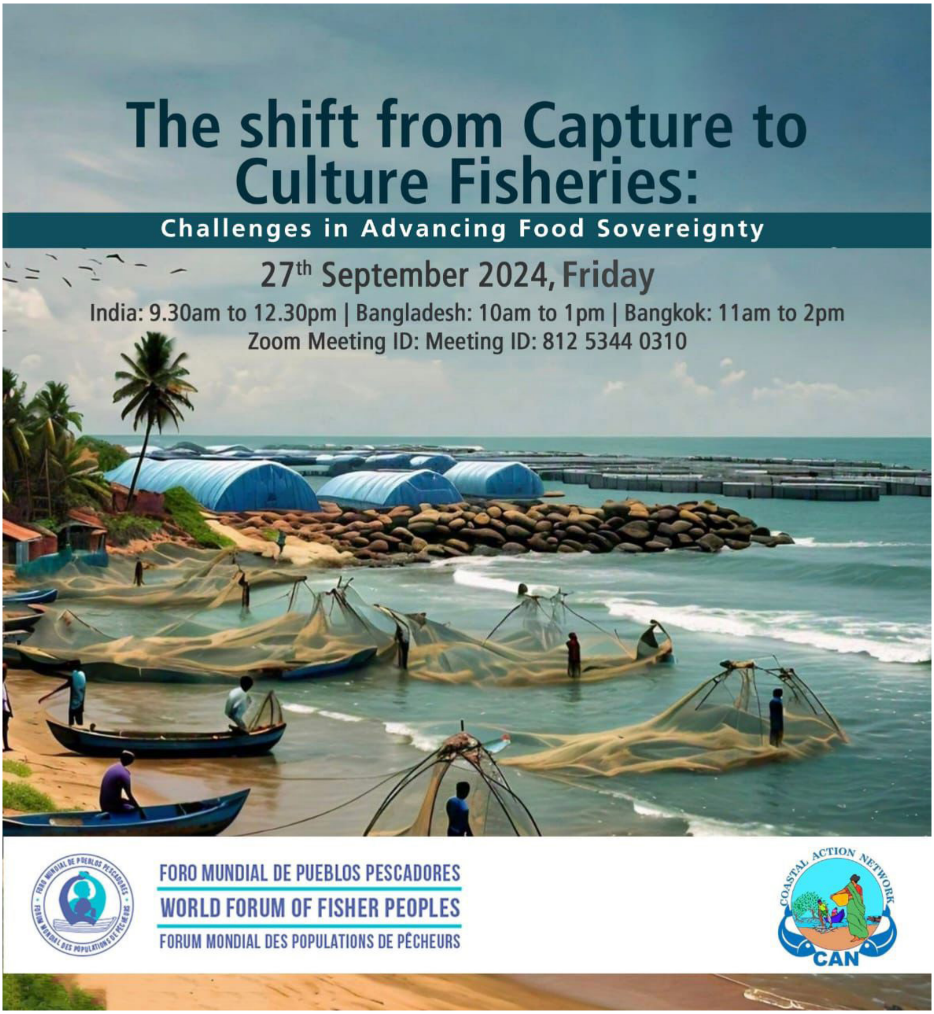
Free trial

Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM)

"Citizens of the Global South now face the worst debt crisis since the global records began. Debt service is absorbing an average of 38% of budget revenues... debt is pushing aside key spending to confront social and environmental crisis... debt service equals combined total spending on education, health, social protection and climate..."



The shift from Capture to Culture Fisheries:

Challenges in Advancing Food Sovereignty

27th September 2024, Friday

India: 9.30am to 12.30pm | Bangladesh: 10am to 1pm | Bangkok: 11am to 2pm
Zoom Meeting ID: Meeting ID: 812 5344 0310

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

COASTAL ACTION NETWORK
CAN

Webinar 2

The Shift from Capture to Culture – Fisheries and Challenges in Advancing Food Sovereignty

Date: 27 September 2024

M. J. Vijayan opened the third day by situating the webinar within the broader preparatory process for the upcoming General Assembly of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) to be held in Brazil. He recalled the historical roots of fisher movements in Asia, particularly the 1990s struggles against industrial aquaculture and coastal enclosure, and emphasised that World Fisheries Day (November 21) itself emerged from fisher-led resistance.

He framed the session as part of a larger political challenge confronting fishing communities today: the systematic shift from capture fisheries to industrial aquaculture under the banner of "blue economy" and "blue transformation." Vijayan underlined that this shift is not merely technical but deeply political, reshaping identities, livelihoods, access to commons, and food systems. He stressed that reclaiming language, history, and customary rights is central to advancing food sovereignty and resisting corporate control of oceans and coasts.

Welcome and Introduction

Jesu Rethinam welcomed participants from across Asia Pacific and other regions, noting that the webinar series is both preparatory and strategic, feeding directly into the agenda of the WFFP General Assembly. She outlined the three core thematic pillars of the Assembly—food sovereignty, climate justice, and ocean grabbing—and explained that Day 3 focuses squarely on food sovereignty in the context of the capture-to-culture shift.

She highlighted how industrial aquaculture, deep-sea mining, coastal privatisation, and export-oriented fisheries are increasingly undermining community control over food systems. Jesu Rethinam emphasised that this session would foreground concrete country experiences and case studies, helping build a shared understanding across regions. She also welcomed the participation of international experts and the UN Special Rapporteur, stressing the importance of linking grassroots realities with global advocacy spaces.

Context Setting: From Capture Fisheries to Industrial Aquaculture

Gandimathi set the analytical foundation for the session by distinguishing between capture fisheries—rooted in natural ecosystems, customary rights, and community governance—and industrial aquaculture, which is capital-intensive, land- and resource-extractive, and corporate-driven.

Drawing from India and South and Southeast Asia more broadly, she argued that aquaculture is often promoted as a solution to overfishing and food insecurity, but in practice it has led to the enclosure of coastal lands, the destruction of mangroves and wetlands, pollution of water bodies, the loss of biodiversity, and the displacement of small-scale fishing communities. She explained how subsidies, policy incentives, and international financial institutions actively promote aquaculture, while restricting capture fisheries and pushing fishers into precarious wage labour.

Gandimathi highlighted the food sovereignty implications of this shift: privatisation of commons, export-oriented production, reduced access to affordable fish for local populations, weakening of local governance systems, and erosion of traditional knowledge. She also pointed to public health impacts, labour rights violations, and ecological degradation associated with industrial aquaculture. She concluded by urging participants to challenge the dominant development narrative and defend indigenous, community-based fishing systems as ecologically resilient and socially just.

Keynote Address: Reclaiming Language, Biodiversity, and Food Sovereignty

Dr.Vandana Shiva (Renowned Indian scholar, author and environmental activist and an advocate for food sovereignty)

In her keynote, Dr. Vandana Shiva placed the fisheries struggle within a broader civilisational and ecological framework. She drew parallels between what has happened to agriculture under the Green Revolution and what is now unfolding in fisheries under the Blue Revolution. Both, she argued, are based on monocultures, external inputs, fossil fuel dependence, and corporate control, leading to violence against ecosystems and communities.

She challenged the terminology of "capture fisheries" and "culture fisheries," arguing that this language itself is colonial and misleading. Traditional fisheries, she said, are not extractive hunting practices but systems of care, knowledge, restraint, and regeneration. In contrast, industrial aquaculture should be named for what it is: factory farming of fish. She described how such systems destroy biodiversity, generate pollution, rely on antibiotics, and undermine nutrition and livelihoods.

Dr. Shiva emphasised that artisanal and traditional fishing communities are custodians of biodiversity and providers of real food security. She urged fisher movements to document and assert the diversity of fish species, food cultures, seasonal practices, and customary rules that sustain ecosystems. Drawing on decades of work in agriculture, she stressed that biodiversity-based systems produce more nutrition, resilience, and livelihoods than monocultures.

She concluded by calling on fisher peoples to reject imposed language, reclaim their identity as regenerators rather than exploiters, and take their demands into global spaces such as biodiversity conventions, climate debates, and human rights forums. She framed the upcoming WFFP General Assembly as a critical moment to articulate a collective vision grounded in peace with the Earth, food sovereignty, and the defence of the commons.

Country Presentations

Mohammad Zahidul Islam (COAST), Bangladesh

He outlined how the rapid shift from capture fisheries to culture fisheries is reshaping food sovereignty and livelihoods in Bangladesh. He began by situating fisheries within the country’s context of high population density and limited land, noting that fishing remains central to rural and coastal livelihoods across Bangladesh’s 17 coastal districts.

