



# RALLYING TO ROME

**SPECIAL PEOPLE. COLLECTIVE PROCESSES. A UNIQUE EVENT.**

A personal account of what went into organising the first International Conference of Fish Workers and their Supporters (ICFWS), held in Rome in July 1984

**John  
Kurien**

International  
Collective  
in Support of  
Fishworkers



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Rallying to Rome: Special People. Collective Processes. A Unique Event  
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## John Kurien





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# Foreword

THIS PUBLICATION SERVES AS A TESTAMENT TO THE  
ORIGINS OF GLOBAL SSF CIVIL SOCIETY  
ORGANIZATIONS, ILLUSTRATING HOW COLLABORATIVE  
ACTION CAN DRIVE POLICY CHANGE. IT IS IMPORTANT  
TO ENSURE THAT THE CURRENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS  
OF FISHERIES MOVEMENTS AND SUPPORTERS—GLOBAL,  
REGIONAL, NATIONAL AND LOCAL—ARE AWARE OF AND  
TREASURE THEIR ORIGINS.

NICOLE FRANZ  
FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS  
(FAO/UN)

In 2004, I embarked on my journey as a junior consultant with the Fisheries and Aquaculture Division of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN). Fresh out of college with a thesis in Development Economics, I was tasked with compiling fisheries trade data for a publication on [Responsible Fish Trade and Food Security](#). Although young and inexperienced, I felt the weight of responsibility on my shoulders. However, fortune smiled upon me as I had the privilege of working under the guidance of Prof. John Kurien, the lead consultant for the study. Despite our initial interactions being limited to emails and phone calls, John's unwavering support, respect, empathy, and patience left an indelible mark on me. This encounter not only bolstered my confidence but also ignited in me a passion for small-scale fisheries (SSF).

Our paths continued to intersect over the years, from Banda Aceh in Indonesia to Rome in Italy, followed by various SSF events worldwide. Each interaction reaffirmed John's integrity, his profound understanding of small-scale fisheries, and his pivotal role in catalysing global movements such as the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF).

John's role extended beyond advocacy; he was a driving force behind the development of the [Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication](#) (SSF Guidelines). My deep involvement in this process was a privilege, culminating in the endorsement of the SSF Guidelines by the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) in 2014, marking a significant milestone in our collective efforts.

While pivotal, John's contributions were not solitary. This publication serves as a testament to the origins of global SSF civil society organizations, illustrating how collaborative action can drive policy change. It underscores the importance of a shared vision; of cooperation, initiative, preparation, and effective leadership in generating meaningful change. It pays homage to those who believed in a common goal, making the inaugural International Conference of Fish Workers and their Supporters (ICFWS) a reality in 1984 in Rome.

In a world characterized by rapid change and digitalization, reflecting on the progress of global SSF movements over the past four decades is enlightening:

- Since 2003, SSF have been a standing item on the [FAO COFI](#) agenda, with inclusion since 2016 in the agenda of the FAO Sub-Committee on Fish Trade.
- In August 2011, the Civil Society Organizations (CSO) Platform for SSF was established, fostering collaboration among key stakeholders.
- The SSF Guidelines, endorsed in 2014, were shaped by extensive consultations organized by the CSO Platform, underscoring the importance of participatory decision-making.
- The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, with [Target 14B](#) advocating for small-scale artisanal fishers' access to marine resources and markets, further propelled our cause.
- Continuous advocacy efforts have resulted in the integration of SSF Guidelines into various global guidelines and human rights instruments.
- The designation of 2022 as the [International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture](#) (IYAFA) reinforced the global recognition of SSF.

Despite these global achievements, tangible action at the grassroots level remains imperative to improve the lives of the nearly 500 million people reliant on SSF for their livelihood.

John's advocacy of 'Think Global, Act Local' underscores the importance of grassroots initiatives in driving change. This thinking was also reflected in a 2014 FAO [workshop](#) to inform the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. Chairing this workshop, John said: "A balanced and equitable partnership approach and cross-sectoral collaboration will be fundamental for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. There are clearly different roles for different partners and the implementation of the SSF Guidelines will need to follow a dual strategy of top-down and bottom-up." The workshop also reached the following conclusions:

- Governments have a key responsibility to make implementation happen at the national and local level, and to incorporate the SSF Guidelines (principles) in relevant policies and strategies, not only for fisheries but for overall socio-economic development. Political engagement at high level together with investments in capacity and participatory decision-making processes will be required to realize the new vision for SSF.
- Fishers and fish workers, through their organizations, are the main drivers of change and play a major role in the bottom-up processes. The SSF Guidelines need to empower collective action to ensure that SSF are mainstreamed into relevant policies, strategies, and actions at the local, national and regional level, and to ensure the implementation of these policies, strategies and actions.
- Other players, in particular academia and researchers, but also regional organizations, NGOs and others, should be at the interface of this dual



strategy, with a function to connect, to supplement, to document and to strengthen the above-mentioned efforts.

This approach emphasizes the need for and benefit of collaboration, as well as the different roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder group in ensuring sustainable SSF.

The IYAFa celebrations in 2022 laid the foundation for a new regular global convening space for SSF actors, social movements, and their supporters from NGOs, academia, inter-governmental organizations and governments.

The first [Small-Scale Fisheries Summit](#) was held in Rome, just prior to COFI's 35th session. It brought together over 140 people—primarily SSF organizations and social movements, and their supporters, from over 40 countries.

Government representatives who attended the last day of this SSF Summit brought it into the official COFI plenary discussions as well as the deliberations of COFI35. They “emphasized the unique opportunity to gather commitments and recommendations at a summit on small-scale fisheries, which is encouraged to be held every two years prior to COFI, subject to resourcing, to sustain and inform continued support to the sub-sector.”

The second Small-Scale Fisheries Summit will be held on July 5-7, 2024, exactly 40 years after ICFWS which was held in Rome on July 4-8, 1984.

It is important to ensure that the current and future generations of fisheries movements and supporters—global, regional, national and local—are aware of and treasure their origins.

This testimony on the process that made possible the first global meeting of SSF actors and supporters will, hopefully, inspire leaders, movements, organizations, youth, and supporters today and in the future to work together constructively for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries.

**Nicole Franz**

Equitable Livelihoods Team Leader

Fisheries and Aquaculture Division

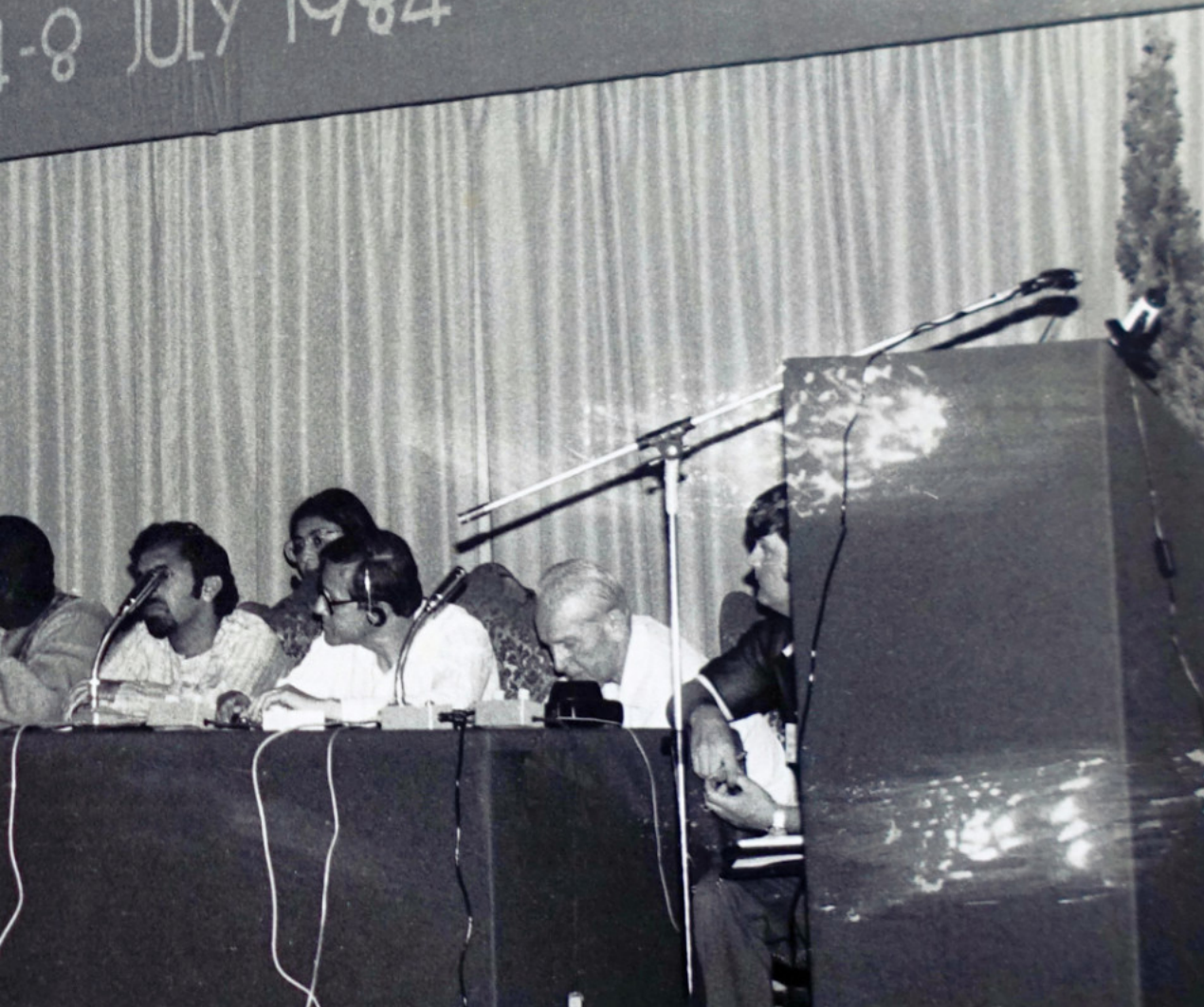
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO/UN)

January 30, 2024





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S  
NAL CONFERENCE OF FISHWORKERS AND THEIR  
-8 JULY 1984



# Preface





It was a tumultuous time, the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Competition over fishery resources, particularly through large-scale trawl fishing, resulted in conflicts at sea. Coastal fishing communities became restless, expressing their discontent through actions ranging from Luddite protests to adversarial collective actions against the state.

The year 2024 marks the fortieth anniversary of the first International Conference of Fish Workers and Supporters (ICFWS), held in Rome on July 4-8, 1984. Reflecting on this event reveals its pivotal role in shaping national, regional and international movements of fishworkers that followed.

The story begins with a letter I received in July 1983.

It was a tumultuous time, the late 1970s and the early 1980s. The Vietnam War had ended, the Cold War was intensifying, and global capitalism was undergoing significant changes. The repercussions of adopting Western-style industrial development in the primary and secondary sectors were evident in the socio-economic shifts and marginalization of working populations in what is now termed the Global South. Concurrently, the feminist movement gained momentum; various social movements were emerging.

In the marine fisheries sector, the widespread adoption of state-promoted, large-scale industrial fishing vessels led to conflicts with small-scale artisanal fishing communities worldwide. Competition over fishery resources, particularly through large-scale trawl fishing, resulted in conflicts at sea. Coastal fishing communities became restless, expressing their discontent through actions ranging from Luddite protests to adversarial collective actions against

The participants,  
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and hope.

the state. Their demands encompassed exclusive, trawler-free fishing zones, marine ecosystem protection, enhanced welfare support to address marginalization, and the right to free association. This was the socio-political backdrop of the first international gathering of fishworkers and their supporters.

Many, particularly the younger members within our circle of fisheries friends, were intrigued by the logistical challenges of organizing such a large-scale event within six months in 1984, a time devoid of today's easily accessible and affordable communication tools. International phone calls incurred high costs; the internet, email and smartphones had yet to make their debut.

During that period, telex emerged as the swiftest and relatively more economical means of communication, while airmail letters took up to a week to traverse the globe. With personal computers only beginning to enter the market, mass communication relied on cyclostyling, typewriting or traditional printing in a press. Fax machines were considered a luxury; photocopying was in its nascent stages.

Despite these challenges, it was in that era of 'snail mail' that ICFWS was organized to become the first global gathering of fishworkers and their supporters, bringing together about 100 participants from 34 countries.

The participants, many on their first international trip, embraced the journey with faith, goodwill and hope. The belief in the value of coming together to discuss common problems, identify causes, and plan remedies justified the trek to Rome. The formula was simple: no grand expectations, just the conviction that collective efforts will be worthwhile.

My reflections on this historic event comprise a personal account. A lot is from my memory, but several persons who read drafts provided details and corrections too. I must acknowledge that this account would not exist without the speedy communications and modern facilities we have today. Reconnecting with individuals mentioned in the story through email and WhatsApp facilitated this retrospective that was written over a few months in 2023.

The narration centres on a multitude of exceptional individuals, collective processes, and the preparatory events that were imbued with commitment, mutual trust, and friendship. Culminating on July 3, 1984, the day before the conference commenced, this chronicle encapsulates the essence of the preparations for this historic event. The hand-written report detailing what our fisheries friends affectionately term as [The Rome Conference](#) effectively chronicles the intricacies of the processes and the outcomes of this memorable event.

Enriching my narrative with additional content has been rewarding. The infusion of photos from the conference, graciously shared by friends who were in attendance, serves to amplify my story. These visual elements provide a vivid backdrop, allowing readers to immerse themselves more deeply into the ambience of the event. Furthermore, the inclusion of snapshots capturing the post-conference moments of the delegates meeting with the Pope, adds a poignant layer to the account.

Recent reflections shared by participants serve as a contemporary bridge to the past, creating a dynamic narration that resonates across time. It gains a multifaceted dimension by incorporating these insights, weaving together the historical significance of the Rome Conference with the enduring impressions it left on those who participated.

