

Marine Stewardship Council

## A view from the Third World

**Under the sanctuary of ‘sustainable fishing’, the MSC could well end up working against the interests of the poor producers of fish**

**T**he Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), a collaboration between Unilever and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), is a case of one giant riding atop another. The resulting behemoth can either make deep impressions on the path it traverses or stumble and crash for lack of balance.

There is, therefore, considerable worldwide interest to see how these two multinational organizations, which, at first sight, seem strange bedfellows, plan to work out a strategy to “ensure the long-term viability of global fish populations and the health of the marine ecosystems on which they depend.”

Congruent to their objectives, both organizations are concerned primarily with the natural resource and the environment—fish and oceans—without necessarily having any intrinsic, long-term interest in either.

For Unilever, all actions must be weighed against its unfeigned pursuit of profits. The corporation is involved in the MSC because it is convinced that sustainable fishing is good business. For WWF, this is but another specific case of nature conservation taken up in its larger pursuit of mobilizing public appreciation for such issues. It feels it has a winner in the MSC initiative. For both organizations, the success of this initiative will be a major boost to the ‘markets’ to which they cater, that is, consumers and well-wishers in the First World.

In attempting to respond to the MSC initiative, it is necessary to examine several issues:

- How does one view, from a Third World perspective, an initiative

which places all its faith in the magic of the market?

- How should fishworkers’ movements in the Third World, that have been opposing destructive fishing undertaken primarily by fleets fishing for export to the First World, relate to this initiative?
- Will the dynamics of this novel partnership intended to modulate international trade through the use of ecolabels result more in sustainable profits and assured fish consumption (for people and pets) in the First World or will it enhance incomes for fishing communities and ensure adequate protein supplies to needy consumers in the Third World?
- Will this effort be viewed by fish exporting countries in the Third World as creating technical barriers to trade, thus violating free trade rules under the World Trade Organization (WTO)?

In most Third World countries, the market is seen as one of the economic institutions embedded in society. Markets are created for society and not the other way around. One, therefore, shudders to think of the day when the prediction of Elizabeth Dowdeswell that “the market is replacing our democratic institutions as the key determinant in our society” becomes valid worldwide.

### Market no leveller

In democratic institutions, the initial endowments of the participants are the same. Everybody has one vote. Market institutions are not such levellers.

**T**hey function on votes which are expressed only in money terms (effective purchasing power), which, as we all know, is hardly distributed equally. Thus, those who recommend “free markets as the means to efficiency” forget that one of the basic premises of that theory is that economic power is fairly equally distributed among all the participants.

In the Third World, where assets, income and purchasing power are so unequally distributed, this blind faith in the almighty market’s ability to correct all economic and environmental ills is a far cry from the realities which people experience.

Consequently, an initiative which assumes that where the market leads, all else will follow in setting single, generalized standards for an activity undertaken by millions of small producers in diverse circumstances can not be welcomed without cautious circumspection.

The history of unsustainable fishing in Third World tropical waters is closely related to the expansion of the markets in the First World for fish from these waters. Fishing techniques like bottom trawling and purse-seining were imposed in preference to the more seasonal, selective and passive techniques used by artisanal fishworkers. The latter were seen to be ‘less efficient’, since their unit output from

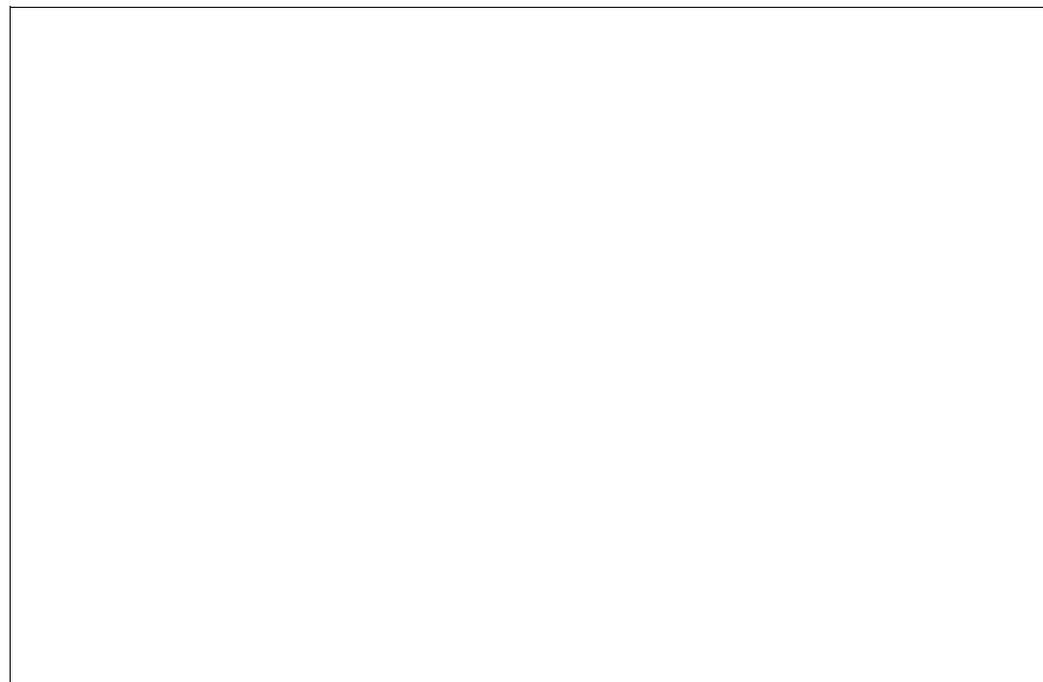
the sea was small. Today, of course, we realize that this was because they were fishing more sustainably and at rates which were in tandem with the natural rates of regeneration of the stocks.