He highlighted that over 12 million people are directly or indirectly dependent on fisheries, with marine and inland capture fisheries sustaining around 0.2 million coastal households. Despite this, recent years have seen aquaculture dominate fish production, now accounting for over 57 percent of total output, driven largely by shrimp farming and freshwater aquaculture. Fisheries contribute 2.41 percent to Bangladesh’s GDP and remain a critical source of nutrition, supplying around 60 percent of animal protein intake.

Islam stressed that capture fisheries are ecologically sustainable, low-cost, and vital for food security, particularly for poorer communities. Bangladesh’s rivers, floodplains, and coastal waters covering nearly 3.9 million hectares continue to support traditional fishing practices. However, overfishing, pollution, habitat degradation, climate change, and destructive shrimp fry collection have severely depleted fish stocks. He cited research showing that thousands of fish larvae are destroyed to collect a single kilogram of shrimp post-larvae, particularly in the Sundarbans region.

Turning to aquaculture, he acknowledged its role in boosting production but warned that its industrial and privatised expansion has caused serious ecological and social harm. Shrimp farming in southern districts has intensified groundwater salinity, degraded agricultural land, destroyed mangroves, and marginalized small-scale fishers. Most traditional fishers lack access to credit, training, or mechanized boats, pushing them into deeper insecurity rather than benefiting from aquaculture growth.

Islam emphasized that food sovereignty is under threat as export-oriented aquaculture prioritizes profit over local nutrition and access. He argued that policy frameworks must balance capture and culture fisheries through sustainable, community-centered approaches. Key recommendations included coordinated fishing bans across borders, exemptions for small-scale fishers due to their minimal ecological impact, promotion of fisher cooperatives, and alternative livelihood support during closed seasons.

He concluded by stressing that without recognizing and protecting small-scale fishers, Bangladesh’s fisheries growth will continue to undermine food security, ecological resilience, and social justice.

Praween Julpakdee (Sustainable Development Foundation, Thailand)
Praween Julpakdee presented a case study from Surat Thani Province in southern Thailand, focusing on how large-scale aquaculture has reshaped the livelihoods, resource access, and food security of small-scale fishing communities around Bandon Bay. He began by situating Bandon Bay as one of the most important coastal fishing zones in the region, supporting about 152,675 people across more than 74,600 households, all of whom depend directly on coastal and marine resources for survival.

He explained that the small-scale fishing population in Bandon Bay is diverse, comprising boat owners, gear owners who work as crew, and shoreline foragers who rely on shallow coastal waters for daily subsistence. Although Thai law reserves the first three nautical miles from the shore as a small-scale fishing zone, this same area has been increasingly allocated for aquaculture, particularly for blood clams, oysters, and mussels. This overlapping use of space has become the foundation of a deepening resource conflict.

Over the last decade, aquaculture permits in Bandon Bay have expanded dramatically. What began as about 4,700 hectares has now grown to roughly 8,000 hectares—around 40 percent of the bay's primary fishing grounds. Praween highlighted that these permits effectively convert shared public waters into private commercial enclosures. Once a permit is granted, small-scale fishers are barred from entering those waters, even though their families have depended on them for generations. In addition to legal enclosures, illegal expansion into public areas further restricts community access.

This imbalance, he stressed, reflects a severe lack of resource justice. While fewer than 300 families benefit from aquaculture concessions, more than 74,000 small-scale fishing households are losing their fishing grounds, incomes, and food security. The result has been widespread economic and social disruption. As fishing areas shrink, many fishers are forced to abandon their occupation and migrate to urban and industrial zones as unskilled labourers. At the same time, the shift toward monoculture shellfish farming has reduced biodiversity and replaced the diverse seasonal food supply that traditional fishing once provided. These pressures are felt across every district along Bandon Bay, including areas where aquaculture plots are encroaching dangerously close to mangrove forests, which serve as critical nursery grounds for marine life.

In contrast to this model, Praween described the work of the Bandon Bay Small-Scale Fishing Network, which has spent more than a decade building a community-led "blue economy" rooted in ecological restoration, social participation, and food security. Through crab banks, fish homes, community fishing rules, women-led financial groups, and value-added seafood production, the network has demonstrated that livelihoods, biodiversity, and sustainability can be strengthened together. He concluded by emphasizing that protecting small-scale fisheries is not only about livelihoods, but about safeguarding ecosystems and ensuring equitable access to food and resources for future generations.

Ravadee Prasertcharoensuk (Director, Sustainable Development Foundation)
She highlighted how state policies in Thailand continue to strongly promote aquaculture, despite clear evidence of its harmful impacts on small-scale fishing communities. She noted that small-scale fishers have lost access to traditional fishing territories, leading to growing conflicts between artisanal fishers and commercial operators who invest heavily in aquaculture.
Ravdi stressed that aquaculture investors are not small-scale fishers. Unlike commercial players, artisanal fishers depend on daily incomes and cannot afford to wait seven or eight months for returns from aquaculture production. This economic reality makes aquaculture inaccessible to them and pushes them into deeper insecurity.

She pointed out that the expansion of aquaculture has generated not only environmental damage but also serious socio-economic consequences, including unsafe working conditions and heightened vulnerability for small-scale fishers. Despite these documented negative impacts, the government continues to allocate additional coastal areas for aquaculture, often in regions where conflicts and ecological damage have already occurred.

Ravdi emphasized that current fisheries policies prioritize productivity and income figures while ignoring who actually produces the fish and at what social and ecological cost. She concluded by calling for stronger collective action and networking among fishing communities to demand fairer, people-centred policies that protect small-scale fishers' rights, livelihoods, and access to coastal resources.

Kovvada Varalakshmi (Traditional Fishworkers Union [TFWU], Andhra Pradesh & National Fishworkers Forum [NFF], India)
Lakshmi spoke about the rapid transformation of coastal regions in Andhra Pradesh and its devastating consequences for traditional fishing communities. She explained that large-scale construction of beach roads, tourism infrastructure, industrial projects, and aquaculture farms has led to widespread ecological destruction. Coastal sand beds have been disturbed, marine life has declined sharply, and entire stretches of shoreline have been altered. As a result, fish populations that once sustained local communities have disappeared, causing severe losses for traditional fishworkers who depend on these waters for their livelihoods.

She noted that tourism development, large fishing companies, and commercial aquaculture have together damaged fragile marine ecosystems. Effluents, chemicals, and untreated wastewater released into the sea have polluted coastal waters, killing fish and other aquatic species. The intervention of big companies has ignored both marine biodiversity and the rights of communities that have fished in these waters for generations. The introduction of shrimp aquaculture, driven by profit motives, has further intensified water pollution and disrupted traditional fishing practices.

Lakshmi highlighted that the decline in fish stocks and restrictions on access to fishing grounds have forced many fishworkers to migrate to other states or take up alternative occupations. Many are able to return to their villages only once a year. Salination of groundwater caused by aquaculture has made tap water unusable, forcing families to buy drinking and cooking water despite their low incomes. Employment generated by aquaculture is exploitative: men are hired to harvest shrimp, while women are employed to clean ponds and discharge dirty water back into the sea.

She also described how the growth of aquaculture and mariculture has displaced entire communities. From the stretch between Bhimili and Krishnagiri, five gram panchayats have reportedly been vacated as shrimp farms and tourism projects expanded. Acidic effluents discharged at night have led to serious health problems, including skin, kidney, and lung diseases. Forest lands and coastal commons have been taken over, leaving fishworkers without space to live or fish.

Lakshmi stressed that traditional fishworkers have always protected and respected the sea, and that access to coastal forests and fishing grounds is their right. She criticised the practice of importing non-native fish species for mariculture, which further harms local ecosystems and excludes local fishers. She called for fair compensation, recognition of fishworkers' rights, and development policies that centre traditional communities. She urged the National Fishworkers' Forum and the World Forum of Fisher People to stand with Andhra Pradesh's traditional fishworkers in protecting their livelihoods, health, and coastal commons.

Pradeep Elangovan (SNEHA, India)

Pradeep Elangovan situated the crisis of shrimp aquaculture in India within the larger framework of caste, land, and power. Drawing on the idea of "cultured shrimp" as a form of factory farming, he argued that unlike industrial factories, shrimp farms operate with minimal regulation while producing equally destructive ecological outcomes. What is often missing from this discussion, he emphasised, is caste. In India, shrimp aquaculture is largely controlled by upper-caste landlords, making the enclosure of mangroves, wetlands, and coastal commons an extension of caste-based domination, reinforced first under colonialism and now under post-colonial development policies.