This account concludes with another letter that I wrote in 1985. It emerged as a pivotal element, serving as the catalyst for the formation of the International

It emerged as a pivotal element, serving as the catalyst for the formation of the **International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF)**.

Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF). This unintended yet profound outcome of the conference adds a layer of serendipity, highlighting the unpredictable and transformative nature of historical events.

...we stand on the sturdy shoulders of these pioneers.

In a gesture of reverence, the narrative is dedicated to luminaries from the Rome Conference of 1984 who have since passed away. Their names appear at the end of this document. It is a whispered homage to these trailblazers, shaping the course of fishworker movements and inspiring ongoing struggles and triumphs globally.

In the realm of fishworker movements today, the narration emphasizes that we stand on the sturdy shoulders of these pioneers. Their sacrifices and wisdom form the foundation upon which present-day efforts are built. This document is a living tribute, acknowledging the enduring impact of those who paddled to create the waves of change in 1984. A reminder of the voyage they started, which continues to resonate in the chants of fishworkers worldwide. It is a tribute to our collective resilience.

**John Kurien**

Kozhikode, India,  
February 15, 2024

# The Letter<sup>1.</sup>

So, it all started with this  
hand-written letter...



**Hong Kong, July 20, 1983.** That was when the letter arrived.

My exciting days in Hong Kong, setting up a documentation and research centre to support the work of civil society initiatives in Asia, were ending soon. I was due to go back to Trivandrum, India, and rejoin my researcher position in the applied economics institute called the Centre for Development Studies (CDS).

My Hong Kong stint had been rewarding from both the perspectives of research and activism. Looking around the Southeast Asian region, one saw a mosaic of authoritarian regimes. Park in South Korea; Marcos in the Philippines; and Suharto in Indonesia. The military junta controlled Myanmar. Communist

regimes were in power in China, Laos and Vietnam. Civil society activists were being hounded. Trade unions were crushed. The press was controlled. There was a crying need for a civilized democratic space, for freedom of expression and protection of basic human rights.

...the primary objection, surprisingly, was to the word *Group* in the name. The Registrar of Societies informed us that words like group, gang and cell were not acceptable in the civilized lexicon of registered organizations.

When we approached the government agency in Hong Kong to register a new entity with the name Documentation for Action Groups in Asia, the primary objection, surprisingly, was to the word *Group* in the name. The Registrar of Societies informed us that words like group,

gang and cell were not acceptable in the civilized lexicon of registered organizations. This was perhaps a throwback to the colonial days! He suggested we change the name.

The initiative we wanted to register in Hong Kong was originally located in Japan and called by the same mouthful of a name, resulting in DAGA, the acronym by which it became widely known. DAGA had been functioning in Tokyo for a few years. But the cost of hosting it there was rapidly becoming prohibitive. Personnel to take on executive and administrative responsibilities were getting

Hong Kong was the first choice, as the only 'free' venue where any form of dissenting views on happenings in Asia could be expressed.

hard to come by. This was what spurred the decision to relocate it and start anew.

Hong Kong was the first choice, as the only 'free' venue where any form of dissenting views on happenings in Asia could be expressed. So, when the authorities refused to accept 'Group', it did raise some questions about the advantage of being under British rule. The impasse ended

when we submitted another memorandum under the name DAGA Ltd. This was accepted and we got the registration to function in Hong Kong.

Later, at a gathering of friends, I was told by a young Filipino, that in one of the languages of the Philippines, DAGA meant rat! Another senior associate, who was familiar with DAGA's history, warily remarked, "Well, looking around at the political situation, a more appropriate expansion for DAGA would be Documentation for Action against Governments in Asia!"

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Let me get back to the letter and its context. It was from **Rolf Willmann**, a close friend working in the Rome office of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations.

**Rolf:** My association with him went back to September 1979, when I first met Rolf in the Indian state of Kerala's capital Trivandrum, now called Thiruvananthapuram. He had just joined FAO and was posted to their office in Madras, now called Chennai, under a major project called the FAO/ UNDP Small-Scale Fisheries in South Asia. It was then functioning under the umbrella of the FAO Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP). Rolf came to Trivandrum with one of the senior staff of the FAO Investment Centre, **Dr. Chan Lin Yap**, for a discussion with the Government of Kerala.

Rolf and Chan Lin Yap met me for a courtesy call. We met in the afternoon at the office of Programme for Community Organization (PCO), an NGO that a few colleagues and I had started in 1976; it also ran a small initiative called the Fisheries Research Cell (FRC). I do not remember the details of our discussion, but I do recall that FRC was at that time planning a workshop. It was to facilitate feedback on a study about the issue of credit and indebtedness of the fishers and fishing communities of Kerala. The study had been undertaken by Professor **Jean Philippe Platteau** of Namur University in Belgium, along with his colleagues in the Loyola College, Trivandrum. After I mentioned this workshop, Rolf asked if he could attend it.

When the workshop dates were finalized, I sent a letter directly addressed to Rolf Willmann. I did not realize that I should have sent it to the project director **Lars**



Some Study Team Members at PCO in 1980. Rolf second from right

Rolf Willman flagged the need to comprehend the economics of fishing and its contribution to the overall economy.

**Engvall**, as per protocol, requesting him to depute someone to attend the workshop. Engvall, however, knew me well and he gladly gave Rolf permission to attend. The workshop was held in October 1979. The three-day event was organized in PCO's small, long and narrow hall, under a tiled roof. Jean Philippe and his

colleagues delivered a summary of their findings, followed by a discussion with local community activists and fisher leaders.

This was Rolf's first experience of an Indian-style 'people-oriented' workshop. The last day saw a free-flowing discussion about the kind of research studies needed to get a better understanding of the traditional small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector of Kerala. One very useful investigation, Rolf suggested, could be a study of the costs and earnings of fishing units used in the state. He flagged the need to comprehend the economics of fishing and its contribution to the overall economy.

I had been closely associated with the study Jean Phillippe and colleagues had conducted from 1976 to 1979. As a result, we had developed a professional and personal rapport. I raised Rolf's proposal with Jean Philippe. He endorsed it. The

three of us had a detailed discussion. I agreed that FRC needed to undertake such a study because it would be useful for the emerging trade unions of small-scale fishers, that it would help make their case before the government for greater financial and budgetary support. A study supported by UN agencies would also carry greater clout with the government.

Suffice to say that this was a very interesting and unique collaboration between an NGO and FAO.<sup>1</sup> The study was carried out between April 1980 and March 1981. A report based on it was published in July 1982 by BOBP and FAO/UNDP; it was titled 'Economics of Artisanal and Mechanized Fisheries of Kerala State'. It was the first costs-and-earning study of artisanal fishing units that was based on real-time data, collected for one whole year from centres across the state.

At that time, it was impossible to know how our future paths would intersect.

This study was also the foundation of my friendship and association with Rolf. He was heartily accepted by all my colleagues, both professionals and activists, who were organizing Kerala's fishing communities. Here, I must mention three names: **Nalini Nayak, A.J. Vijayan** and the Belgian priest-cum-boat builder **Pierre Gillet**.

As a result of this study, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) contacted me, enquiring if I would be willing to help organize a similar study in the Hambantota district of Sri Lanka. I agreed, thereafter undertaking a few trips to Sri Lanka in 1981 and 1982. This is when I first met **Johan H Williams** who was in-charge of this initiative at Norad. We became close friends. At that time, it was impossible to know how our future paths would intersect.<sup>2</sup>

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Back now to the details of the letter.

So, it all started with this hand-written letter from Rolf in Rome that I received in Hong Kong on July 20, 1983. He had mentioned FAO's plans to hold a World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development (WFC) in 1984. I had become aware of this plan in May 1983 while attending an expert consultation in Rome on strategies for fisheries development, with reference to SSF. It was one of several expert consultations in the technical phase of WFC.

- 
1. UN agencies, at that time, generally collaborated only with national government agencies. Lars Engvall took a bold step, broke that tradition, and entered a contract with FRC based on a Letter of Understanding (LoU) that then became a precedent for other project managers of FAO to commission NGOs for services.
  2. Johan Williams warmly supported the formation of ICSF after the Rome Conference in 1986. He also chaired the COFI session in 2014 that endorsed the SSF Guidelines.



Overseeing the organization of this consultation was **Antonio Carlos Diegues**,  
FAO Senior Fishery Planning Officer. Because I resided in Hong Kong at that time,  
I was listed as a participant from the UK, which was  
not to my liking.

Out of the blue, he proposed  
my name for the rapporteur  
and it was seconded by the  
participants from Cuba and  
Senegal.

On day one of an expert consultation, the first point on  
the agenda was electing the workshop's chair and  
rapporteur. The name of Thailand's fisheries secretary  
was proposed for the chair. It was seconded and  
accepted. Applause!

Antonio had jokingly mentioned to me that morning, in  
his characteristic Brazilian style, that I may be given  
some hard work at the workshop. I welcomed it, but was totally unaware that  
this entailed official formalities. Out of the blue, he proposed my name for the  
rapporteur and it was seconded by the participants from Cuba and Senegal.  
Surprise! Applause! Hard work ahead!

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Rolf wondered in the letter if I would be able to ensure some participation of  
fishers and/or their NGOs representing them from various countries to attend  
WFC. He was concerned about how grassroots concerns of SSF would be  
addressed. The UN system permitted only country delegations and observers  
from international organizations and international NGOs. He hinted at the  
possibility of a gathering of fishers and activists in Rome at that time.

The day I received the letter, I  
was planning to meet with **Fr.  
Desmond D'Souza**, who had  
come to Hong Kong for a  
meeting.<sup>3</sup> He was a friend  
from Goa, who was at that  
time heading an Asian church  
mission on human  
development in Manila. I had  
spent time with him in Manila,  
too. Desmond was an ardent  
supporter of the Goan  
rampon fishermen's  
movement that was headed

The UN system permitted only  
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NGOs. He hinted at the  
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3. I met Desmond for the first time in 1978 while on a tour of India, with Nalini Nayak, to understand how different  
activists worked and kept up their spirits and actions during what was called the "Emergency Period" in India.

by a school teacher named **Matanhy Saldanha**.<sup>4</sup> Being the Provincial of the Redemptorist House in Goa, he encouraged his fellow priests to take active part in supporting fishers. A.J. Vijayan and I had gone to Goa in 1979, as part of an FRC initiative, to conduct a study of the movement and, if possible, provide some guidance on the way forward. Desmond had actively encouraged us to engage in this analysis.

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I vividly remember that evening at Hong Kong.

I was waiting for Desmond on the skybridge at my Telford Garden apartment complex, built above the Kowloon Bay deport of the Mass Transit Railway (MTR). With me was my six-month-old son Amit. Even at that young age, he was fascinated at the movement of cars, like most boys. But that day, I ignored his vehicular preoccupations, since I was more excited about sharing the contents of Rolf's letter with Desmond.

We started making a mental listing of all the folks in the Asian region who needed to be contacted for reactions. That I believe was the conversation where I first heard, from Desmond, the idea of a **'counter conference'**.

Desmond thought it was a brilliant idea which needed work. We were already talking about possible ways to assess the worthiness of the idea. We started making a mental listing of all the folks in the Asian region who needed to be contacted for reactions. That I believe was the conversation where I first heard, from Desmond, the idea of a 'counter conference'.

Organizing workshops and conferences was not new for me. I was well into this trade, so to speak, from the late 1960s, when I was in the Madras Christian College, and during the early 1970s when I was studying business management in the Xavier Labour Relations Institute, Jamshedpur, in eastern India. I reveled in it—running things in my head; jumping out of bed at night to note down a detail, lest I forget it the next day; imagining logos and themes; possible speakers; working out the finance and costs; forming organizing committees; provisions for materials; draft agendas for the days... The works!

But would an international conference, of a rather unique type, be as easy to organize?

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4. The rampon is a large, community-operated beach-seine, traditionally used by the fishing communities in Goa. It was introduced in the area by a Portuguese priest named Fr. Rampani. The movement developed when the operations of rampons were affected by the newly introduced purse-seine nets and boats, which were part of the 'fisheries development' initiatives of the state.

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## 2. Acting On The Letter

I decided to write a letter to be sent to about 80 people across the world, who would, in my understanding, be interested in the idea of a world conference of fishing people to be held in Rome

My days in DAGA were fast coming to an end.

**George:** My boss **Dr. George Ninan** was away on home leave. I first met George in 1978 in Bombay, now called Mumbai. He was director of the Bombay Urban Industrial League for Development (BUILD), an organization dealing with the rights of the urban poor and informal workers, mainly those living in the city's slums. Also a presbyter of the church, he was passionately involved with the ecumenical and inter-faith movement, while supporting many of the new social movements of the marginalized and unorganized workers, which were springing up in India. One of the movements with which he was closely associated was the emerging organizations of marine fishers in several coastal states of India, particularly in Goa. Though I had not kept in close touch with him, I knew that in 1980 he had moved over to work with the Urban Industrial Mission of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA-URM), which was based in Hong Kong.

In early 1981 CCA-URM was considering the possibility of hosting the documentation and research centre, then based in Tokyo, called DAGA. George was on the lookout for an activist-researcher who could help to re-position DAGA in Hong Kong. He caught up with me in May 1982 in Trivandrum and discussed the possibility of my taking on this challenging assignment, at least for a year.

Initially, I was unsure of leaving Kerala at the juncture when the fishers' movements were beginning to get more organized and there was a demand for more movement-oriented research. However, this was also when CDS granted me leave for a year to take up the assignment. I took the plunge and proceeded to Hong Kong in September 1982.

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I was to return to Trivandrum in August 1983, before George got back to Hong Kong from leave. So, it was important for me to inform him about this venture. I realized that if I wanted to reply positively to Rolf, I would have to utilize all the contacts I had made during my tenure in DAGA, leaning on the goodwill I had



"In DAGA we were privileged to have two IBM electric typewriters. We had also acquired one of the first personal computers from Apple that appeared on the Hong Kong market. I needed to take advantage of this technological edge." Images courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

earned in the Asian region. I wrote a quick reply to Rolf. Yes, done! That was the sum and substance.