The struggle of fishworkers in Asian countries to ensure a future both for the fish and for themselves, has meant a unilateral opposition to destructive fishing techniques. They have achieved partial successes and, on the face of it, the MSC initiative need not initially be against their interests. In a sense, much of the talk about sustainable fishing pertains to reverting to, and restoring, this mode of fishing.

Where the contradictions will soon arise pertain to the power that those who buy the fish from these fishworkers will be able to exercise in dictating terms of harvesting and levels of prices. The nature of the trade linkages and tie-ups for supply of ‘sustainably harvested’ fish can get to be totally determined from the outside. This could create a complete loss of autonomy for small fishers, with respect to the pattern of harvest and disposal of the produce of their labour.

#### **Price premiums**

Even assuming that their harvest may be covered by MSC ecolabels, the consumer price premiums for this may not translate into higher incomes for dispersed producers. Ecolabelling of marine fish



must be undertaken with the tacit co-operation of the fishworkers or organizations which represent their interests, and not through the lower-level functionaries of the international marketing chain.

**T**he MSC initiative, by virtue of the fact that it is initiated and funded by Unilever, one of the largest fish buyers in the world, will obviously be anathema to such links and concerns. The corporation's influence (invisible control) over the MSC initiative will give it a new channel of access to the producers over whom it has had no control until now.

This possibility to make the crucial connection between the realm of production and the realm of sales can also lead to the wiping out of all small-scale commerce which does not fall in line with the product differentiation process sought to be achieved by Unilever in the name of ecolabels for 'sustainable fishing.' With this achieved, Unilever will retain a quasi-monopoly control over a large segment of the market and can then set the environmental standards it likes and dictate the prices it wants, both at the consumer and the producer end.

Additionally, through the MSC initiative, Unilever will have enormous control over information on fish harvesting processes and effects on ocean environment which it can command and disseminate to its

advantage in a wide variety of ways. This will further sully the minds of First World consumers because they have been led to believe by the MSC initiative that buying Unilever brands is the sure way to save the fish and oceans.

In such a market context dominated by one multinational merchant wielding enormous influence on economic and non-economic factors, prices will be set to achieve a high rate of profit. They can not be treated as revealing the 'true' economic significance of goods or reflect the preferences of 'end consumers.'

The only way for fishworkers' movements to stall this dynamic will be to take the initiative of sustainable harvesting methods on to their own turf, at their own pace and terms. They also need to link with consumer movements in the major consumption countries to foster greater direct trade between organized groups of fishworkers from the Third World and consumer-based institutions in the First World which are not merely concerned with consumption per se but also with reassessing lifestyles as well as their own patterns of consumption.

#### **Governmental involvement**

Pressure must be exerted to ensure governmental involvement in fostering this nexus, on the premise that sustainable harvesting and sustainable consumption are necessary prerequisites for sustainable

trade in which all governments have a high stake. Making the MSC initiative recognize this would be an important criteria for fishworkers' organizations to extend selective support to it.

**O**n the question of the MSC's role in supplying protein for the poor, we are confronted with the classic chicken-and-egg dilemma. Which came first—unsustainable fishing or unsustainable fish consumption? And which do we tackle first? Behind all boom-and-bust fishery histories of the Third World (and the First World too) lie the attraction and power of strong and usually distant consumption centres to which fish flow after they are harvested.

The consumers are not necessarily people. They may be pets or animals. The point, however, is that they have greater purchasing power than needy people closer to the centres of harvesting, for example, a fact rarely highlighted in the boom-and-bust story of the Peruvian anchovy fishery is that children in coastal Peru suffer malnutrition and blindness due to lack of proteins and vitamin A, while the anchovy is fed to pigs and cattle in the us and Europe. Will introducing passive fishing techniques and providing ecolabels to fish-meal made from fish so harvested, address this issue?

As consumers, First World citizens need to be convinced and educated that the answer to the above question is in the negative. If they really wish to play a crucial role in halting natural resource depletion and environmental destruction around the world, it will necessarily have to be through less consumption and a greater emphasis on consumption closer to the point of production.

The easy option of buying products ecolabelled by multinationals, without the participation and sanction of the distant producer, is but a sophisticated technique of product and market differentiation masquerading as sustainability.

Since marine fish form an important component in the basket of easily exportable commodities, Third World governments are unlikely to take to this MSC initiative with open hands. The recent efforts by the us to unilaterally impose

turtle excluding devices (TEDs) on trawls as a prerequisite for import of shrimp from India created a furore which prompted the government and the industry to consider appealing to the Wit's provisions on technical barriers to trade. Though many environmentalists and academics in India—myself included—are against trawling, they saw the US initiative as another case of us environmental imperialism, which, to them, was a greater enemy.

Clearly, efforts to impose environmental standards of the First World using 'non-market' methods, which then provide obvious advantages to the trade and consumers of the First World alone, will be resisted, however strong and sensible the environmental logic of the initiative may be.

A global initiative to achieve sustainable fishing needs to be far more broadbased, with the participatory support of fish producers, the processing industry, governments and the consumers. Such initiatives cannot be "left to the market", nor do they "just happen." They have to be carefully crafted. To the extent that the MSC attempts to make a beginning in this direction, it merits the careful attention of all the fisheries' stakeholders not involved in it.

Given Unilever's economic power and the opinion mobilizing skills of WWF, it would be naive to brush aside this initiative as a non-starter. It is often said with confidence that "where industry and the market lead, governments will likely follow." What is still not sure, however, is whether the people—the millions all over the world who, on sea and land, toil to harvest and process fish—will obey. Herein lies the weakness of the MSC initiative and, ironically, the strength of the millions, whose food and livelihood depend on fish and the oceans, to reject the initiative or shape it to their priorities. ♣

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