To illustrate this, he presented a case study from Kottaiyamedu, a small fishing village in Mayiladuthurai district of Tamil Nadu. Over the past 25 years, around 300 fisher households—most without land titles—have faced continuous threats from powerful shrimp-farm owners. After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, many families were relocated closer to brackish water bodies. Soon after, surrounding agricultural lands were rapidly converted into shrimp ponds, displacing fishing communities from areas they had long used for fishing, access, and settlement. Although movements such as the Coastal Action Network had resisted shrimp farming since the 1990s, the post-tsunami period accelerated this enclosure.

Pradeep explained that in the Cauvery delta, three groups—fishers, Dalits, and tribals and de-notified communities—are most affected by culture fisheries. These communities are historically and culturally embedded in coastal ecosystems such as mangroves, creeks, and tidal wetlands, yet they face discrimination through caste, class, and gender. A dominant narrative has been constructed that fishers belong only to the sea and Dalits have no customary rights over water bodies, while "farmers"—a category dominated by landed castes—are portrayed as rightful owners of the entire landscape. Under this cover, common lands and waters have been systematically taken over for shrimp aquaculture.

The ecological impacts are severe. Shrimp farms discharge feed, fertilisers, pesticides, and medicines into water bodies, destroying all aquatic life except the farmed shrimp. Soil salinity has increased, agricultural land has degraded, and drinking water sources have been contaminated through excessive groundwater extraction and saline intrusion. During monsoons, when fishers traditionally relied on rivers, access is now blocked by shrimp farms, leaving people without food or income. Women, especially Dalit women who practise hand fishing, are excluded through casteist myths and intimidation.

Pradeep also described how political and legal systems protect shrimp farms. Panchayats dominated by landed castes criminalise fisher resistance, while illegal farms continue to operate. Regulatory loopholes are exploited by dividing large farms into smaller units to avoid environmental safeguards. As a result, he concluded, shrimp aquaculture has become a tool of caste-based dispossession that threatens food sovereignty, coastal ecosystems, and the survival of fishing and Dalit communities across Tamil Nadu.

Susan Gui (KIARA, Indonesia)

Susan situated Indonesia's fisheries crisis within the long history of aquaculture-driven development, tracing its roots to the early 1990s when the government began aggressively promoting shrimp expansion. She recalled how this phase led to widespread destruction of mangroves, including in Lampung and other coastal regions, under a nucleus–plasma model dominated by large foreign corporations. These projects resulted in serious human rights violations and allowed corporate actors to wield power that often surpassed that of the state.

She challenged the dominant narrative that capture fisheries are solely responsible for resource depletion, arguing that declining fish stocks must be understood through multiple, interconnected pressures. These include coastal and ocean grabbing, large-scale infrastructure projects, mining, tourism development, port construction, and the rapid expansion of aquaculture across multiple commodities. She noted that the number of traditional fishers in Indonesia has declined from around 2.6 million to 2.4 million, reflecting the cumulative impact of these pressures.

Susan highlighted findings from spatial planning analyses showing that aquaculture expansion—especially shrimp ponds—is heavily concentrated in western Indonesia, including Sumatra, Java, Bali, and West Nusa Tenggara. This regional focus is driven by export-oriented policies targeting markets in Japan, the United States, and Europe, as well as the proximity of processing facilities, which are largely located in Java. In contrast, eastern regions such as Papua New Guinae have seen limited expansion due to higher production costs.

She critiqued Indonesia's Blue Economy framework for prioritising export-led food production over food sovereignty, positioning Indonesia primarily as a producer for global markets while neglecting local needs, community rights, and ecological integrity. Under this framework, national regulations—including the Omnibus Law introduced during the COVID-19 period—have accelerated ocean grabbing and weakened protections for coastal communities. Aquaculture zones designated as national strategic areas have become especially difficult for communities and civil society groups to challenge or influence.

Susan questioned official government data that shows rising aquaculture productivity, noting that it largely reflects industrial-scale operations rather than small-scale fishers, many of whom lack access to formal fish auction systems. She also raised concerns over government claims of 17 million hectares of potential aquaculture land, warning that such expansion threatens mangroves and coastal ecosystems and relies on weak and contested data.

She further pointed to ongoing and planned mega-projects—such as coastal reclamation for tourism in Manado and Surabaya—that are displacing fishing communities and forcing fishers to abandon capture fisheries altogether. This, she argued, is eroding fisher identity and livelihoods. The government's target to produce 10 million tonnes of shrimp for export, supported by significant public funding and private investment, is likely to benefit large corporations rather than small-scale fishers or fish farmers.

Susan concluded by citing concrete impacts on the ground, including pollution from aquaculture destroying seaweed farms managed by fisherwomen in Jeneponto and the criminalisation of community members in Karimunjawa for opposing aquaculture expansion. She called for solidarity among fishing communities to resist development models driven solely by global demand, stressing the need to protect fisher peoples' rights, territories, and holistic ways of life that have sustained coastal ecosystems across generations.

Thematic Expert Presentations

Siddharth Chakravarty (Research Scholar, Queen Mary University, London)
Siddharth located the present debate within a longer historical trajectory, noting that the shift from capture fisheries to aquaculture is not new but has been unfolding since the mid-20th century, intensifying sharply from the 1990s onward across the Asia-Pacific. He traced how aquaculture has already surpassed capture fisheries in many countries, driven by successive commodity booms—particularly shrimp—and sustained by state support, international finance, and domestic elites.

He unpacked what is **new** in the current phase: diversification beyond shrimp into other carnivorous species, the rise of intensive and super-intensive systems detached from open ecosystems, and a growing reliance on monocultures, genetic manipulation, and proprietary technologies. Aquaculture, he argued, must be understood beyond farms alone—through expanding hatcheries, feed industries, processing hubs, and cold-chain infrastructures that deepen land and water grabs while restructuring labour and markets.

Siddharth also highlighted shifting consumption patterns, pointing to the growth of urban domestic markets alongside exports, facilitated by supermarkets, digital platforms, and processed seafood. He emphasised the role of domestic capital—often caste- and class-linked elites—alongside venture capital and agribusiness interests, particularly soy and feed lobbies, in reshaping aquaculture's political economy. The result, he noted, is a widening impact across coastal, inland, riverine, and reservoir commons, intensifying dispossession and food insecurity for fishing and farming communities alike.

Dr. Paula Satizabal (Scholar, Marine Governance Group, Germany & PAR)
Dr. Satizabal framed aquaculture expansion within the broader ideological architecture of the "blue economy" and "blue transformation," arguing that these initiatives rest on a persistent myth—that population growth and overconsumption necessitate ever-increasing production. This framing, she noted, reduces food security to a technical problem of efficiency and output, obscuring the political and economic structures that generate hunger, inequality, and ecological degradation.

Drawing on global data, she underscored that food scarcity is not caused by insufficient production but by waste, unequal access, and dispossession. Aquaculture's expansion, she argued, does not resolve these contradictions but deepens them by prioritising export markets, financial returns, and cost minimisation—often at the expense of labour rights, ecosystems, and community sovereignty.

She highlighted how aquaculture supply chains intersect with land struggles far beyond the coast, linking marine extraction to monocrop agriculture, soy expansion, debt traps, and displacement of peasants and small producers. Conservation organisations and financial institutions, she added, increasingly play enabling roles, promoting "sustainable" aquaculture while disregarding human rights violations and gendered impacts—particularly on women fish workers.

Dr. Satizabal stressed that food sovereignty is not only about redistribution but about **how** food is produced and whether communities retain control over their territories, cultures, and political futures. She called for stronger solidarities across fisher, farmer, worker, feminist, and indigenous movements to confront the false solutions embedded in blue economy narratives.

Jones Spartegus (Research Scholar, Participatory Action Research Coalition India)

Jones challenged the foundational language used to legitimise aquaculture, rejecting the framing of industrial aquaculture products as "food." He argued that what is being produced is a commodity—standardised, lab-controlled, and detached from ecological life—rather than food rooted in nature, culture, and nutrition. This misnaming, he said, reflects a deeper colonial mindset that treats fisheries as an industry rather than living systems.

Drawing from community experiences, he illustrated how aquaculture expansion criminalises fishers—especially women and lower-caste workers—while undermining local nutrition by diverting affordable fish species into fishmeal for shrimp feed. Fisheries, he noted, have been structurally repositioned under industrial and trade regimes, reinforcing export-driven exploitation and erasing the diversity of ocean-dependent livelihoods.

Jones argued that aquaculture depends fundamentally on capture fisheries, through fishmeal, fish oil, and bycatch, making it impossible to separate the two. He warned against the homogenisation of food systems—where shrimp, chicken, and processed products replace diverse local diets—and called for reclaiming ocean narratives from the perspective of fisher peoples as custodians of biodiversity.