My letter to George Ninan was more detailed. He was a great organizer of international events. He was very gentle and strategic about his moves. Therefore, I had to fill him in with my tentative ideas on what could be done and why it needed to be done. Organising an international conference for fishermen and women from around the world would be a very hard idea to sell to funding agencies. Having dealt closely with them during my DAGA tenure, and being mentored by George on what goes and what does not with European 'development funding' outfits, I realized that raising money for such an event would be a major challenge. That was putting it mildly.

In DAGA we were privileged to have two IBM electric typewriters. We had also acquired one of the first personal computers from Apple that appeared on the Hong Kong market. I needed to take advantage of this technological edge.

I decided to write a letter to be sent to about 80 people across the world, who would, in my understanding, be interested in the idea of a world conference of fishing people to be held in Rome, parallel to WFC. The annotated address list was keyed into the new computer and cards of the same were printed out for me to file physically in a box, which I was planning to carry back to Trivandrum. Briefly, here are the four points and three questions contained in the letter.

First, I put across my understanding of the major developments of the 1970s: The decade had witnessed the growing involvement of national governments and international agencies in fisheries development projects, particularly in the waters off Third World countries. Simultaneously, there had been sporadic as

The wealth from the sea seems to have accrued to those who own the craft and gear along with the processing facilities, and to those who controlled the trade.

well as organized and sustained agitation by small-scale fishers in several Third World countries, particularly in Asia. This was hardly surprising. If there was one thing that schemes to develop industrial fisheries did not ensure, it was the development of fishermen and related workers. There is growing evidence that, by and large, their living conditions have deteriorated. The wealth from the sea seems to have accrued to those who own the craft and gear along with the processing facilities, and to those who controlled the trade.

What was happening in Asia among fisher organizations was then explained: There have been at least three meetings of representatives from Asian-level organizations where, along with their supporters, they discussed common problems and possible means of cooperation for their solution. It seems doubtful if any concrete action programmes had evolved from these meetings but it certainly reinforced the feeling of solidarity among the workers and their supporters. More importantly, they had become aware of the fact that changes in the fish economies can only come as result of larger changes in the economic and social structures of their respective countries and regions.

A rhetorical question was then posed and answered: What then will a world-level conference achieve, you may ask? Well, basically, more of the same, particularly if one sees such an event in isolation. However, it was important to press for the need to focus global attention on an 'alternative agenda' for fisheries development. It could come only from those who labour, along with their supporters. It would provide, for the first time, a common platform for 'the people' to meet. On such occasions, a lot of genuine communication and sharing of live experiences is possible, even if simultaneous translation facilities are lacking.

This was followed by the reason for the timing and proposed venue for the conference: Timing such a meet for July 1984 and holding it in Rome was going to yield another result. It would pre-empt the ministers and policy makers, gathered there at the same time for the FAO-sponsored WCF, from easily making commitments and endorsing strategies that continue to lay stress only on the

judicious exploitation of fish resources at the near total neglect of the workers who are required to convert this resource to wealth.

Timing such a meet for July 1984 and holding it in Rome was going to yield another result. It would pre-empt the ministers and policy makers, gathered there at the same time for the FAO-sponsored WCF, from easily making commitments.

After offering the rationale for a world conference, I posed three questions that can be summarized so: One, would you



support the idea of such an event? Two, if yes, what can you offer in terms of financial assistance, organizational support, intellectual and inspirational support? Three, do you have any suggestions of persons or organizations who may be willing to join and be part of the initiative?

The letter was dated August 8, 1983, just over a fortnight after I got Rolf's letter. I made it clear that it would be the last one I would be writing from Hong Kong and wanted recipients to reply to my address in CDS, Trivandrum. Posting the letters in Hong Kong by airmail ensured that they reached their destinations much faster.

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The small-scale artisanal fishers had set up their independent trade union and were on the war path against biased government policies that favoured the mechanized trawler sector.

I got back to Trivandrum in mid-August 1983 and rejoined my responsibilities in CDS, which had increased following my selection as secretary of the academic committee and promotion to associate professor.

On the fishery front there was a lot of excitement. The small-scale artisanal fishers had set up their independent trade union and were on the war path against biased government policies that favoured the mechanized trawler sector. Their demands included marine

regulations to ensure a trawler-free zone; ban on trawl fishing in the monsoon months of May, June and July; new social protection measures, including grants for education, housing, and other welfare requirements.

I was enthused with the responses to my conference proposal letter. The letters kept steadily trickling into my pigeon hole mail-box. I present a few quotes as samples:<sup>5</sup>

Said the head of development aid agency in Europe: "There is much to be said on 'a world conference of fishing industry workers and their supporters.' The idea is 'rather ambitious' as you say, but there is nothing wrong with that... Fishermen should have equal facilities and opportunities to meet on the international level as is already the case for scientists, students, workers, bankers, etc. To have such a meeting in Rome... might have a very strong impact indeed... From now to July 1984 is too short a time for proper preparation of 'the people.' ...I am missing in your letter an indication about your thinking on the follow-up and possible lines of evolution beyond Rome"

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5. These quotes from the letters which remain in the documentation center of ICSF

Wrote the leader of a national fisherman organization in a developing country: "I am happy to hear from you and am also pleased with your ideas of having a world conference on fishermen. I fully agree with you that the conditions of the fishermen are further deteriorating and we need to do something about it. Hope we can put our efforts together to safeguard this community."

A bank manager in a developing country said: "I fully endorse your proposal and I believe the time is now ripe for such a meeting. In fact, a few of us had a preliminary discussion on the need for a symposium locally on... identification of various socio-economic consequences in the fisheries sector... I and my colleagues will be able to provide 'inspirational, organizational and intellectual support'. It may be possible to get some financial assistance."

A priest working closely with fishers in his country replied: "Yes, I promise my full support for your plans. I am particularly interested in serious preparatory studies and seminars. Please feel free to make demands on me and my Centre."

Replied a boat builder-cum-consultant: "I was flattered to get your letter... Certainly I think that this is a good idea, provided the preparatory work is properly done... Whilst the idea of meeting in Rome is very attractive from the point of view of influencing policy... I cannot quite see some of our fishers and working colleagues from Third World countries sitting easily in a conference hall in Rome... Would their statements be regarded as special pleading by some kind of elite, perhaps? My wife and I would manage a contribution of 100 British Pounds or so towards publication costs perhaps... However, we can at least offer our support and encouragement and if you think of any way in which we can directly help, then please say so."

"...My wife and I would manage a contribution of 100 British Pounds or so towards publication costs perhaps... However, we can at least offer our support and encouragement and if you think of any way in which we can directly help, then please say so."

Wrote a pastor and promoter of fishing communities: "I agree with you readily. My only fear is that the people involved in the fishing industry are not able to express themselves in an international gathering because they do not know an international language... So, I can only think of a world conference for persons associated with the fishermen at the moment. Anyhow it is worth trying to get them together."

The head of a research council in a developing country said: "I am in principle totally in agreement with the move indicated in your letter, and you can ask for any kind of support in this venture. I am reasonably sure that the council could also be requested, and they would react favourably to your idea... if formally approached."

This is what a student at an environment and policy studies institute in the First World wrote: "Frankly, I like the idea, but I don't think it is wise to time it in such a way as to pre-empt the ministers and policy makers who will gather there at the same time for the FAO-sponsored world conference because international organizations are the best bet for any kind of funding for such an endeavour."

A professor at a First World centre promoting exchange of researchers across the world replied: "The idea is ambitious, but it is also worthwhile... In the planning for the conference you might prepare a periodic newsletter to help focus on the issues and keep people informed... You and I are good at being critical. But people tire of that... it would be useful to be prepared to offer very concrete alternatives."

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In September 1983 I got a lengthy reply from George Ninan. This was after he got back from leave and gave some serious thought to my departing letter to him. He had two concerns. One, to find my replacement in DAGA. Two, to see how the idea of the world conference could be handled.

In the letter, he said that **John Garbutt**, who was working with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and based in the Netherlands, was willing to join DAGA. This came as a relief to me, too, knowing how difficult it was to find people for such assignments. George then made a suggestion about the conference that was completely new to me. Such a special event, he said, needed a proper planning meeting. He suggested that I should gather about 10 people from around the world, representing various interests in fisheries—trade unions, fishery NGOs, academicians who dealt with socio-economic issues in fisheries, consumer

groups, environmental activists, and so on. They could gather and debate the idea and, if agreeable, create a planning committee to carry through the event. George was gracious enough to say that DAGA would be able to host this meeting and pay for it, provided it was after 1983.

By October 1983 I must have received over fifty replies to my letter; all but one was positive about going ahead with the idea. These responses signalled overwhelming support.

By October 1983 I must have received over fifty replies to my letter; all but one was positive about going ahead with the idea. These responses signalled overwhelming support. This would be the foundation of goodwill on which one could plan a major international event, first of its kind.



**Pierre Gillet**—my right hand in all matters: “From being a trawler advocate, he became an ardent proponent of ‘small is beautiful’ boat designs for small-scale, beach-based, artisanal fishers.”

**Pierre:** A crucial development in September 1983 was that Pierre Gillet was going back to Europe on holiday. He would travel to Geneva and Rome before reaching his hometown Namur in Brussels. Pierre was also excited about the world conference and, one day, he came to visit me at CDS.

Pierre had been in India since 1973. He was this most delightfully lovable, short, stockily-built, jack-of-all-trades, super technician. But he was also a Catholic priest. He came to India, to work with what was a little-known Indo-Belgian Fisheries (IBF) project based in Muttom in Kanyakumari district of the state of Tamil Nadu. His original mission was to build trawlers for the fishermen using the resources of IBF’s boatyard located on a scenic red soil hilltop, overlooking the Arabian Sea.

When Pierre arrived in India, he mostly spoke French, but had a reasonable understanding of English. However, in three months flat, he was celebrating mass in the chapel in Tamil, much to

the delightful amazement of the fishers of Muttom! He also worked hard at English and mastered it. Soon he underwent a radical technological conversion. From being a trawler advocate, he became an ardent proponent of ‘small is beautiful’ boat designs for small-scale, beach-based, artisanal fishers.<sup>6</sup> This conversion resulted from his close association, over the years, with the Marianad Team of social activists, who had been working with artisanal fishers in Trivandrum district since the early 1960s. I too was a member of that Team from 1973.

Pierre also joined a ginger group of social activists who underwent a three-month socio-political analysis course in the Indian

I recall him saying how the fishery activists at the course used an article I had written in 1978 in the journal *Economic & Political Weekly*. Titled ‘Entry of Big Business into Fishing: Its Impact on the Fish Economy’

6. Pierre’s greatest contribution to South India’s small-scale fisheries were the models of the ‘stitch and glue’ marine plywood beach landing fishing crafts, which he helped to create. These crafts were the result of fruitful blending of knowledge of artisanal fishers with modern naval architecture designs, using fabrication materials available in India. Today these types of fishing crafts are ubiquitous along the coastline.

Social Institute in 1979 in Bangalore, which is now called Bengaluru. This was what really led to his final socio-political conversion, I think. I recall him saying how the fishery activists at the course used an article I had written in 1978 in the journal Economic & Political Weekly. Titled 'Entry of Big Business into Fishing: Its Impact on the Fish Economy', it had become an important basis for their critique of fisheries development in India.

Pierre had a disciplined, light-hearted and mischievous approach to life and living. He also had this great ability to strike up contact with people from every walk of life. This distinguished him from other people I got to know in my life journey.

It was this committed, resourceful, delightfully humorous Pierre who offered to walk into the Geneva headquarters of the International Labour Organization (ILO) to discuss the idea of a fishers' conference. Pierre also agreed to meet with staff in FAO headquarters in Rome to discuss how fishers could be included in the WFC, so that people's issues could be raised along with the fishery resource issues.

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3.

# Planning the Planning Meeting

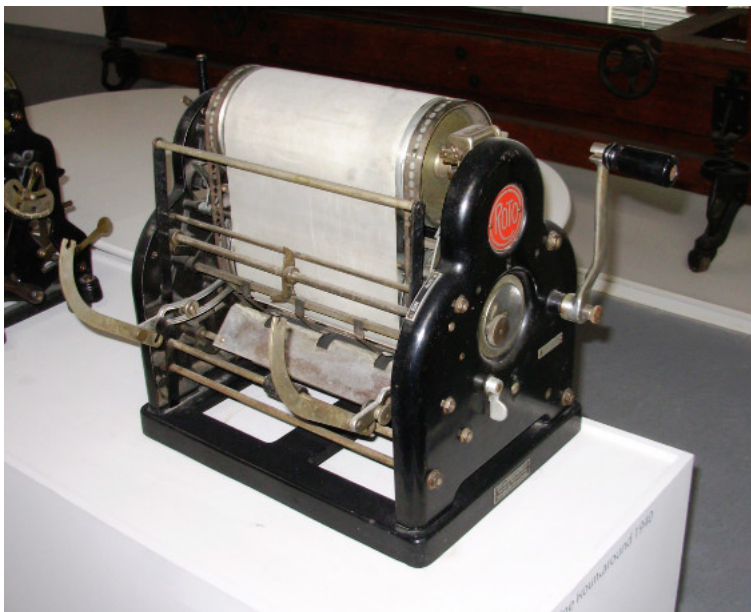
We had four options for long-distance communications: **postal letters, cable, telex, and telephone.** Postal letters by air mail to Europe or Asia took at least five to seven days to reach. If the person at the other end responded in a day or two, I got a reply in 15-20 days.



For a smooth transition in DAGA, it was decided that I should meet with John Garbutt and brief him. We were to also discuss the planning meeting for the world conference, scheduled to be held in January 1984. Indeed, this became John Garbutt's first assignment after taking over in DAGA.

John Garbutt came to Trivandrum in October 1983, en route from Amsterdam to Hong Kong. His two-day stay in CDS gave me the occasion to get to know this mild-mannered and affable gentleman, who had vast experience in dealing with development financing by charitable aid agencies.

Our immediate concern was to put together a representative group to partake in the planning meeting. In my letter of August 8, I used the term 'World Conference of Fishing Industry Workers and their Supporters'. Later, following discussions with colleagues, we decided to replace 'World' with 'International'.



**A Cyclostyling machine:** "This entailed cutting a stencil on oil-paper and then fixing it on the drum of a cyclostyling machine, which dispensed ink through the cut parts of the stencil, and onto paper which was rolled out when turning a handle."

The first step for the planning meeting was to get a letter pad printed with that title. Since most of the letters were to go abroad and postal rates depended on the weight of the letter, I decided to make pads using what was called onion leaf paper. My printer was Mr. Koshy, a most obliging elderly gentleman, who ran the SB Press in Trivandrum.

For making a small number of copies of a document, we had to resort to what was called cyclostyling. This entailed cutting a stencil on oil-paper

and then fixing it on the drum of a cyclostyling machine, which dispensed ink through the cut parts of the stencil, and onto paper which was rolled out when turning a handle.

We had four options for long-distance communications: postal letters, cable, telex, and telephone. Postal letters by air mail to Europe or Asia took at least five to seven days to reach. If the person at the other end responded in a day or two, I got a reply in 15-20 days.

Cables were fast, but generally, not more than 50 terse all-caps words, with even the punctuation marks being spelt out – COMMA, STOP. You could send it only from a post office.

Telex was instant, but only some organizations maintained this bulky, noisy machine. The cost of a telex message depended on the length of the message and the time taken to send it. But on average it cost about five times as much as a letter and thrice that of a cable.

Telephone calls required booking a 'person to person' (PP) international call through a telephone exchange and waiting to 'get through' to the number and person at the other end. Sometimes the wait seemed endless. Calls from India to the rest of the world were usually hard to make, unless you booked a 'lightning' call that was at least ten times costlier than an ordinary PP international call that, in turn, was perhaps five times the cost of a telex message.

So, finally, I had to settle largely for airmail letters and the occasional cable and telex. To access a telex machine, I approached my travel agent Kerala Travels. The owner **K.C. Chandrahasan** and the manager **S. Vijayakumar** went out of their way to accommodate my request. They agreed to allow me to use their telex facility and mention their telex address on the letterhead. However, since DAGA had a telex and communications from Hong Kong to the rest of the world were seamless, I could always send a telex to DAGA and request it to be 'repeated' to other telex numbers.

it was important to get at least one person from each continent with a reasonable understanding of the people in the fisheries sector

#### THE PLANNING GROUP

To get global representation at the planning meeting, I realized that it was important to get at least one person from each continent with a reasonable understanding of the people in the fisheries sector, if not a close link with them in some way.

From India I decided to get the assistance of my activist colleague A.J. Vijayan who was a member of the Kerala Independent Fishers Union and a secretary of the National Fishermen's Forum (NFF). Of course, having Pierre Gillet was a

foregone conclusion, given he was already in Europe lobbying for the conference. There were many to choose from in Europe. I decided to request Jean-Philippe Platteau, since I knew him well from his research days in Kerala. Moreover, he had good contacts with academicians and NGOs in Latin America and Africa.

The largest number of fishers needing representation were in Asian countries. My stint in DAGA had put me in touch with a number of people; I contacted them. For Thailand, friends from ACFOD nominated **Amporn Sugandavanij**, an anthropologist who had good contact with fishing communities and had been working on a paper regarding the impact of the EEZ on ASEAN fisheries. From the Philippines, my friend **Jose Cunanan** suggested that we invite **Nenita Cura** who was with the Asian Social Institute that was in close touch with fishers of Laguna de Bay in Luzon, who were protesting the fish pens that were privatizing the lacustrine space.

Japan was a major player in global fisheries and a Japanese NGO called Pacific Asia Resources Centre (PARC) was leading the charge against this expansionism. There, I had been in touch with **Junko Yamaka**, who had organized the first Asian workshop of small-scale fishers in Bangkok in 1978; it produced a report titled 'Asian Fishermen Speak Out'. I requested her to attend. She, however, suggested the name of **Tsurumi Yoshiyuki**, founder of PARC and one of Japan's leading socialist activists.

As we were planning a conference of a labouring class that produced food, I got in touch with **Dan Gallin**, general secretary of the Geneva-based International Union of Food workers (IUF). He suggested that we should invite **Ma Wei Pin**, their regional secretary for Asia/Pacific, who was better informed on fishers' issues.

In the early 1980s I had been in touch with **Professor George Kent** of the East-West Center of Hawaii, who was researching and writing much about international fish trade and food security issues, with a focus on the Pacific region. He dealt with the issue of unequal trade that favoured the rich fish consumers over the poor fish producers. Kent agreed to participate in the planning meeting.

My contacts in Africa and Latin America were not with people related to fisheries. Initial efforts to identify suitable persons were not fruitful. In December 1983, as a last-minute effort, I sent a telex to Jean Philippe, asking if he knew anyone who could represent African concerns. He replied that for his research, he had been in touch with an organization called Environment and Development in Africa (ENDA) in Dakar, Senegal, which had some contacts with fishing communities.

I replied by cable  
asking: **IS  
BUGICOURT  
AFRICAN  
QUESTION.**  
To this I got the  
reply: **FRENCH  
BUT RELIABLE  
STOP.**  
We invited him!

He suggested we invite its director **Jacques Bugnicourt**. The name sounded French and so I replied by cable asking: IS BUGICOURT AFRICAN QUESTION. To this I got the reply: FRENCH BUT RELIABLE STOP. We invited him!

Jean Philippe had also suggested the name of **Luis Hector Morales**, a Chilean sociologist working in Mexico on the socio-economic and ecological impacts of aquaculture. Apparently, his thesis had the catchy title: 'The Red and the Green of the Blue Revolution'. However, he was not able to make it to Hong Kong.

The planning meeting was fixed for January 16–18, 1984, and John Garbutt confirmed that DAGA had the funds for the participants' air tickets. Through a good friend in the YMCA in Hong Kong, Ranjan Solomon, we were able to use their premises for conducting the meeting. Then there was **Lawrence Surendra** of ARENA, Hong Kong, and **Leung Po Lam**, a labour activist from Hong Kong, who was also helping with local logistics.

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By early December 1983, we had received confirmations from all the invitees to the planning meeting. Most of the arrangements had been made. But I had a concern. If the planning meeting endorsed the idea of a conference in Rome, somebody had to take the lead role to organize the conference. I saw my role as limited to facilitating the process till Hong Kong; thereafter, a professional organizer needed to be appointed to take over.

It was in this context that I sought help from my friend **Anil Agarwal** of the Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi. I was keen to get one of his colleagues whom I had recently met in Trivandrum. He had impressed me as a possible choice for the role of the main organizer. I remembered only his first name: Ravi. He had a nice flowing beard and very positive attitude to all matters.

Thinking his second name to be Sharma, I wrote to Anil requesting for the services of Ravi Sharma in the event of a positive decision in Hong Kong. Anil replied to me positively and said that Ravi Sharma could participate in the Hong Kong meet. I was relieved that I would not have the crucial organizational task, which I was sure this bearded and amiable Ravi would take over if we decided to hold the conference.

Two days before the scheduled meeting, I arrived in Hong Kong on January 14, 1984, along with Pierre Gillet, who came in from Belgium. Most of the participants were arriving at different times the next day. So,

By early December 1983, we had received confirmations from all the invitees to the planning meeting. Most of the arrangements had been made. But I had a concern. If the planning meeting endorsed the idea of a conference in Rome, somebody had to take the lead role to organize the conference.

we had a head start, discussing the details with John Garbutt and George Ninan.

On January 16 we reached the YMCA in the morning and found that several participants—I did not know most of them personally, nor had I met them before—were already in the meeting room, since they were staying in the YMCA.

I got a shock when a clean-shaved young man, whom I had not met before, came up to me and introduced himself as Ravi Sharma. I composed myself; this was not the Ravi I knew and sought as the organizer! Without showing any embarrassment or saying anything about the task before him, I welcomed Ravi Sharma. I pulled Pierre aside and shared my quandary. The priest in him consoled me, saying: “The stranger may turn out worthier than the friend.”

There were no other similar surprises, as the remaining unfamiliar faces were deputed by persons I knew well. Happily, Pierre was beside me when the stocky Jacques Bugnicourt introduced himself in French, stating that his English was at the kindergarten level. The only other excitement was when the police intelligence officers arrived on the second day to get a briefing on what this planning meeting was all about, asking about John Kurien, the person who represented the UK from Hong Kong at the FAO/UN in May 1983.

...the police intelligence officers arrived on the second day to get a briefing on what this planning meeting was all about, asking about John Kurien, the person who represented the UK from Hong Kong at the FAO/UN in May 1983.

The meeting started with the standard welcomes and introductions. The two and a half days were fruitful. Discussions commenced with an assessment of the situation of fishing communities around the world in the backdrop of all the efforts being made at fisheries development. Despite the variations in the specific contexts across the globe, there was a consensus on one point: planned fisheries development efforts initiated by national governments and international bodies were oriented to an industrial-mode of large-scale fishing operations, which in the main became inimical to the life and livelihood of most fishing industry workers.

It was the constant use of the phrase ‘fishing industry workers’ in English which seemed to bug the ears of Frenchman Jacques Bugnicourt. He found it jarring and a mouthful. “Can we not have a word like fishworker, even if it may not be proper word in English?” he asked.



“Can we not have a word like fishworker, even if it may not be proper word in English?” he asked. **That was the origin of the term fishworker.**

That was the origin of the term fishworker.<sup>7</sup> The planning meeting then defined fishworkers as “children, women and men engaged as crew members, small fishers, processing workers and sellers.”

Another important issue got discussed: what was the nature of what we were planning, a counter conference or a parallel conference? The consensus was to consider the conference as an initiative in its own right—neither counter, nor parallel. It was also decided that, strategically, we should start our conference before the

FAO conference was scheduled to end on July 6, 1984, and continue till after. The final dates were fixed for July 4-8, 1984. The conference was to be called the International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters (ICFWS).

Another conclusion reached was to hold at least three regional meetings in Asia, Africa and Latin America between April and June 1984. This suggestion was an endorsement of one of the oft-mentioned points in the support statements that I had received to my first letter of August 1983. Several respondents emphasized the need to first organize national and regional gatherings of fishworkers and supporters, before meeting internationally in Rome. Such gatherings would also permit more democratic selection of the fishworkers and supporters who were to travel to Rome and represent their respective communities or organizations.

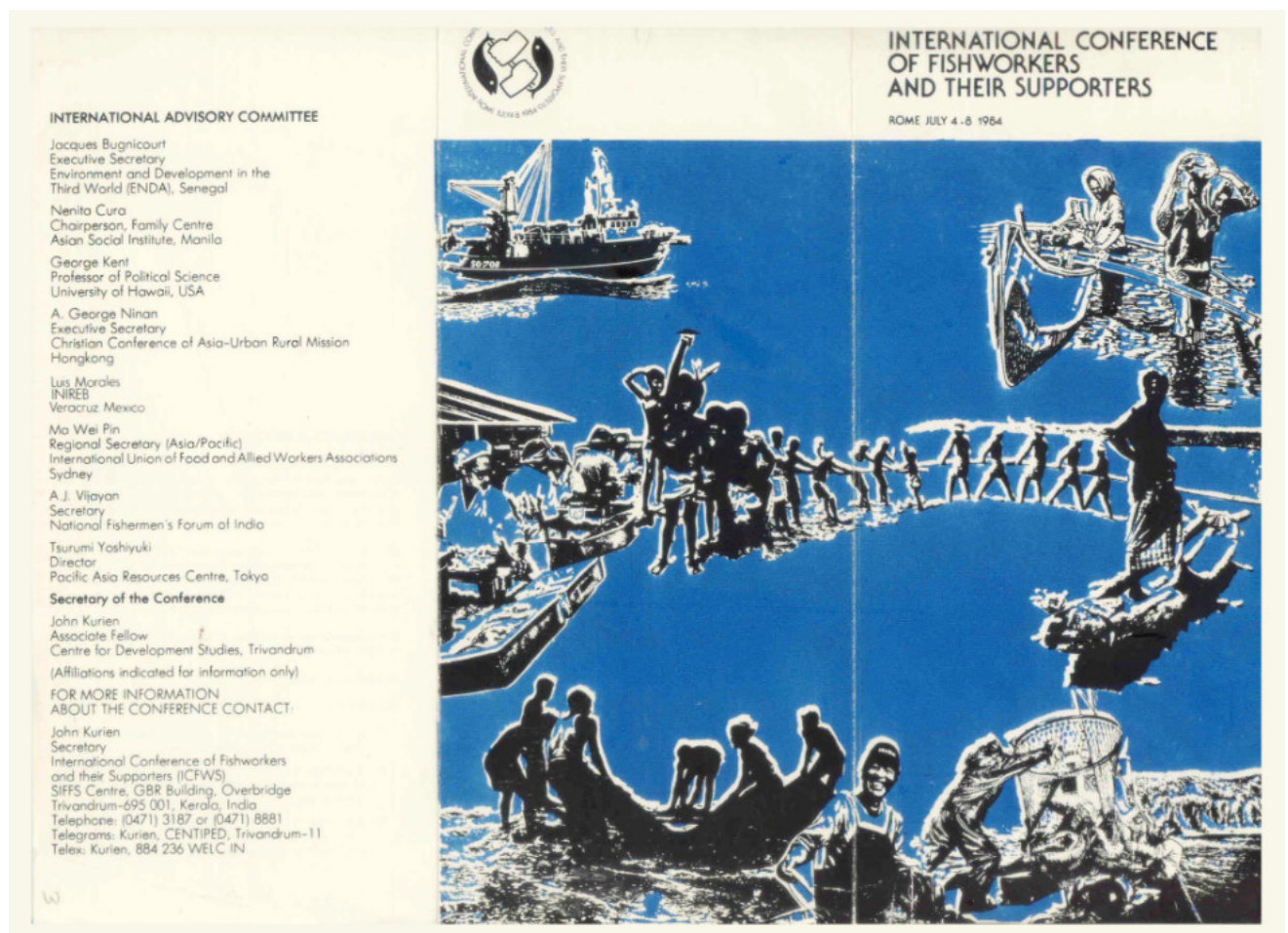
what was the nature of what we were planning, **a counter conference or a parallel conference?**

It was clear that the delegates were not going to represent their countries, but rather their own local fisher community, organizations, NGOs, or other institutions. The group also drew up a rough programme format for five days. The key was to have a good blend of fisher’s statements about their current situation and inputs from supporters on various themes. The use of audio-visuals was encouraged to partially get over the potential ‘tower of Babel’ language issue that we were bound to confront. There was a suggestion that we hold an exhibition, using artefacts brought to Rome by the fishworkers.