He concluded by asserting that fisher movements must dismantle colonial terminologies and assert alternative frameworks grounded in ecology, culture, and collective rights—commitments he said would be carried forward into the forthcoming General Assembly of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples.

Response to the Presentations

Michael Fakhri (UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food)
Responding to the presentations, Michael Fakhri emphasised that what is at stake for fishing communities is not merely livelihood, but an entire way of life and relationship with water bodies. He noted striking commonalities across regions—despite local differences—pointing to aquaculture as an existential challenge shaped by global finance, state policy, and corporate narratives.

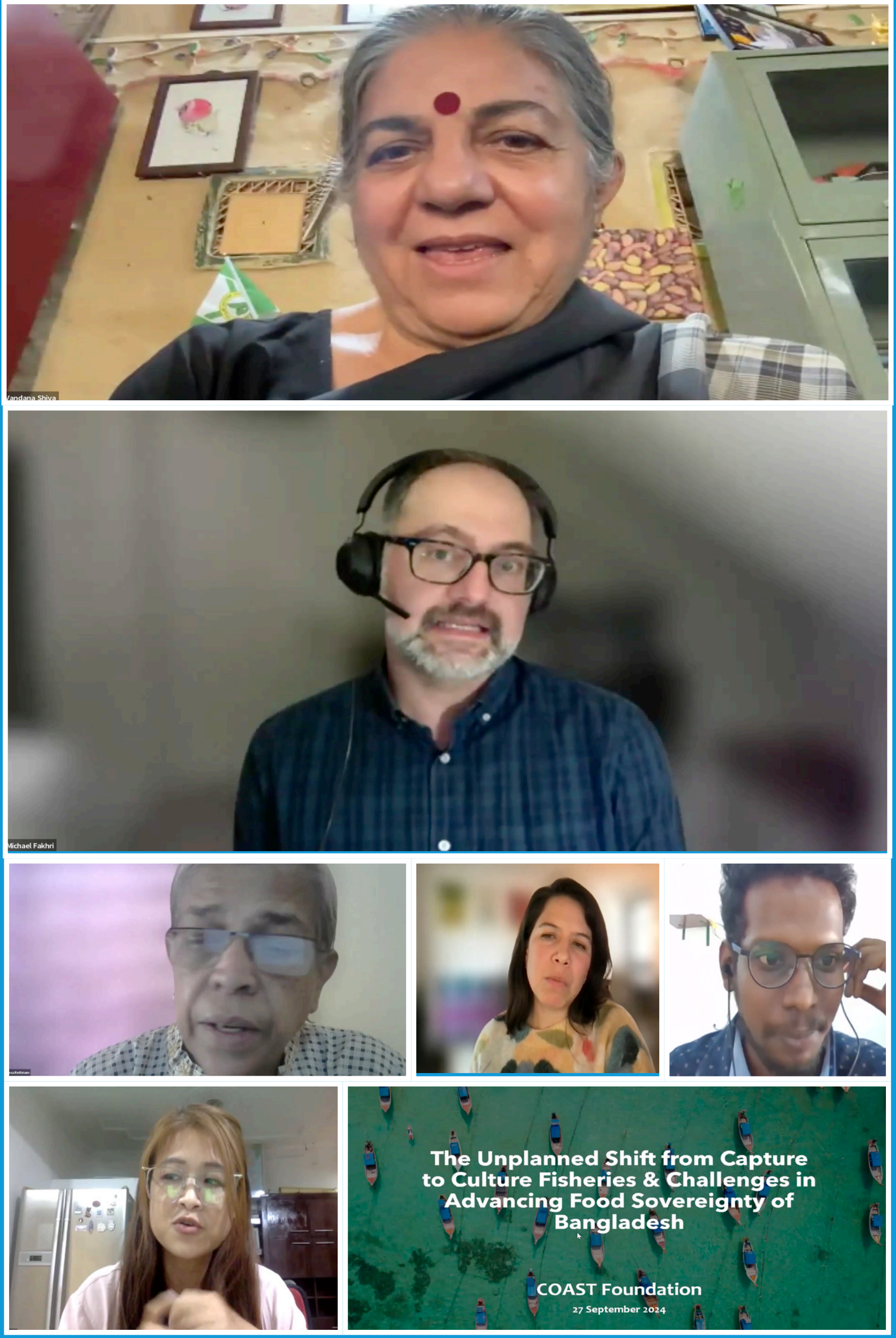
He cautioned against the dominant framing of the blue economy, which treats rising seafood consumption as the problem and increased production as the solution. This, he argued, reduces food to consumption and erases questions of nutrition, tradition, biodiversity, and sovereignty. Echoing earlier speakers, he described aquaculture outputs as edible commodities rather than food systems that sustain communities.

Fakhri stressed the importance of narrative power, identifying two key audiences: governments—who must be shown that aquaculture undermines long-term national interests—and broader publics, who need to understand the links between climate change, biodiversity loss, and food sovereignty. He affirmed that allies exist within international institutions, including within the FAO, and encouraged continued mobilisation, documentation, and articulation of fisher-led perspectives to counter the blue economy hype.

Concluding Reflections and Way Forward

The third day was concluded by Vijayan situating the interventions within a shared political framework, noting that the discussion moved beyond blaming international institutions alone to exposing the deeper capitalist logic driving aquaculture expansion. He emphasised that the strength of the session lay in connecting lived community experiences with structural analysis—across caste, class, gender, ecology, and political economy.

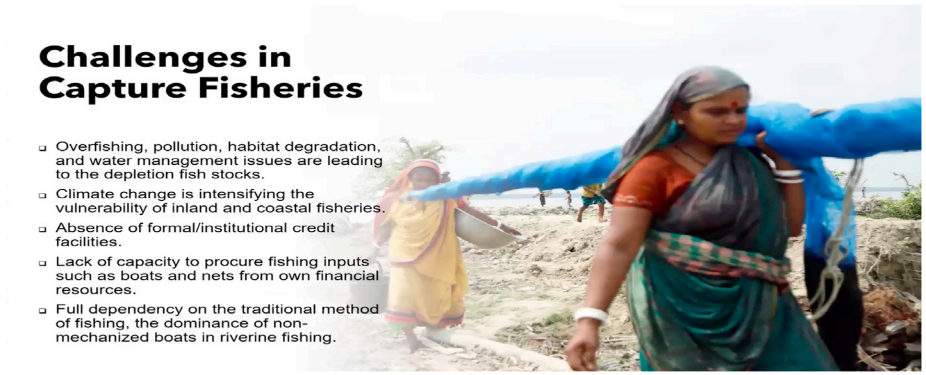
Thanking the speakers and participants, he highlighted the breadth of participation across regions and the visible leadership of women and grassroots groups. Vijayan reaffirmed that the insights generated would inform ongoing collective processes, including global fisher assemblies and future mobilisations, highlighting that resistance to aquaculture expansion must remain rooted in solidarity, knowledge-sharing, and community-led alternatives.


Vandana Shiva
Michael Fakhri

The Unplanned Shift from Capture to Culture Fisheries & Challenges in Advancing Food Sovereignty of Bangladesh