The meeting then discussed a first draft of a brochure I had prepared in October

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7. Incidentally, in my mother tongue – Malayalam – fishers are referred to in gender neutral form as ‘matsya-thozhilali’ – which translates literally to ‘fishworker’.

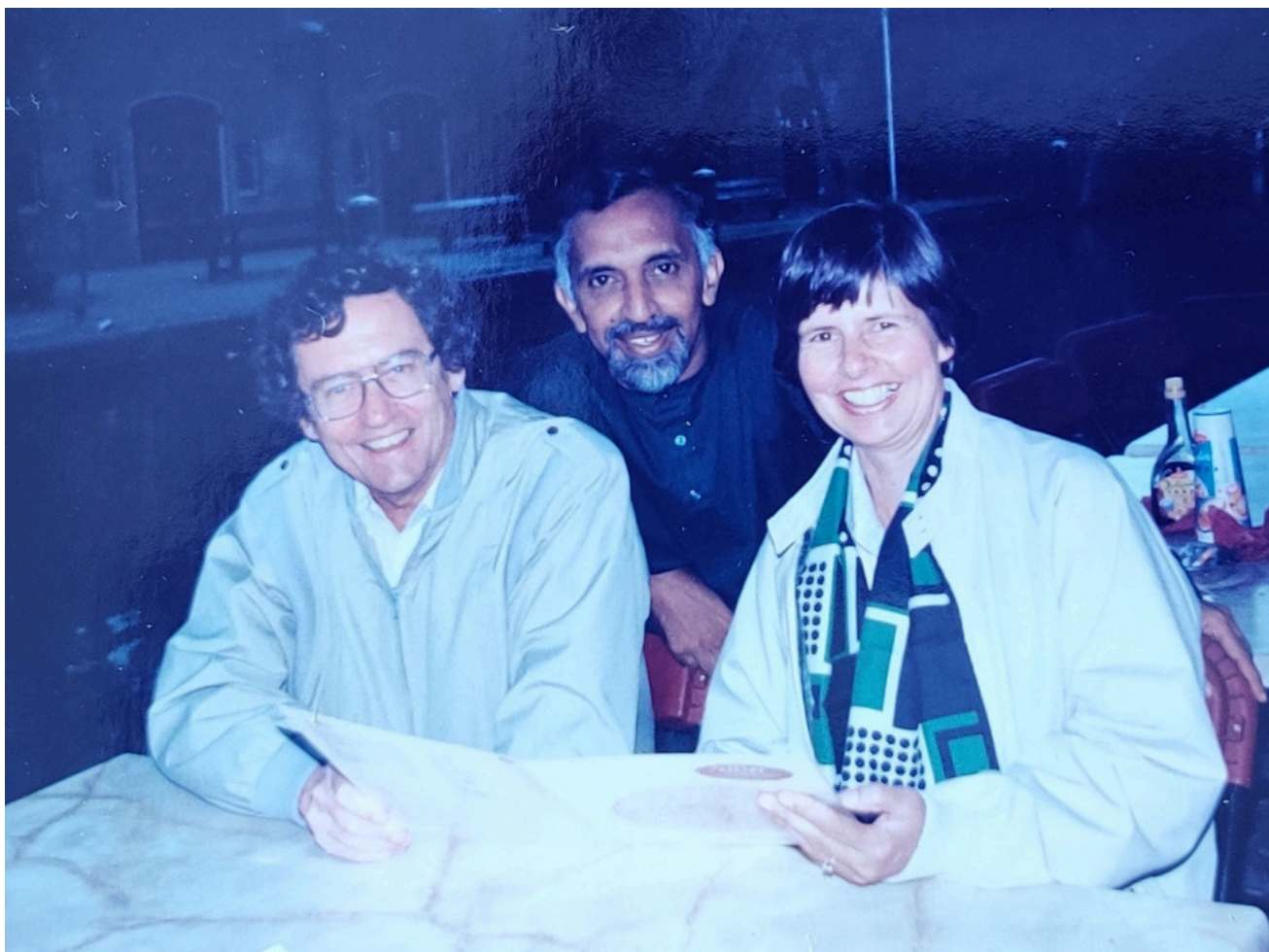


The cover-side of the brochure

1983, which could be widely circulated around the world and provided to the media also. The brochure would be translated first into French and Spanish, and later into other languages. It would be attached to all correspondence regarding the event. The statement of purpose and the desired outcomes of the conference were well enumerated in the draft. Many amendments were suggested and everybody agreed on the final version prepared by George Kent.

He felt that it was going to be difficult to get funding for such an event. But nothing was impossible if we put sincere efforts into the task. For this, the key was confidence that the funding agencies had in the leadership of the event.

On the final day, George Ninan, the fundraiser and conference organizer par excellence, raised the crucial issue of finance, as also the execution of the detailed organizational requirements to make the event a success. He felt that it was going to be difficult to get funding for such an event. But nothing was impossible if we put sincere efforts into the task. For this, the key was confidence that the funding agencies had in the leadership of the event.



With John and Marion in the Netherlands in 1999

It was decided that there would be three small, efficient secretariats: one in Hong Kong for documentation and coordination of the finances; one in Rome to plan and make the local arrangements; and one in Trivandrum for overall coordination.

George had spoken to me individually about this issue at length the evening before. He held that there was no way I could shy away from the task of taking on the lead role of coordination. Funding agencies, he said, evaluate the merit of 'unusual requests' based on the person they see, the face before them.

He reminded me that having made contacts with several funding agencies during my brief tenure in DAGA, and having worked on grassroot-level projects dealing with organizing fishworkers, gave me the

credibility to approach development aid agencies with such a request. He assured me that if I took on the responsibility, all the administrative matters regarding funding would be handled by John Garbutt, with his wife **Marion Fortgens** working exclusively on this matter.

I saw the full import of his arguments. There was no way I could delegate the main organizing task to anyone else. I had to accept the responsibility—fully, sincerely, joyfully. I was designated secretary-general for the event.

To ensure the highest participation in the organizational process, given that there was only six months to bring the event to fruition, it was decided to constitute an International Advisory Committee (IAC) to assist the secretary-general. The committee consisted of seven people present in Hong Kong. Later, Luis Hector Morales of Chile was included.

It was decided that there would be three small, efficient secretariats: one in Hong Kong for documentation and coordination of the finances; one in Rome to plan and make the local arrangements; and one in Trivandrum for overall coordination.

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# Preparations for ICFWS

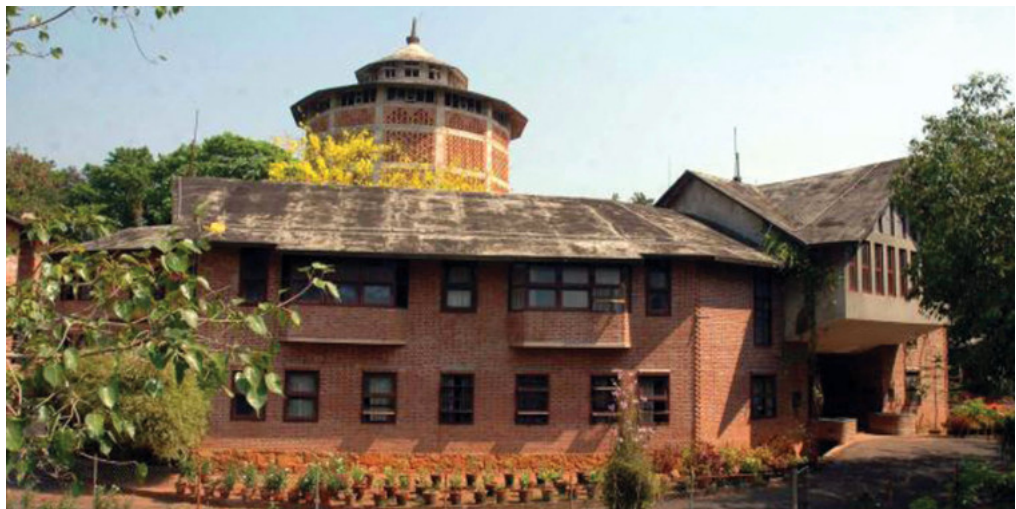


The best logo had fists holding an oar, with fish on either side; the name of the conference encircled it. I interpreted it thus: the fists emphasized the centrality of the worker in producing wealth from the sea. The clench indicated determination. Their not touching highlighted the need to forge new links.



Getting back to Trivandrum, the full import of organizing an international conference from scratch dawned on me.

My first task was to get the CDS to formally permit me to take on this assignment. The permission was ratified by the academic committee. Fortunately, CDS and its founders did not view academics and activism as separate concerns, but rather as mutually supportive pursuits. This allowed me to fully engage with the preoccupations of putting together the conference. Such institutional support was invaluable.



**Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum.**

“Fortunately, CDS and its founders did not view academics and activism as separate concerns, but rather as mutually supportive pursuits.”

Given my penchant for letterheads and logos, I got thinking of ideas for the conference. I made a few rough sketches and then an artist friend worked to refine them. The best one had fists holding an oar, with fish on either side; the name of the conference encircled it. I interpreted it thus: the fists emphasized the centrality of the worker in producing wealth from the sea. The clench indicated determination. Their not touching highlighted the need to forge new links.

The next step was to set up a small secretariat to assist me in coordination. The South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS), which I had a role in creating in 1980, was happy to host the secretariat.

I was involved in doing some monitoring of the new plywood boats which were created with the collaboration of fishers, Pierre Gillet, and the Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG), the organization started by the well-known economist E.F. Schumacher, who wrote the influential book *Small is Beautiful*. I requested ITDG that my fee for this task be passed to SIFFS. That would defray the costs of the secretariat, which was located within a kilometre of the Kerala Travels office, the main post office, and SB Press. This helped coordinate the main channels of communications and printing.

The letterhead, with the logo at its left, read as follows:



**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
OF FISHWORKERS  
AND THEIR SUPPORTERS**

ROME JULY 4-8, 1984

**Coordinating Secretariate:**

SIFFS Centre, GBR Buildings, Overbridge  
Trivandrum 695001, India

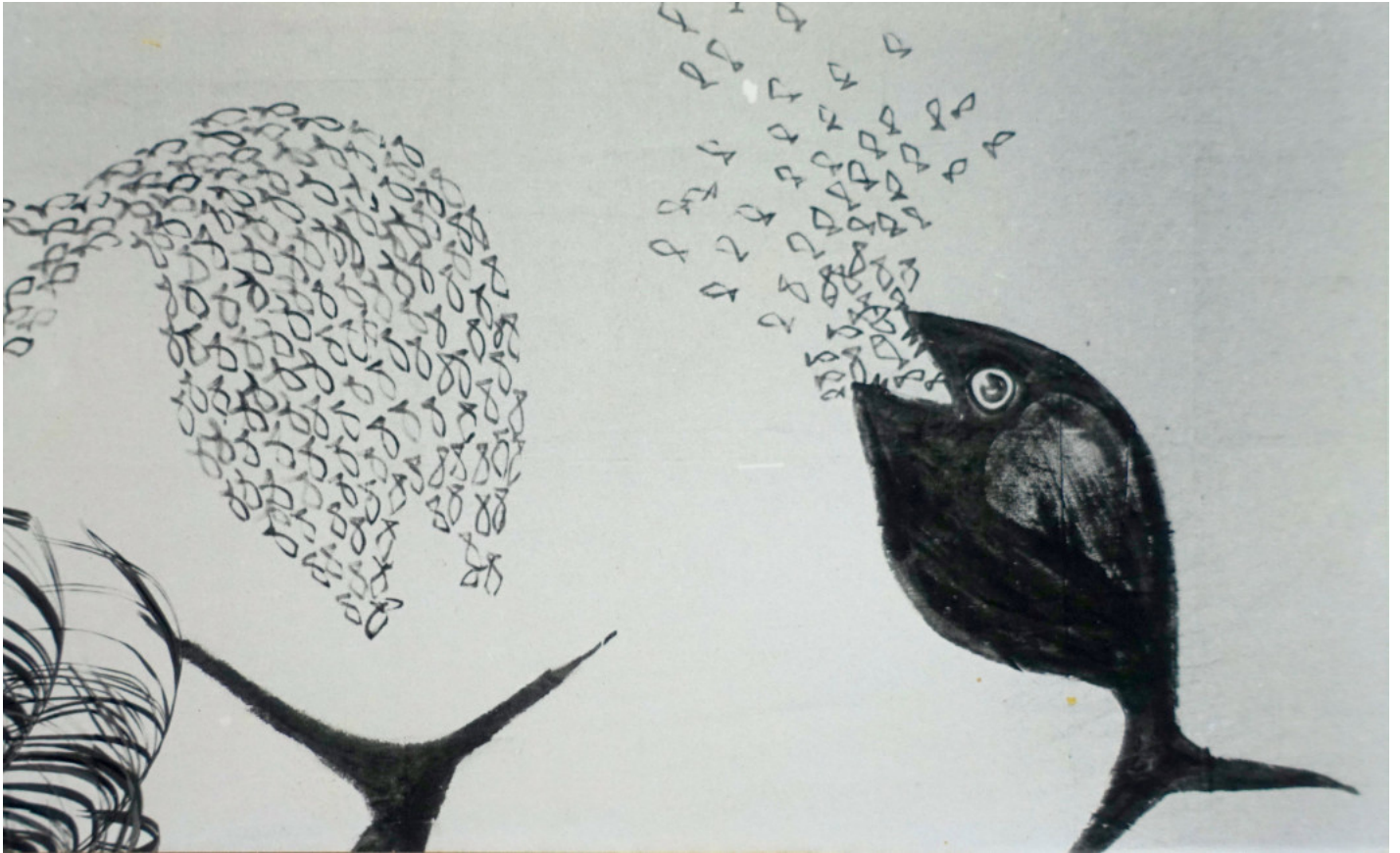
Tel: 3187 or 8881 Cable: CENTIPED, Trivandrum-11

Telex: 884 236 WELC IN

For dealing with certain special aspects and some post-conference matters we sought the assistance of four compatriots: **Jeremy Herklots, John Devaraj, Cornelia Quist** and Nalini Nayak.