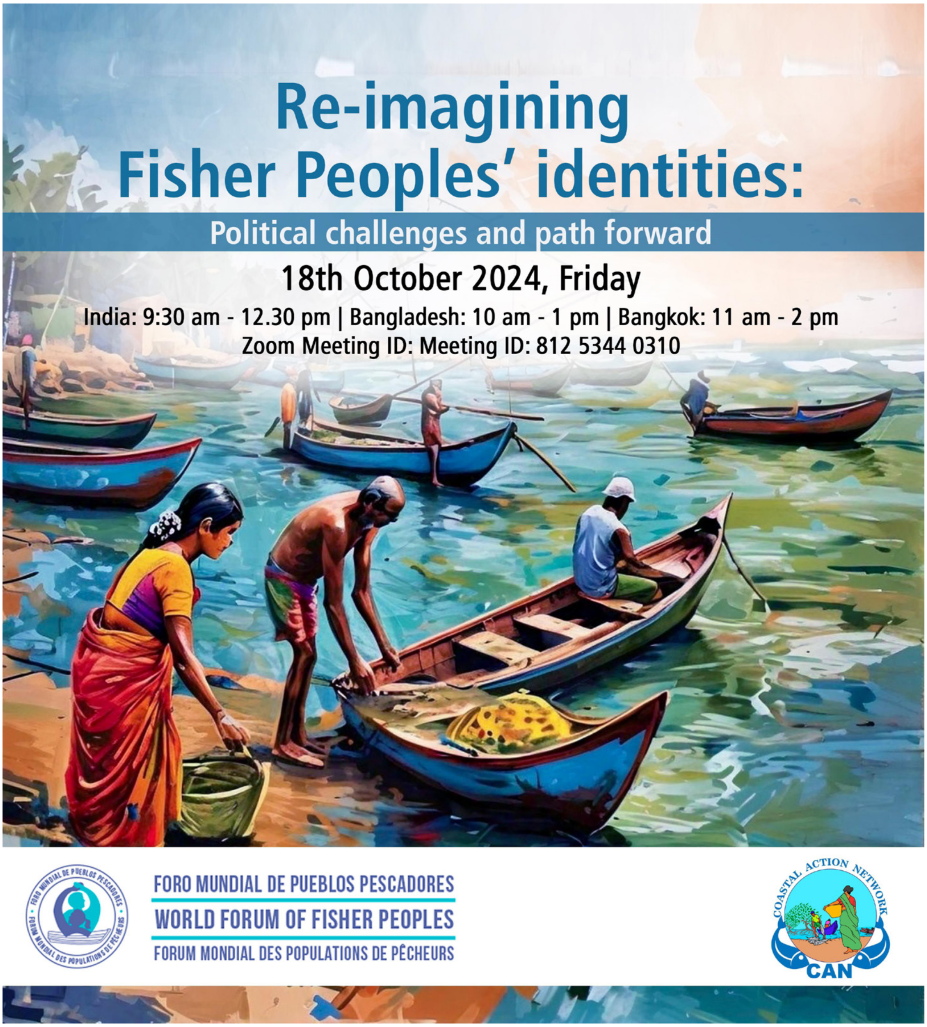
COAST Foundation

27 September 2024



Challenges in Capture Fisheries

- Overfishing, pollution, habitat degradation, and water management issues are leading to the depletion fish stocks.
- Climate change is intensifying the vulnerability of inland and coastal fisheries.
- Absence of formal/institutional credit facilities.
- Lack of capacity to procure fishing inputs such as boats and nets from own financial resources.
- Full dependency on the traditional method of fishing, the dominance of non-mechanized boats in riverine fishing.



Re-imagining Fisher Peoples' identities:

Political challenges and path forward

18th October 2024, Friday

India: 9:30 am - 12.30 pm | Bangladesh: 10 am - 1 pm | Bangkok: 11 am - 2 pm

Zoom Meeting ID: Meeting ID: 812 5344 0310

FORO MUNDIAL DE PUEBLOS PESCADORES

WORLD FORUM OF FISHER PEOPLES

FORUM MONDIAL DES POPULATIONS DE PÊCHEURS

COASTAL ACTION NETWORK

CAN

Webinar 3

Re-imagining Fisher Peoples' Identities: Political Challenges and the Path Forward

Date: 18 October 2024

Introduction and Context Setting

Opening the third webinar in the series, M.J. Vijayan welcomed participants joining from across Asia, the Pacific, Europe, Africa, and the Americas, acknowledging the challenges of multiple time zones and thanking speakers, interpreters, organisers, and participants for their commitment and solidarity.

He noted that the webinar series is being organised by the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) – Asia Pacific Continental Forum, together with the Coastal Action Network, with active coordination and leadership from fisher unions across India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. This collective process, he said, has been central to the strength and political relevance of the series.

Situating the discussion in the run-up to the 8th General Assembly of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples, scheduled to be held in Brazil from 14–21 November, Vijayan highlighted the strong thematic focus of the webinars. The first two sessions addressed critical questions of coastal and inland land rights, and the expansion of intensive industrial aquaculture—collectively described as the factory farming of fish and prawns. He noted that these discussions had generated important momentum for deliberations at the upcoming General Assembly.

The third webinar, he stressed, moves deeper into a foundational political question: who fisher peoples are, and how their identities have been defined, contested, and reshaped over time. Tracing the evolution of terminology—from fisherfolk and fishermen, to fisher peoples and fish workers—Vijayan reflected on how identity has been shaped both by struggles against casteist and derogatory labels and by broader political frameworks, including Marxist analyses that foreground labour and class.

Despite this evolution, he noted that fisher organisations across countries continue to use diverse names, reflecting local histories and struggles—from fishworkers' forums to fisherfolk federations and solidarity organisations. This diversity, he argued, makes the question of identity both complex and central to contemporary political struggles.

Vijayan highlighted the wide participation in the webinar series, particularly the collective viewing of sessions by fishing communities—especially women—across coastal regions of India, Thailand, and elsewhere. Through community screenings supported by local organisations and live interpretation, the discussions have reached far beyond those visible on Zoom. This, he said, demonstrated the depth of engagement and relevance of the conversations being held.

Introducing the theme of the day, Vijayan emphasised that re-imagining fisher peoples' identities is essential at a time when monocultures—both ecological and political—are being imposed through blue economy narratives and industrial development. He cited testimony from the South African Blue Economy Tribunal, where a fisher asserted the right to be recognised simply as a fisher, rather than being reduced to categories such as "small-scale" or "subsistence." This framing, Vijayan said, offered a powerful entry point into the day's discussion.
He concluded by inviting participants to reflect on identity not as a static label, but as a political assertion rooted in lived practice, history, and collective rights, before inviting the General Secretary of WFFP to deliver the opening remarks.

Opening remarks

Herman Kumara (General Secretary, World Forum of Fisher Peoples) congratulated the organisers, speakers, and participants, emphasising the importance of sustained collective engagement as WFFP prepares for its 8th General Assembly in Brazil. He noted that the webinar series has played a critical role in shaping political direction and strengthening unity across regions.

He outlined the key priorities of the forthcoming General Assembly, including the defence of fishing communities' resources and rights, resistance to ocean grabbing, and confronting the impacts of climate change. He also highlighted the close collaboration between fisher movements and Indigenous peoples, noting that a dedicated assembly on Indigenous peoples' issues would be held during the General Assembly.

Kumara highlighted the continued marginalisation of fisher peoples globally, despite their central role in food production and livelihoods. He stressed that women and youth would have dedicated spaces within the Assembly, ensuring their perspectives and leadership inform broader movement strategies.

Drawing from his participation in UN processes, including the UN Decade of Family Farming, he pointed out that fisher peoples are often subsumed under agricultural frameworks, receiving limited recognition and space. This, he argued, makes it crucial to clearly articulate who fisher peoples are and why their identities, rights, and knowledge systems must be recognised on their own terms.

He cautioned against policy shifts that prioritise aquaculture and blue economy agendas while sidelining capture fisheries and fisher peoples' rights. Emphasising the value of initiatives such as the Blue Economy Tribunals, Kumara called for louder and more unified advocacy to ensure fisher peoples' perspectives are not erased.

He concluded by thanking all contributors and expressing confidence that the discussions and solidarities built through the webinar series would strengthen the political outcomes of the General Assembly.

Thematic Expert Presentations

Naseegh Jaffer (Former General Secretary, WFFP | South Africa)
Naseegh Jaffer began by situating himself as part of a fishing community rather than as an individual leader, emphasising that fishing has always been a collective practice. He stressed that small-scale fisheries should never be understood as the activity of a single fisher, but as the work of an entire community, where different roles—from preparing gear and boats to processing and selling fish—are interconnected and essential.

He reflected on the long-standing debates within WFFP over terminology—artisanal, traditional, small-scale, or commercial—and cautioned against becoming overly fixated on definitions based on vessel size, engine power, or technology. What matters, he argued, is not scale, but purpose: fishing undertaken to provide food and nutrition for communities, rooted in collective labour and local knowledge.

Jaffer asserted that fishing is fundamentally a human right, grounded in labour, food provision, nutrition, and culture. This right, he said, is pre-existing and cannot be granted—or taken away—by governments or corporations. It is embedded in historical practice, intergenerational knowledge, and community governance of water bodies.

He warned that this balance is disrupted when fishing is commodified—broken into inputs, costs, and profits—and subjected to external regulation aimed at maximising extraction and revenue. Such interventions, he argued, undermine community stability, ecological balance, and cultural continuity.

Across oceans, rivers, and lakes, Jaffer noted, fisher communities interact with water bodies in ways that sustain both livelihoods and ecosystems. Overextraction driven by profit, rather than community need, threatens this relationship and future food security.

He explained that the term "small-scale" emerged at the global level as a strategic tool to distinguish fisher peoples from industrial fleets in international policy arenas, particularly in negotiations involving trade and fisheries governance. At the national and local level, communities should retain the right to define themselves in ways that reflect their histories and realities.