**Jeremy:** Tall, lanky, and master of several trades, Jeremy Herklots could solve any technical problem without much ado—and such a fine human being. He was our contact person in ITDG, UK. It was his persistence and push with Pierre Gillet and ITDG that resulted in a technical collaboration that created the most important technological innovation in small-scale fishery of South India: the design and fabrication of plywood boats that replaced the traditional kattumaram and the canoes of the small-scale fishers.

Jeremy was requested to take full charge of the exhibition being planned to showcase the various realities of fishworkers of the world at the conference venue. The exhibition's title was: 'The Life, Work and Struggles of Fishworkers'.



Mural by **John Devaraj**

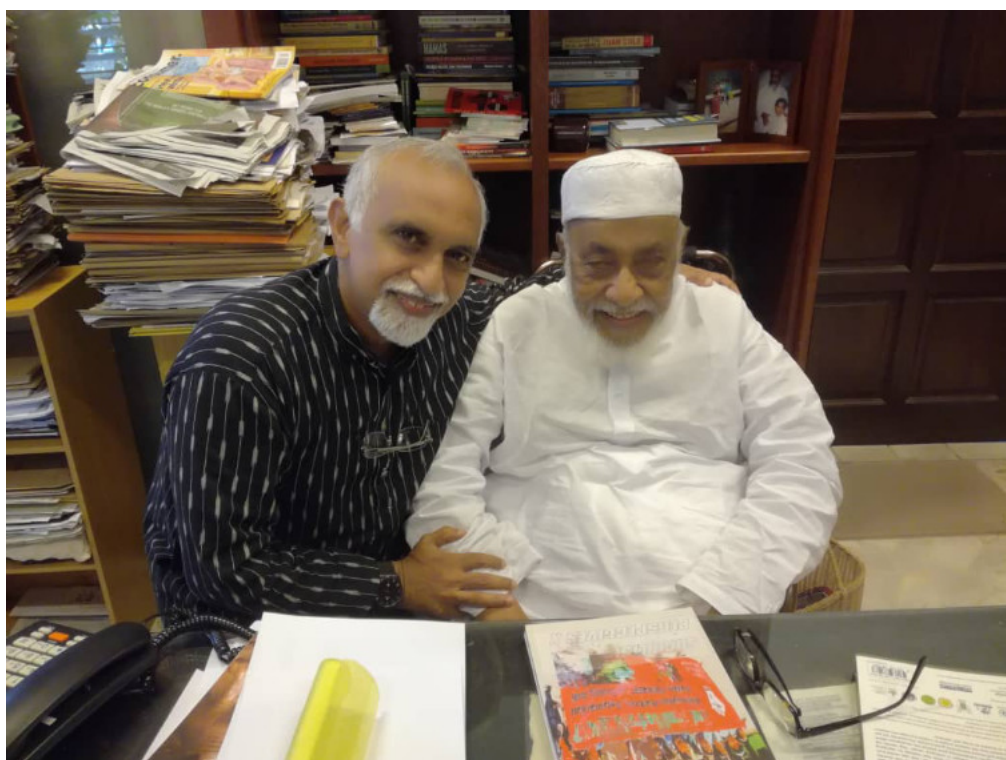
John befriended the fishers and went fishing with them, providing a graphic piece of research on the labour process and the income sharing system. Many of the workers were migrants living on the boats, because the owners were not willing to make living facilities on land for them.

**John:** A friend from Bangalore, John Devaraj was a man of many skills: artist, calligrapher, sculptor, poet, musician and social researcher. He had conducted a great piece of participatory research under my guidance in 1979 on the purse-seiners of the state of Karnataka, about their work, organization and the conditions

of labour of the fishers. John befriended the fishers and went fishing with them, providing a graphic piece of research on the labour process and the income sharing system. Many of the workers were migrants living on the boats, because the owners were not willing to make living facilities on land for them. John titled his research, undertaken for the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), as 'Keel-hauling of the Fishermen.'

John was tasked with documentation for the conference; for designing and

painting of the conference banners; the large cloth murals for the conference hall; the exhibition; the design of the brochure and, finally, for handwriting (yes, you read right) of the final conference report in three languages. He travelled to the documentation centre of the Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) in Malaysia, where **S.M. Mohamed Idris** and my college mate **Rajendran**, both founders of CAP, had allowed us free access to their documentation centre for obtaining the background material to be included in the conference pack. Both gave unstinted support for the efforts and arranged for a national meeting in Malaysia for fishworkers for selecting participants for Rome.



With **Idris-ji** a couple of years before he left us

**Cornelie:** A researcher and community organizer, Cornelie Quist was sensitive to gender issues. She had come from Amsterdam in 1980, wanting to get to know the fishing communities of Kerala and work with social activists. She interacted closely with colleagues of the Programme for Community Organization (PCO) and established her credentials as a perceptive, empathetic and knowledgeable person, who could swim into any socio-cultural milieu and form binding relationships.

Cornelie was requested to liaise with some of the agencies we had approached for funds, who wanted that the participants, particularly the fishworkers, stay on in Europe for a few days after the conference and travel to meet with local



communities in Europe who would have contributed to the funding. She was requested to ensure that this people-to-people interaction was conducted in a meaningful and fruitful manner.

It was her spontaneity, commitment and laughter that prompted me to quit my job in the corporate world and live in a fishing village to help facilitate the formation and functioning of a small-scale, artisanal fisher's cooperative society. Nalini has been my mentor from that first hot summer day we met in 1973.

**Nalini:** A community organizer with a feel for people's issues, Nalini Nayak was politically astute and gender sensitive. Her brother was my roommate during my business management studies. It was at his request that I made a life-changing bus journey to meet Nalini in the fishing village where she worked with a team of social activists. Her focus was on training of women and girls from the fishing communities, equipping them with social awareness and life skills. It was her spontaneity, commitment and laughter that prompted me to quit my job in the

corporate world and live in a fishing village to help facilitate the formation and functioning of a small-scale, artisanal fisher's cooperative society. Nalini has been my mentor from that first hot summer day we met in 1973.

She was our sounding board during the planning, often providing creative suggestions on several matters of consequence. At the same time, Kerala's fishworker movement was getting organized in a big way; Nalini had silently fostered the involvement of women in its forefront. I requested her to prepare an intervention for Rome on the relevance and role of organizing fishworkers. Also, together with Cornelie, they were to ensure that appropriate measures were taken to ensure women's spirited participation in the conference. That was central to its success.

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# 5. Getting Going For Rome

There was a plethora of tasks,  
each urgent and important.  
D-day was only six  
months away.

There was a plethora of tasks, each urgent and important. D-day was only six months away.

### **FUND RAISING**

Naturally, the most important matter to address was funding. John Garbutt was at it from mid-January 1984. We decided to take the approach that is now called 'crowd funding'. We made a careful calculation of the total costs. The most variable of them was airfares to Rome and back for all the participants from developing countries. Airfares from Asia to Rome were considerably cheaper

than from Latin America and Africa.

Accommodation and food, along with other costs, had to be factored in for all participants coming from various parts of the world. John Garbutt reckoned that the conference would cost US \$200,000 for 100 participants, the per capita cost being \$2000.

John Garbutt reckoned that the conference would cost US \$200,000 for 100 participants, the per capita cost being \$2000.

The strategy was to approach those interested in financing the conference to fund a given number of participants, subject to a maximum of 20. This would ensure that no funding agency could dominate the conference with their funding. We also permitted funders to specify the participants they wished to support. For example, one agency wanted that five of the ten persons they were paying be women; three were to be from Africa and two from Latin America. One agency was keen to fund fishers who worked on industrial fishing vessels, or in the industrial fish processing activity—and preferably active members of trade unions. Such conditions were acceptable to us.

As a result, we had 26 agencies or individuals who funded the conference. The largest sponsor funded 20 people and the smallest was one individual who paid for one participant.

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## CANDIDATE SELECTION

The need to be clear about the selection of the delegates was already discussed at Hong Kong. Most of them were to be from the Global South, with a majority being fishworkers. The top-level allocation was 75:25

favouring the Global South, with 60:40 favouring fishworkers. Those selected as supporters, particularly from Asia, would have to play the role of 'whispering translators' to the fishworkers from their respective countries. All delegations were encouraged to ensure that at least a third of their participants were women.

It was further specified that, ideally, the participants should be selected at the respective national or regional meetings that were being planned in several parts of the world.

It was further specified that, ideally, the participants should be selected at the respective national or regional meetings that were being planned in several parts of the world. We also

considered the possibility of having a few seats reserved for 'observers' who would come at their own expense, but would be provided accommodation and food.

## NEWSLETTERS

Keeping everyone informed about the progress of the preparations from across the world required a newsletter that could be sent out by airmail. I was able to issue three newsletters between February and May of 1984. These had to be type-set and printed on A4 size onionskin paper to save on the costs of airmail.

The first newsletter in January 1984 provided the conference logo and its symbolic meaning; had the details of the Hong Kong meeting; outlined the plans for pre-conference meetings in several countries; reported on the first pre-conference meet held in India; and announced the setting up of the coordinating secretariat in Trivandrum. It included an important quotation from the manifesto of the meeting of fishworkers in India: "Development strategy has so far been concerned only with production growth based on the Western capitalist models, motivated by profiteering... As India has now acquired full rights over the 200-mile EEZ, we want to assert our rights to be at the centre of all fishing development activities in India."

The second newsletter in March 1984 announced the exhibition of arts; provided details of the pre-conference meetings in the Philippines and Sri Lanka; and highlighted the efforts to have the African regional meeting of fishworkers from 10 countries in April 1984. It also announced the details of the desired composition of delegates. The newsletter also gave details and addresses of the three secretariats in Hong Kong, Rome and Trivandrum.

The third issue in May 1984 reported on the two regional meetings held in Africa and Latin America; the national meetings held in Malaysia; and three more sub-

**"This conference will be really a people's conference and will attempt to reach a common understanding of the situation of fishworkers and the structural dimensions of the fish economy on which depend their livelihood and survival."**

regional meetings in the Philippines. It emphasized that participants sent to Rome "will not represent their countries in a parliamentary fashion but will be basically genuine fishworkers having a good experience in organizing their fellow workers and ready to share this experience and reflect on the international dimension of their struggle."

It also expressed a hope: "This conference will be really a people's conference and will attempt to reach a common understanding of the situation of fishworkers and the structural dimensions of the fish economy on which depend their livelihood and survival."

### **SPECIAL REQUESTS**

The news about the upcoming ICFWS began to circulate in several fisheries magazines and in the newsletters and occasional documents published by NGOs across the world. As a result, the coordinating secretariat in Trivandrum began receiving several letters that I had to attend to. Many of them only requested more information; they were sent the conference brochure.

However, there were many other letters from persons who wished to participate. To some, we had to send polite regret letters. We had been forewarned to be cautious about undesirable persons making their way into the meeting.

**I had a rule of thumb: if the request came from a fishworker or a related organization, the reply was generally positive.**

But there were a few requests that evoked greater interest, bearing the potential of adding value to the conference. I had a rule of thumb: if the request came from a fishworker or a related organization, the reply was generally positive.

One such request came from Canada. **Kirby Nickerson**, a fisherman from Shelburne County in Nova Scotia, wished to participate at his own cost. He represented an association of small fishers. We checked out the credentials of the association with a person we knew at the Coady Institute in Antigonish, Nova

Scotia. We then sent him a cable welcoming him to attend.

Another letter came from the All-Indonesian Fishermen's Association. I knew from my days in DAGA that this organization was sponsored by the country's military dictatorship. By that time, we had identified an elderly fisher and a supporter, a journalist who represented non-military interests. But there was a

problem: getting a clearance from the Indonesian government to apply for their Italian visas seemed impossible.

The compromise was to invite the secretary of the government-sponsored fisher organization, knowing full well that he was not a fisher, but who agreed, in turn, to facilitate obtaining government clearance for all to apply for visas.

It was unacceptable to not have participation from a major Asian country with a large and diverse fishworker population. The compromise was to invite the secretary of the government-sponsored fisher organization, knowing full well that he was not a fisher, but who agreed, in turn, to facilitate obtaining government clearance for all to apply for visas.

Another letter came from **James Smith**, who described himself as a researcher, English-born but based in France. He had been a student of Prof. **Ignacy Sachs**.<sup>8</sup> James said he had worked on aquaculture issues and got to know of the conference from an NGO. He was keen to participate at his own expense and extend any help required at the event such as translation, reporting and so on. Such requests needed to be verified in greater detail; I requested him to contact Jean Philippe in Belgium. Fortunately, they were both passing through Paris Airport at the same time and decided to meet there. After the meeting, Jean Philippe sent me a cable giving a green signal. I then sent a formal letter of invitation to James. Little did I realize then that this would be the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship.<sup>9</sup>

Such requests needed to be verified in greater detail; I requested him to contact Jean Philippe in Belgium. Fortunately, they were both passing through Paris Airport at the same time and decided to meet there.