Jaffer concluded by reiterating that identity is inseparable from rights, purpose, and practice. As long as fishing sustains communities, respects ecosystems, and advances collective well-being, fisher peoples have the right to continue their ways of life on their own terms.

M. Pushparayan (Co-traveller with Fisher Movements in India)

Pushparayan began by situating his intervention within the Indian context, noting that India has nine coastal states and four Union Territories. He argued that successive governments, with the support of international financial institutions and the FAO, have systematically reduced and marginalised traditional marine and inland fishing populations through development policies and programmes.

Drawing from Tamil literature, he explained that landscapes have historically been classified into five ecological zones—mountain, forest, farmland, coast/sea, and arid land. Fishing communities, he stressed, are indigenous to the neithal (coastal and marine) landscape, asserting their historical custodianship of coastal and marine resources. These communities lived in harmony with water bodies, governed themselves collectively, and practised sustainable fishing long before the imposition of external regulation.

Fishing, Pushparayan emphasised, has never been an individual activity but a family- and community-based practice, forming the core of cultural identity. In the Indian context, fisher peoples cannot be reduced to categories of class, caste, gender, or labour status. Fishing is not an occupation, he said—it is an identity.

He rejected externally imposed labels such as "small-scale fishers" or "fish workers," arguing that these terms marginalise and fragment communities. Historically, fisher peoples were neither "small-scale" nor "large-scale"; such classifications emerged only with the onset of modernisation, mechanisation, and industrial fisheries after independence.

Pushparayan traced the transformation of Indian fisheries to post-independence development models, particularly FAO-backed programmes promoting mechanisation and industrial fishing. Initiatives such as the Indo-Norwegian Project and the expansion of deep-sea fishing restructured fisheries into an industry oriented towards global markets. These interventions, he said, disintegrated fishing communities, intensified resource depletion, and displaced indigenous fishers from their customary territories.

He argued that every crisis—natural disasters, environmental degradation, or economic downturns—has been used as an opportunity to further alienate fisher communities through capital-intensive technologies and policy reforms. Under neoliberal reforms and structural adjustment programmes, traditional governance systems were dismantled, while fisher communities were blamed for ecological destruction they did not cause. From the 1990s onward, conservation narratives, marine protected areas, and later the blue economy agenda intensified exclusion. Policies promoting aquaculture, tourism, seabed mining, shipping, and energy extraction rebranded coastal spaces for profit, while traditional fishers were recast as obstacles to development.

Pushparayan highlighted the disproportionate impact on fisherwomen, who were central to post-harvest work, net-making, vending, and local markets. Technological and market transformations erased women's roles, rendering their labour invisible and unrecognised.

He warned against current efforts to create "sea farmers" and fish farming communities as substitutes for indigenous fishers, arguing that these policies further dispossess traditional communities from land, coast, and sea. He concluded by asserting the need to reclaim historical and customary rights, secure political representation from local governance to Parliament, and reassert fisher peoples' identity as indigenous custodians and producers of nutritious food for the world.

Shalmali Guttal (Working Group Member on UNDROP)
Shalmali Guttal expressed appreciation for the opportunity to speak alongside fisher movement leaders and clarified that she would not engage in debates over terminology, emphasising that identities must be defined by movements themselves.

She introduced the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2018. While often inaccurately referred to as a "peasants' rights declaration," she clarified that UNDROP protects a much broader constituency of small-scale food providers, including fishers, fish workers, Indigenous peoples, pastoralists, and rural workers. Guttal explained that UNDROP recognises the special relationship between rural peoples and land, water, and nature, and acknowledges their historical and ongoing contributions to biodiversity, food security, and food sovereignty. It explicitly addresses structural discrimination, exploitation, hazardous working conditions, denial of labour rights, barriers to justice, and the concentration of power within global food value chains.

She highlighted UNDROP's recognition of women's unpaid and non-monetised labour, collective rights, food sovereignty, agroecology, and the rights to natural resources, including coastal and marine ecosystems. Importantly, she noted, the declaration affirms self-identification—governments and experts cannot define who qualifies as a rights-holder.

Speaking from her role in the UNDROP Working Group, Guttal explained that they have adopted an expansive interpretation of rights-holders, explicitly including fishing, hunting, gathering, forestry, and mixed livelihoods. This interpretation has been presented to the Human Rights Council without objection.

She concluded by stressing that UNDROP is a powerful tool but remains ineffective without collective mobilisation. Its implementation, she said, depends on movements asserting their rights, shaping strategies, and holding states accountable. The declaration, she reminded participants, represents the rights of more than half the world's population—and its promise can only be realised through sustained struggle.

Piya Thetyaem (Secretary General of The Federation of Thailand Fisherfolks Association, Thailand)

Piya Thetyaem, Secretary General of the Federation of Thailand Fisherfolks Association, situated the question of small-scale fisheries within the specific political and cultural context of Thailand. He began by noting that while every country defines small-scale or local fishers differently, in Thailand they are understood as micro-scale, independent fishers who rely on self-made gear and their own labour. Despite their limited capital and technology, these fishers make up nearly 80 percent of Thailand's fishing sector. Yet their majority status has not translated into recognition or secure rights. For Piya, the central struggle of Thai small-scale fishers today is to establish a clear and protected identity that guarantees access to aquatic resources, which is fundamental to both survival and dignity.

This identity, he emphasized, is rooted in community, tradition, and intergenerational knowledge. Thai small-scale fishers understand the sea not as an abstract resource but as a living system that must be read, listened to, and respected. Practices such as diving to hear underwater sounds, following lunar cycles, and working with the rhythm of tides reflect a deeply embedded ecological intelligence. These forms of knowledge are not marginal traditions but active systems of environmental governance that have sustained fishing communities for generations.

Piya also stressed that small-scale fishers are not only extractors of resources but active stewards of marine ecosystems. Across Thailand, communities run crab banks where egg-bearing crabs are released back into the sea, and they build fish homes, or sang-gaw, using natural materials to regenerate habitats. These practices respond to widespread ecological degradation and demonstrate that small-scale fishing is inseparable from restoration and care.

At the organisational level, the federation connects communities across provinces into a national network and links fishers to wider society through seafood markets. Consumers, Piya argued, are not external to sustainability but central to it. When communities are strong, networks are active, and consumers recognise the value of ethical fishing, a broad social foundation for food security and sustainability is created.

However, this system is under threat from deeply unequal legal and economic frameworks. Thailand’s fisheries laws allow the capture and sale of juvenile fish, undermining stock recovery. The quota system introduced in 2015 allocates access by daily catch limits rather than by vessel type, bringing disadvantage to small fishers. At the same time, large commercial fleets receive subsidised fuel and state-built ports, while small-scale fishers receive none of these supports. For Piya, this reflects a structural bias that pushes small-scale communities into deeper vulnerability.

In response, the federation asserts that Thailand’s seas are common resources that must be governed for long-term public benefit. Fishing must follow rules that protect ecosystems, ensure food security, and allow resources to be passed to future generations. This struggle, Piya concluded, is not only Thai but global, requiring solidarity across small-scale fishing communities to defend their rights, identities, and responsibilities as custodians of the sea.

Nus Ukru (Baileo Maluku, Indonesia)

Nus Ukru grounded the discussion on fisher identity in the legal, cultural, and ecological realities of coastal and island communities in Indonesia, particularly in the eastern regions of the country. Framing his intervention around the central question of the webinar—*“Who are small-scale fisherfolk?”*—he argued that this cannot be answered solely through policy language, but must be understood through the lived relationship between people, sea, and territory.

He explained that Indonesian law contains multiple definitions of fisherfolk, with at least five legal formulations referring specifically to small-scale fishers. However, he highlighted Law No. 27 of 2016 as especially significant, both because community organisations were involved in its drafting and because its framing aligns closely with indigenous, local, and small-scale fishing communities. Under this law, fisherfolk are defined not by technology or scale but as people—women and men—whose daily lives, livelihoods, and food systems are directly tied to the sea and coast. This definition, he stressed, reflects the reality of fishing communities across Indonesia, regardless of the tools they use or the volume they produce.

Within these communities, Nus Ukru noted, gendered roles exist but are complementary. Men are generally engaged in fishing, while women are primarily involved in processing and selling traditional fish products. These activities are not separate economic sectors but part of an integrated household and community system. Small-scale fisher households are bound together through mutual aid—sharing boats, nets, gear, and labour—and most still operate on a subsistence or near-subsistence basis. This pattern remains especially strong in eastern Indonesia, yet it is largely absent from the government's official frameworks, which tend to be designed around more commercialised or industrial models.

He emphasised that these communities continue to manage coastal and marine resources through local knowledge and customary law. Fishing practices are embedded in social rules, spiritual values, and collective norms that regulate how and when resources can be used. For indigenous coastal communities, this is not an abstract principle but a daily lived reality: fishing is organised in ways that maintain ecological balance while sustaining food and livelihoods. Their political and cultural identity, he argued, is inseparable from this relationship with the sea.

Turning to the issue of guardianship over water areas, Nus Ukru warned that new forms of control are emerging through conservation policy. He identified two major mechanisms that are increasingly reshaping coastal governance in Indonesia.

The first is the expansion of legally designated marine conservation areas. While these are formally established through law and are presented as participatory, he argued that in practice they often function as a form of indirect territorial control. Communities are said to have given consent or participated in planning, but the result is frequently that areas long governed by customary systems are absorbed into state-managed conservation regimes. This effectively transfers authority over community waters to the government under the language of environmental protection.

The second mechanism is the growing use of Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs), which are being promoted to help Indonesia reach its target of conserving 30 percent of its marine waters. Although framed as flexible and inclusive, Nus Ukru cautioned that, if implemented without careful attention to local governance, OECMs can undermine existing community authority and trigger conflicts by sidelining traditional leaders and institutions.

In response to these pressures, Baileo Maluku and allied organisations have developed strategies to defend community control. They work directly with villages inside and around conservation areas to strengthen community zoning plans, customary regulations, and management systems rooted in traditional knowledge. These locally developed plans are then used to push the government to formally recognise community-based governance over marine and coastal territories.

With regard to OECMs, Nus Ukru stressed the need for a fundamentally different approach. Rather than imposing new frameworks from above, conservation must be built through the expansion of community capacity, the strengthening of local regulations, and collective planning that includes the whole community, not just specific user groups. Education, customary institutions, and village-level governance must be at the centre of any conservation effort.

He concluded by affirming that community-based stewardship of the sea is not opposed to conservation, but that conservation must be rooted in the rights, knowledge, and authority of the people who have lived with and cared for these waters for generations.

Mads Barbesgaard (Transnational Institute – TNI)

Mads Barbesgaard shifted the discussion from cultural and political visions of fisher identities to the material and often brutal realities facing many fishing communities today. Building on earlier interventions, including reflections on capitalist social relations entering fishing villages and internal inequalities highlighted by Piya Thetyaem, he stressed that these internal differences must be confronted when defining fisher peoples and developing political strategies for mobilisation.

Barbesgaard argued that fishing communities are not homogeneous. Instead, they are shaped by class divisions intersecting with gender, generation, caste, and race, depending on context. These internal dynamics, he suggested, raise difficult but necessary questions for organising: who is mobilised, on what basis, and whose interests are prioritised.

To illustrate this, he presented a case study from a small coastal fishing village in Myanmar, comprising 265 households. The village has been heavily affected by ocean grabbing, including offshore gas pipelines that have damaged fish stocks and industrial fishing vessels encroaching nearshore waters, destroying nets and boats. However, he emphasised that these impacts are experienced unevenly across the village.

Barbesgaard proposed a set of analytical questions to understand these differences: who owns what, who does what work, who gets what, and how income is used. Applying these questions to the village revealed sharp internal stratification.

Of the 265 households, only 25 own boats, effectively controlling access to fishing. Among them, ownership is unequal. The wealthiest individual in the village, a woman in her late forties who owns ten boats and land, does not fish herself but organises labour. She employs men for fishing at sea and women for pre- and post-harvest work, reflecting a clear gendered division of labour. Half of her boats are leased out under highly exploitative arrangements, requiring borrowers to sell their entire catch to her at just 10 percent of the market price. She also functions as a moneylender, indebting other boat owners and binding them into dependent relationships, while reinvesting profits into land for rubber cultivation in an effort to exit fisheries altogether. Other boat-owning households, such as those owning two or three boats, work alongside their hired labour but remain economically dependent on the wealthiest owner through debt relations. Their surplus is directed towards land acquisition and education for their children, reinforcing aspirations of social mobility beyond fishing. The largest group in the village, however, consists of households that own neither boats nor land and survive solely by selling their labour. Within this labouring class, Barbesgaard highlighted further divisions.

Men fish workers, typically from the age of sixteen, work under seasonal contracts with stable employment but low wages, earning between USD 50–70 per month depending on seniority. Most are indebted to the very boat owners who employ them. Women workers form two distinct groups. Those aged between 16 and 30 who are not pregnant may obtain contracts for pre- and post-harvest work, earning about USD 30 per month—roughly half the men’s wages—and are also frequently indebted. Other women—those older, younger, or pregnant—are excluded from contracts altogether and must seek daily, irregular work, such as sorting shrimp. Their monthly income is drastically lower, between USD 5–10, placing them in extreme precarity.

Through this example, Barbesgaard demonstrated that even so-called small-scale fishing villages contain clear class relations, with capital-owning households profiting from the labour of others, and labouring classes further stratified by gender and generation. These positions, he argued, shape not only material conditions but also people's future expectations and political outlooks.

He further noted that nearly all households in the village rely on migrant labour, often due to debt. Family members migrate to urban areas or abroad—particularly to Thailand—to work in factories or other industries. As a result, households are stretched across rural and urban spaces, challenging the notion of "pure" fisher households and highlighting the need to view livelihoods as diversified and interconnected.

In conclusion, Barbesgaard emphasised that recognising this internal diversity is essential for meaningful political organising. He posed a series of questions to the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP): What is the current social base of its membership? Who is being organised—workers, boat owners, or specific segments within these groups? Who is excluded, either from membership or from demands? Which classes should be mobilised moving forward, and how? And how should fisher movements respond to rural–urban linkages and the need for alliances beyond fisheries?

He concluded with a quote from a French organiser working with small-scale fishers, highlighting the idea of a "double struggle"—defending small-scale fisheries from external threats such as ocean grabbing, while simultaneously transforming the sector internally to secure rights for workers, women, racialised groups, and LGBTQ people. This, Barbesgaard suggested, is central to reimagining fisher peoples in a way that is both politically grounded and socially just.

Response to the Presentations

Jones T. Spartegus (Participatory Action Research Coalition India)

Reclaiming Identity Beyond "Small-Scale"

Jones T. Spartegus began by acknowledging the contributions of community representatives, veteran leaders, and scholars who had reflected on the evolving identity of fisher peoples. He noted that the discussion had expanded the definition of fisher identity by grounding it in lived realities rather than externally imposed categories.

He raised a fundamental concern with the term "small-scale", arguing that it is not a neutral descriptor but a political label that diminishes fisher peoples. Fisher communities, he stressed, are not marginal or minor: oceans cover over 70 percent of the planet and generate the majority of the world's oxygen, yet the people who sustain these ecosystems are framed as "small." Calling a majority community "small," he argued, is inherently political and rooted in power relations.

Jones questioned who has the authority to define fisher peoples as "small" and pointed to the class and power hierarchies embedded in such naming. He described the term as a social stigma that reduces fisher communities to a lesser status, despite their long-standing governance systems, customary laws, and collective knowledge. Drawing on earlier interventions, he recalled how fisher peoples once governed their own territories through well-defined norms and institutions—systems that are now erased or ignored.

He further argued that struggles of fisher peoples are often misrepresented as isolated protests against individual projects—ports, mining, or aquaculture—rather than being recognised as broader struggles for land, water, and territorial rights. This framing, he said, strips these movements of their political and historical depth.

Jones challenged the commodification of fisheries and the language associated with it. Terms such as "fish workers," "traditional," or "harvesting," he argued, reduce complex ways of life to economic activity. "We are not harvesting," he said. "We are catching, landing, and living with the waters." Such terminology, he warned, facilitates dispossession and legitimises policies that prioritise extraction over community rights.

He also drew attention to the failure to implement key international frameworks, including the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (VGSSF), while aquaculture continues to be aggressively promoted as part of the so-called "blue transformation." This, he said, poses an existential threat to fisher peoples.

Concluding, Jones called on fisher movements to reject imposed identities, resist commodifying language, and assert their political and civilisational rights. He urged unity within global platforms such as the World Forum of Fisher Peoples

(WFFP) and the upcoming General Assembly, calling for collective resistance against capitalist, production-oriented frameworks that undermine fisher communities.

Way Forward and Concluding Reflections

Jesu Rethinam (WFFP–Asia Pacific and women's assembly coordinator) placed the discussion firmly within the struggle for land, water, and governance. She emphasised that fishing was never merely an occupation but a way of life rooted in collective ownership and community governance. Over time, she said, these foundations have been eroded by state and corporate interventions.