## INVITING THE SPEAKERS

The decision in Hong Kong was to invite a few key speakers to provide brief talks

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8. Prof. Sach's was well known to development activist's world over, and I got to know him personally at the FAO Expert Consultation held in May 1983, which he attended.

9. James later played a key role in obtaining funds for the formation meeting of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) which was created in 1986 as a follow-up of the Rome Conference.



**James Smith:** "James said he had worked on aquaculture issues and got to know of the conference from an NGO. He was keen to participate at his own expense and extend any help required at the event such as translation, reporting and so on."

on important issues that were of concern to fishworkers worldwide. We needed speakers who were from across the continents, could speak in various languages and were, if possible, influential and well known for their work.

I had developed a cordial relationship with Prof. **Johan Galtung**, the well-known Norwegian sociologist and founder of the Peace Research Institute in Oslo. Galtung had visited Kerala to study the impact of the Indo-Norwegian Project, the world's first development project in fisheries. He was a strong critic of the impact of the project. In the late 1960s, he wrote an article titled 'Development from Above and the Blue Revolution'. He said it resulted in over-exploitation of the fishery resources, without much benefit to the real fishers,

creating only a new capitalist class in the sector. He had visited CDS in the late 1970s and found that my early work on the fish economy of Kerala was close to his perspectives. We had been in touch since then.

I shot off a letter to Galtung, enclosing the brochure and requesting his presence in Rome. Since he had held visiting positions at the University of Hawaii, he knew George Kent, who was publishing on similar issues. I requested them to collaborate and make a joint-presentation on the impact of industrialization of fisheries on the people in the sector. He cordially agreed to come at his own expense, if we could provide him accommodation in Rome. He was going to speak English.

There was a need to valorize the role and significance of small-scale fisheries and the fishworkers involved in it. During the 1983 expert consultation in Rome, I had met with researchers from Senegal who had come up with results very similar to the costs-and-earning study that Rolf and I had conducted in 1980-81 in Kerala. The French researcher who made the presentation in Rome had recommended a speaker: **Francois Dioury** from the Oceanographic Research Centre of Dakar. Since I was about to visit Dakar for the African regional meeting of fishworkers, the idea was to meet him personally and then make the request. This presentation was to be in French.

Another major concern was the impact of fishing and fisheries on the environment.

Another major concern was the impact of fishing and fisheries on the environment. For this we had decided in Hong Kong to request Luis Hector Morales, the sociologist who was already a part of IAC, to reflect on this from the perspective of Latin America. One area of focus was the environmental impact of industrial anchovy fishing in Peru and the effects of intensive aquaculture in Chile and Mexico. This presentation was to be in Spanish.

Our plans had included deliberations on the relevance of organizations for small-scale, artisanal fishers and the role of women; this was going to feature in many of the sessions in the conference. As a sort of culmination event, we requested Matanhy Saldanha, then chairperson of the National Fishermen's Forum of India, and Nalini Nayak to lead the participants in a wrap-up session on the last day, reflecting on the issues discussed earlier in the conference. This presentation was to be multi-lingual since Matanhy spoke English and understood Portuguese, while Nalini spoke English and managed reasonably in French.

Participants were requested to bring with them models of their fishing craft, their fishing gear and dress. They were encouraged to make and bring photographic slides illustrating their local contexts.

#### **CULTURAL EVENTS**

The most visually exciting part of the conference was to be the exhibition. A brochure was prepared for this by John Devaraj and posted to all potential participants and support organizations.

Participants were requested to bring with them models of their fishing craft, their fishing gear and dress. They were encouraged to make posters and

bring photographic slides illustrating their local contexts. We requested them to place the conference logo on the material they were bringing.

Given the multi-lingual nature of the conference, the exhibition was also a vehicle for visual and oral communication among participants and also between the participants and the media and other visitors.

Each delegation was requested to prepare a banner three-feet wide and ten-feet long, ensuring that the ends of the banner had the provision for insertion of poles provided in Rome. The banner was to have the conference logo on the left and their organization's name and country written in their native language and one of the three official languages of the conference. These banners would be utilized in Rome during the Fishworkers' Walk that was planned, as part of a major cultural event.

Each delegation was requested to prepare a banner three-feet wide and ten-feet long, ensuring that the ends of the banner had the provision for insertion of poles provided in Rome.

Each delegation was also requested to bring tape recordings of their fishing songs and other cultural music. Those who played musical instruments were encouraged to bring them, if they could. They were also requested to be ready to sing together in their own languages during the cultural event.

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### PRE-CONFERENCE MEETINGS

Pre-conference meetings at the national level were conducted between February 1984 and May 1984 in Malaysia, Sri Lanka and India. In the Philippines as many as four meeting were held across the country.

One regional meeting was held in Tumaco, Colombia, on March 12-16, 1984. In attendance were fishworkers from Chile, Peru, Colombia and Mexico. ENDA had collaborated with the National Association of Artisanal Fishermen of Colombia (ANPAC) to organize this meet, along with Morales, who was already an IAC member and playing a lead role. This was how we got to know of **Rosario Hornung** from Peru, who worked for ENDA.

Another regional meet in Senegal was attended by French and Portuguese speaking fishworkers from West African countries and Mauritius. Rosario took the organizational initiative for this, based on her experience in Colombia.

I decided to attend this African regional meet in Dakar on April 21-28, 1984. The initiative for this meeting came from the ENDA director Jacques Bugnicourt, also an IAC member. Jean Philippe Platteau, who was at the Hong Kong meeting, was also invited, considering that he had been working closely with NGOs in the region. Since, I did not follow French, he also offered to be my translator. Our presence was also a way to initiate linkages among fishers in Africa and those in Asia and Europe.

Our presence was also a way to initiate linkages among fishers in Africa and those in Asia and Europe. The African context was new to me.

The African context was new to me. The meeting started with a short stay of two days in the fishing villages of Senegal. This exposure was particularly helpful in creating a sense of solidarity among fishers from the several countries. This was followed by country presentations and group discussions. Listening to the discussions between the fishworkers, it was becoming clearer to me that the issues faced in Africa were not very different from what their counterparts in Asia experienced. Here's a summary:

- Competition with trawlers over fishing space and for fishery resources;
- Harm to the marine ecosystem by destructive fishing and pollution from land;



- Exploitation by merchants; paucity of credit;
- Lack of institutional arrangements; and
- Low social esteem and political neglect by governments and society.

However, the situation in Senegal was starkly different.

I was fascinated by the socio-religious mores of the Senegalese fishers and both their healthy self-esteem and economic status in society.

However, the situation in Senegal was starkly different. I was fascinated by the socio-religious mores of the Senegalese fishers and both their healthy self-esteem and economic status in society. Being Muslim, many had more than one wife and fathered several children. I was told that it was not uncommon for government officials to want their girls married into families of fishers. I also noticed that several currency notes carried images of fishing and fishing community, indicating their socio-economic and cultural position in society. Senegal even had a national fish.

One of the purposes of the national/regional meetings was also to select representatives to go to Rome. In Dakar I was particularly overwhelmed and impressed by the extrovert, tall, dark, small-scale fisher **Dao Gaye** who had a large built! His multi-coloured, wide-sleeved agbada added to his grandeur. When he heard I was from India, he wanted to know if I was a fan of Amitabh Bachchan, like he was.

Watching the way he conducted himself and provided leadership to the meeting, I made up my mind that the flamboyant Dao was the right choice to inaugurate

**Dao Gaye**

Dao in white with me in colour in 1983!



Fortunately, we had been able to get a benefactor in Rome who was only too willing to pay for the cost of the secretariat.

the Rome conference. We struck up a warm relationship despite not knowing each other's language. He would bear-hug me and say "John, mon petit cher ami de l'Inde (John my dear small friend from India)" and I wished him in English as "Dao, my friend the big small fisher," which I subsequently learned to say in French: "Dao, mon ami le grand petit pêcheur!"

#### IN EUROPE TO MEET THE FUNDERS

From Dakar I travelled to Brussels and then on to Amsterdam to meet up with the agencies and other contacts who had been approached by

John Garbutt from the Hong Kong secretariat. My mission was to really make person-to-person contact with the officers concerned in the funding agencies and bring them up to speed on the preparations. I also met with some small groups of sympathetic individuals who promised support and solidarity. The promises for sponsoring participants were encouraging.

I was informed that a few of the aid agencies had been coordinating among themselves and had a request for me. They wanted that a select group of fishworkers to tour Europe to meet with civil society groups and church groups, who were to make monetary contributions for development action programmes in the Global South. The idea was to create greater first-hand awareness in Europe about the socio-economic and environmental concerns of the fishworkers. We worked out a programme and I requested Cornelia Quist to coordinate the Netherlands part; she agreed.

#### RECONNAISSANCE IN ROME

My last stop—the most important one—was in Rome. The agenda here was to meet with the members of the local secretariat. It was hosted by an organization called International Documentation and Communication Centre (IDOC), with which I had been in touch during my DAGA days.

Our contact there was the efficient **Maria Stella La Commare**. She suggested that we appoint a person on a full-time basis for a period of six months, starting March 1983. We took her advice and appointed **Gloria Bellezza**, who had good contacts in Rome and some experience of organizing such events. She was

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designated the coordinator of the local secretariat. Fortunately, we had been able to get a benefactor in Rome who was only too willing to pay for the cost of the secretariat.

I met with Maria and Gloria and after spending a morning going through the proposed programme for the five days in July, we made a visit in the afternoon to decide on a venue conference venue. Gloria had identified the Domus Pacis or the Home of Peace. It was just off the famous Via Aurelia Antica, the road built in ancient Rome in 240 BCE.

It was relatively inexpensive, with basic living facilities like bunk beds, a large hall, side rooms for small groups to meet, space for the exhibition, dining hall with simple Italian catering facilities and large open spaces and gardens in the compound. The only aspect we could not check out was the food offered at Domus Pacis.<sup>10</sup> Gloria and Cornelie Quist, who arrived in Rome a week before the conference, made a search for rice and tabasco sauce to cater to the tastes of fishworkers.

It must be noted here that obtaining permission to hold a public event at the Piazza was possible only because the Commune of Rome (or was in Municipio of Rome?) had agreed to sponsor the conference.

In the hall where the plenary sessions was to be held, I took the measurements for the banner that was to bear the conference title, and the sidescreen paintings. (John Devaraj used these

measurements to design and paint, on large handloom cloth, mural-sized art pieces to adorn the walls.) We also visited the fishing port and the cooperative in Civitavecchia, some 60 km north of Rome, which the participants were to visit on the third day of the conference.

Another place to check out was Piazza Navona, the famous open public space which is marked by Baroque Roman architecture, sculptures and fountains. , Here, we had planned a cultural event for the citizens of Rome on the second day of the conference, with songs and dance, presented by the fishworkers from around the world.

It must be noted here that obtaining permission to hold a public event at the Piazza was possible only because the Commune of Rome (or was in Municipio of Rome?) had agreed to sponsor the conference. The commune was then governed by the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) and we had established contacts there initially through **Lauretta Farina**, a mentor and colleague, with whom I

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10. This finally turned out be ICFWS's Achilles heel because pasta and spaghetti, or versions thereof every day, were not the most relished food for the fishworkers. Happily, participants from south Asia brought several bottles of their hot pickles that greatly helped to spice up the food for all.



Publicity posters issued by the Municipality of Rome

had worked in the fishing village of Marianad in Kerala, India. Lauretta had by then returned to Italy after over a decade in Marianad. She was then staying in Caravaggio, Bergamo, near Milan and facilitated this great collaboration. The authorities agreed to take the responsibility of advertising the conference with a poster that was visible all over Rome. They also granted the permission to hold a short fishworkers' walk to Piazza Navona; to set up a stage in the Piazza; and a few hours in the evening for the cultural programme of traditional music and dance. A local folk group called Giramalua was also invited.

I was immensely content with my trip to Africa and Europe. It gave me confidence.

## FINAL PREPARATIONS

I got back to Trivandrum in early May 1984.

By the end of May and early June, I was informed, travel arrangements and air tickets would be ready for individuals to apply for visas. Some fishers had decided to participate in the post-conference programmes in Europe; they had to apply for separate visas for those countries. All these elaborate and often complicated procedures were handled by John Garbutt and Marion Fortgens in Hong Kong.

Marion, pitched in to help as she was well versed in making such travel

arrangements. This was a special bonus, the kind support without which many delegates would not have made it to Rome. In several Italian embassies around the world, the question arose as to why simple fishers, often unschooled, should be going to Rome. In India, passports that were sent from one city to the Italian consulate got lost in post.<sup>11</sup> The result was that a few of the leaders could not make it to Rome.<sup>12</sup>

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAO

From the time I got back from Hong Kong in August 1983, we had made several efforts to contact the UN/FAO, particularly the WCF secretariat. Some initial

efforts were made to assess the possibility of real fishworkers participating in the WFC. It soon became clear that this would be possible only if they were part of their official country delegations. Perhaps fishworkers from countries like Norway or Canada would participate in this manner. But for the vast majority of fishworkers of the world, getting representation on country delegations would be a pipe dream.

But for the vast majority of fishworkers of the world, getting representation on country delegations would be a pipe dream.

However, we resolved that even if fishworkers could not participate in the WFC, it was crucial that the ministers and other delegates from all the countries of the world attending the WFC should be made aware of ICFWS and its rationale. This could only be done by communicating directly with them during the WFC. The only means to achieve this was through a leaflet or brochure which would reach them directly in their official physical mail box, usually provided at conference lobbies.

I had some indirect knowledge of such 'surreptitious lobbying' during an IPFC/FAO Symposium on the Development and Management of Small-Scale Fisheries, held in Kyoto in May 1980. I had been requested to prepare a paper on small-scale fisheries for this conference.<sup>13</sup> This was done and sent to the conference secretariat. The secretary of the conference wrote back that the paper could not be accepted as it was too political and made unsubstantiated statements such as "the unholy alliance between MNCs and international development agencies."