She highlighted the importance of community-led mapping as a political tool to reclaim control over coastal commons and expose violations of legal guidelines by the state. While acknowledging recent legal successes, she cautioned that victories on paper must be followed by vigilant implementation.

Jesu highlighted the centrality of language in this struggle. She argued that fisher movements must challenge the framing of fishing as an occupation and resist policy documents that reduce fisheries to economic activity. Governments, she said, must be compelled to rewrite policies and budgets to reflect fishing as a way of life and a collective right.

She also called for greater engagement with international institutions, including UN bodies, while simultaneously challenging the very terminologies these institutions promote. Local struggles, she emphasised, must be connected to national and global platforms, particularly in the lead-up to the WFFP General Assembly in Brazil.

Closing Remarks

Vijayan reflected on the richness of the discussions, tracing the webinar's journey from historical understandings of fisher identity to contemporary political challenges. He highlighted the contributions of senior leaders and scholars who linked identity to collective rights, governance, and international legal frameworks.

He identified three historical processes that have systematically reduced fisher identities. First, colonial frameworks that treated fishing communities as outsiders to land-based governance systems. Second, capitalist reductions that confined fisher peoples to an economic identity centred solely on fish as a commodity. Third, the adoption of "small-scale" as a legal and political category, which gradually came to define all aspects of fisher life—social, cultural, and ecological—ultimately limiting the community's way of defining themselves.

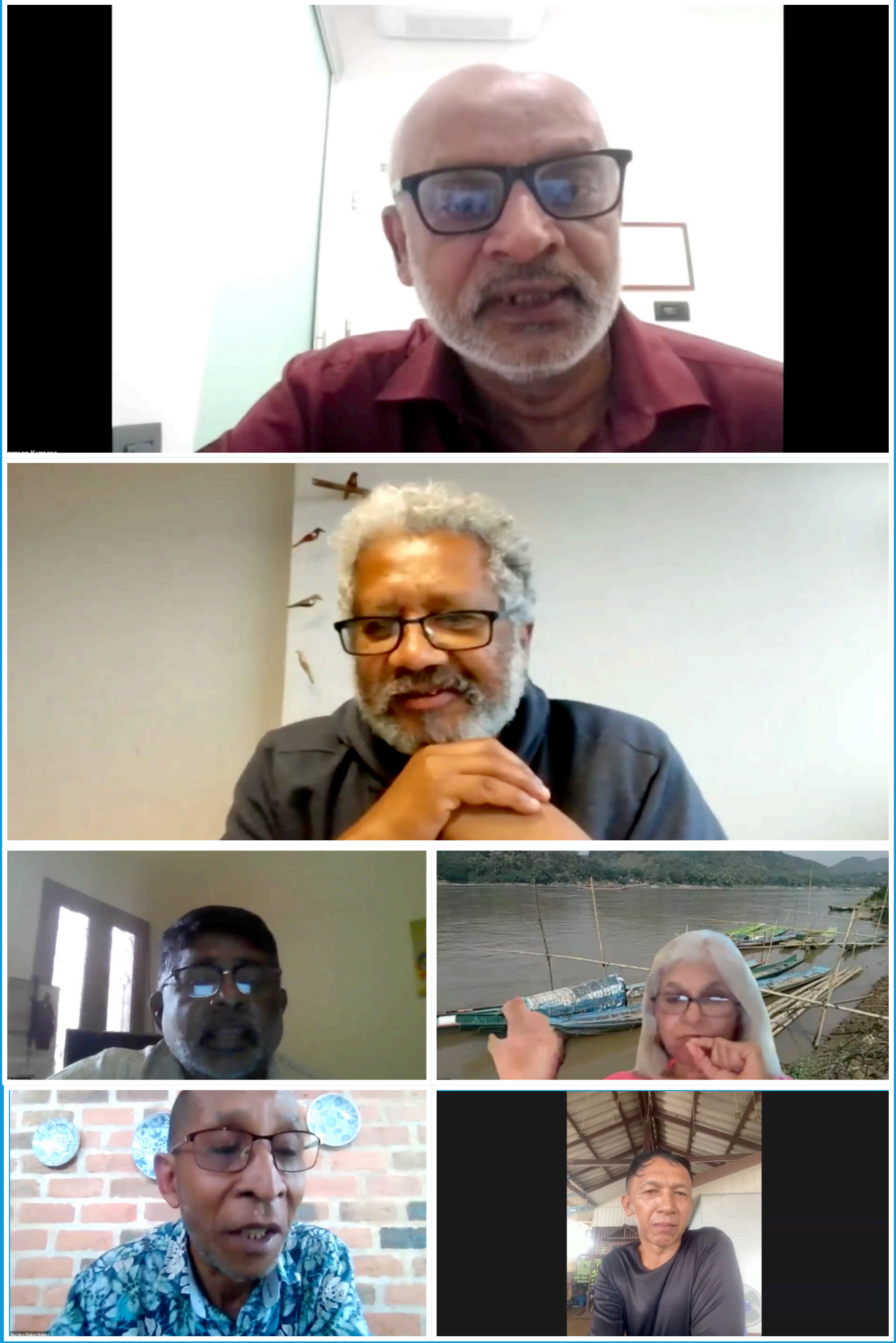
Vijayan stressed the need to shift perspective: to see land from the ocean rather than ocean from the land. He welcomed Jones's intervention for exposing how scale-based terminology diminishes political significance and called for reclaiming fisher identity as a civilisational and rights-based category.

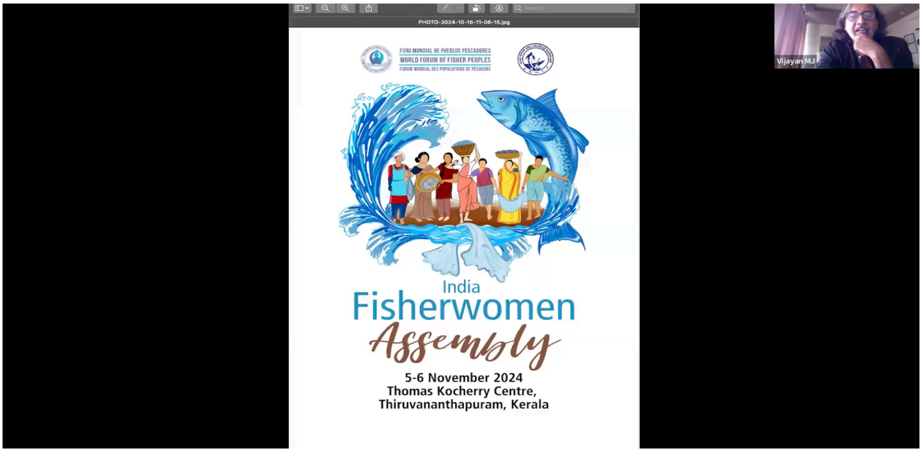
He also acknowledged a significant legal victory in India, where fishing communities successfully challenged state-imposed coastal mapping before the National Green Tribunal. This ruling, he said, affirmed that community-defined rights and knowledge must take precedence over unilateral state decisions.

In closing, Vijayan reiterated that identity is the most fundamental political question facing fisher movements today. Without reclaiming identity, there can be no future for fisheries or fisher peoples. He called for renegotiating identities at both national and international levels and urged the movement to rebuild itself as a militant, politically assertive global force.

He highlighted the growing leadership of women within fisher movements and noted how technology has enabled collective participation across regions—from coastal India to Southeast Asia. These developments, he said, signal a new phase in global fisher mobilisation.

Thanking the speakers, facilitators, interpreters, and participants, Vijayan described the webinar series as an important step toward reimagining fisher identity and strengthening collective resistance ahead of upcoming global assemblies and struggles.


Nus Ukru (Baileo Maluku)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FORO MUNDIAL DE PUEBLOS PESCADORES
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Vijayan MJ

India
Fisherwomen
Assembly

5-6 November 2024
Thomas Kocherry Centre,
Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

This is the report of a three-part global webinar series held as a build-up towards the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) General Assembly, that took place in Brazil from November 14–21, 2024.

A few excerpts:

Traditional fisheries, are not extractive hunting practices but systems of care, knowledge, restraint, and regeneration. In contrast, industrial aquaculture should be named for what it is: factory farming of fish
-Vandana Shiva, Environmental Activist and Author

There needs to be caution against the dominant framing of the blue economy, which treats rising seafood consumption as the problem and increased production as the solution. This, reduces food to consumption and erases questions of nutrition, tradition, biodiversity, and sovereignty.
- Michael Fakhri, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food

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