I was not very pleased with this decision. I sent a copy of the paper to my friend in Japan, Junko Yamaka, who was a fire-brand activist and editor of a magazine

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11. In India there were no courier services or Speed Post at that time, only postal snail mail for documents.

12. John Devaraj, our artist, was not able to make it in time. He finally reached a day before the conference ended.

13. This paper was titled: 'Small-Scale Fisheries in Asia: Some Different Perspectives'. It was based on several of the conclusions that I had drawn during my initial research work in CDS (1977-78), highlighting the contribution of SSF to employment, food security, foreign exchange earnings and the need to support SSF for these reasons, rather than merely on social welfare grounds.



called AMPO. Junko, who in the late 1970s had done substantial research on the influence of Japanese MNCs and their role in influencing fisheries development aid from Japan, was concerned that a voice from the Third World, calling out this unholy alliance was being stifled.

Junko produced a small leaflet in Japanese and English, giving a summary of my paper and questioning the rationale of FAO in not accepting it for the conference. She then attended the conference as a journalist, and put the leaflet into the pigeonholes (that was what paper mailboxes were called) of the delegates. There was a small stir at the meeting as a result of this propaganda. Rolf Willmann was in attendance; he later gave me an account of the incident and the embarrassment it caused for the secretariat.



**With Junko Yamaka in 2013:** "Junko, who in the late 1970s, had done substantial research on the influence of Japanese MNCs and their role in influencing fisheries development aid from Japan, was concerned that a voice from the Third World, calling out this 'unholy alliance' was being stifled."



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We realized that in the current circumstances, we had to resort to similar tactics in Rome. We needed to identify WFC delegates willing to do this; then contact them give brochures informing delegates about ICFWS; and then request them to place the same in the pigeonholes of each delegate.

But first, with the help of John Devaraj, we formulated the text of the brochure and had it designed and printed. Since we were to carry these brochures to Rome, they were printed on a blue A4 card, not on our usual onionskin paper. On one side we had the text shown below, with some artwork by John Devaraj showing fishworkers riding a wave.

#### **ESTEEMED DELEGATES OF THE FAO WORLD CONFERENCE ON FISHERIES MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT**

"The hearts of fishworkers are in the sea.

Living marine resources acquire value only through the labour of fishermen. Host of other workers who process and distribute the products add more value. Together they create the wealth from the sea.

The world over, and particularly in the Third World countries, fishworkers do not receive a fair share of the wealth they create. They are victims of development and in response fishworkers have begun to organize themselves. From the Philippines, through India, Senegal, and Colombia, they unite to defend their rights and legitimate claims.

You gather here under the auspices of the FAO to formulate and endorse policies which will affect the lives of millions of fishworkers. Much of this takes place without their participation either here or in your home countries.

Having been excluded from the FAO World Conference, representatives of fishworkers and their supporters from all over the world will also gather in Rome shortly before you complete your deliberations."

#### **WE MEET TO:**

Assert ourselves; our rights  
Share the experiences of our life and struggles  
Explain our perceptions on fisheries development  
Build new links of solidarity and cooperation

#### **WE WELCOME YOU TO INTERACT WITH US EITHER AT THE**

Domus Pacis Conference Centre  
Via Torre Rossa 94  
00165 ROMA

#### **Or meet us during our cultural evening at the**

Piazza Navona on Thursday 5 July 1984 after 5 pm

On the other side of our brochure, we made five substantial counter-points, quoting from both the WFC brochure and several FAO Fisheries Reports, contesting some of the prevailing conventional views and positions of the FAO and international agencies such as the World Bank.

- The first point was on the structure of the FAO that did not permit participation of the workers.
- The second was on the indiscriminate plunder of the sea using inappropriate technology.
- The third was critical of FAO's technical assistance that favoured the large-scale fishery sector.
- The fourth was about FAO's late recognition of the worthiness of the small-scale fisheries.
- The fifth was arguing for an exclusive economic zone for small-scale fishers with preferential use rights

### **THE CONFERENCE PACK**

The efforts of John Devaraj during his visit to Penang resulted in four dossiers. One each of the four broad themes to be the focus of the Conference – the impact of fisheries development on fishers; the valorization of the small-scale fisheries; the impact of industrial fisheries on the environment; and the need for organisational efforts for fishworkers. The covers of each of the dossiers were etched with John's art. The material inside was typed out with an electric typewriter. The core material was translated into French and Spanish. Master copies were prepared and posted to Rome. All this was done in Hong Kong.

The covers of each of the dossiers were etched with John's art. The material inside was typed out with an electric typewriter. The core material was translated into French and Spanish. Master copies were prepared and posted to Rome. All this was done in Hong Kong.

In Rome, the required number of copies in each language was xeroxed, put in blue file folders with stickers with the conference logo in different sizes printed and included in the conference pack.

### **NOTE TO CITIZENS OF ROME**

As we had planned, and obtained permission for a Fishworkers' Walk to the Piazza Navona, we thought it might be a good idea to distribute a leaflet addressed to the public. It opened with: 'Dear Citizens of Rome...' The leaflet was

printed in Italian and English on the conference letter pad. It explained who we were, and why we were at the great city of Rome. It briefly stated the problems fishworkers faced and our attempts to come together internationally and share our common concerns and build solidarity. It invited them to meet and talk to us. The leaflet also provided the details of our conference programme and thanked the citizens of Rome for hosting us.

I requested a journalist to draft a series of questions, anticipating the kind of queries which would naturally be posed by international media.

#### **PRESS RELEASE**

Because I was organizing WFC, we knew that the presence of the international press and TV would be assured. We also predicted that given the colourful nature of our conference, the media would be attracted and request for permission to attend and set up interviews with participants and speakers.

In anticipation of this, I requested a journalist to draft a series of questions, anticipating the kind of queries which would naturally be posed by international media. This was to form the basis of a long press release. I was sent 14 questions and I provided the answers.

The questions covered the real need for such a conference; why it was being held in Rome alongside the FAO meeting; the composition of our participants; the structure of the proceedings; the source of finance; the definitions for small-scale artisanal fisheries and for the term fishworker; why there were so few trade unions among fishworkers; how fishworkers from very local contexts could relate to the global scenario; what impact was expected from the conference; why we were critical of FAO; our understanding of desirable fisheries development; and a concise statement of what the conference was all about.

#### **LETTER TO FAO AND WFC**

As we neared the date of the conference, the relationship between the WFC secretariat and me became tense. With our efforts to facilitate the participation of actual fishworkers at the WFC falling by the way, I shot off official letters to FAO's director-general (DG), **Edward Saouma**, and assistant DG **Jean Carroz**, along with the WFC secretary-general. It said that this inability to accommodate the 'the people whose labour created the wealth from the sea' at WFC did not help facilitate a cordial relationship between the two events.

I reached Rome on June 25, 1984. Two days later WFC began amid much fanfare.

Pierre Gillet had cleverly managed to get official accreditation to participate in

Pierre wondered if these statements were made due to the imminent presence of fishworkers from around the world in Rome.

WFC as an observer with the International Federation of Plantation, Agricultural and Allied Workers. He got back in the evening with all the details of the opening speeches of the King of Spain, the remarks by FAO's DG, and the statement of the chair of the conference. All of them mentioned the centrality of the fishermen and his family and the need to express solidarity with them. Pierre wondered if these statements were made due to the imminent presence of fishworkers from around the world in Rome.

On June 28, 1984, I addressed a letter to Jean Carroz that was hand-delivered to him, requesting permission for the circulation of the ICFWS brochure and a letter of appeal, to the WFC delegates. We enclosed copies of the same and requested him to inform Gloria Belleza of our local secretariat about his decision on this.

The WFC secretariat informed Gloria Belleza that such permission for the distribution of non-official documents could not be granted. However, in the same communication, there was a request if an official of FAO could formally participate in ICFWS. I was not too pleased. We had spent so much time, thought, energy, and resources in making the brochure and had carried it all the way to Rome.

D-day was July 2. Henry Claireaux surreptitiously inserted the ICFWS documents into the pigeonholes just before a coffee break. By the time his tedious task was nearly complete, the FAO security staff caught up with him.

We placed the materials in envelopes for ease of dropping them in the pigeonholes of the fisheries ministers and official participants from well over 150 countries, liberation movements, and other organizations as well as official observers from unions and other agencies having 'status' with the UN. All this effort ended up wasted. We discussed the matter at the local secretariat.

Earlier the plan was for Pierre to take our brochures and place them in the pigeonholes over the course of WFC. This

was not possible now. We needed another plan. Pierre proposed a solution. He had contacted an official delegate whom he knew well and could be entrusted with the task. The elderly **Henry Claireaux** was a former member of the French parliament, representing the little islands of France off Newfoundland in Canada, called Saint-Pierre and Miquelon. The former senator was a staunch advocate of the small-scale beach landing dory boat. This boat was his life passion and he recommended it for all fishing communities. Being a gentle old maverick, he willingly accepted to use his official position to place our brochure in the pigeonholes of the delegates.

D-day was July 2. Henry Claireaux surreptitiously inserted the ICFWS documents into the pigeonholes just before a coffee break. By the time his tedious task was

nearly complete, the FAO security staff caught up with him. But given his age, diplomatic status, and argumentative nature, he was excused for his subversive action. This did create quite a stir in the FAO ranks.

I was livid. It seemed like an unnecessary provocation. It added to the bitterness in my relationship with Jean Carroz.<sup>14</sup>

On July 3, a day before our conference kickoff, I called Carroz over the phone. Since we were not allowed to make our presence felt at WFC and were denied permission to distribute the brochure, I said, he should expect reciprocal action when the FAO representative arrived at ICFWS. As it turned out, FAO did not send the designated observer to our conference. This saved us both an embarrassment.<sup>15</sup>

This event may have been the reason why the WFC chairperson, who was Mexico's fisheries secretary, formally requested Carroz to provide information about the upcoming fishworkers conference during their end-of-the-day briefings.<sup>16</sup>

#### **EXHIBITION: TO BE OR NOT TO BE**

On July 1, three days before the conference, Jeremy Herklots arrived with his wife Rosemary, all enthused and geared up, ready to take up arrangements for the exhibition. But we had no idea of the space requirement. There was no way we could get information from the delegates about the nature and quantity of material they were carrying for the exhibition. They were already on their way to Rome from the distant towns and villages of 36 countries. How were we to plan the number of display boards and tables, both rather expensive, to be arranged?<sup>17</sup>

Jeremy made a quick trip to the British Council in Rome and used his influence and contacts to get them to agree to lend their large stack of huge display boards with wheels and folding tables for the exhibition. This was the council's contribution. Jeremy typed out a thank you note to the council on his portable typewriter, on the conference letter pad, and got me to sign it.

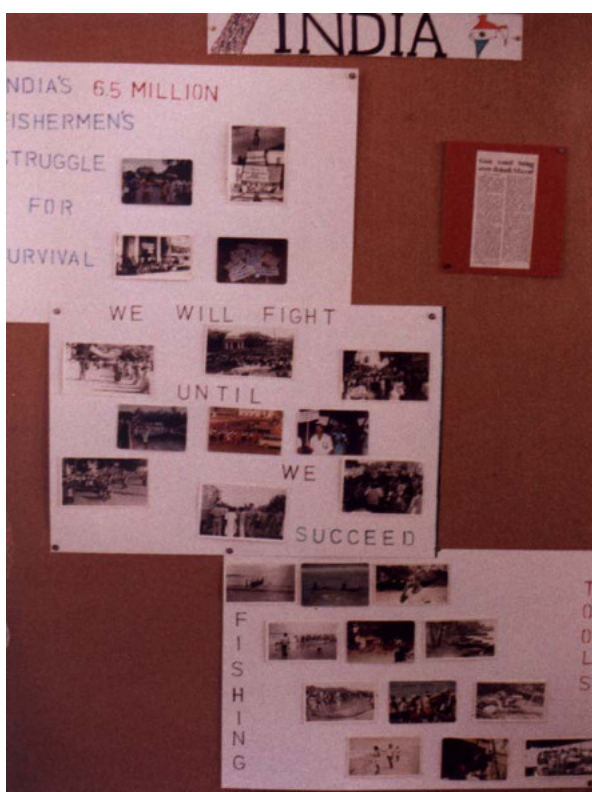
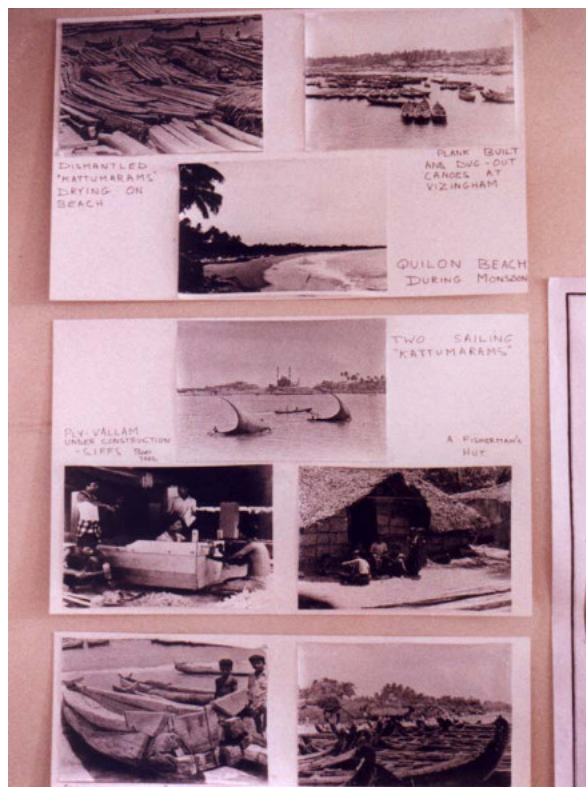
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14. I was given to understand later that Jean Carroz did not harbour any ill feelings against me or small-scale fisheries! However, a combination of circumstances, and perhaps even some negative press against FAO's inability to deal with the issue of representation of fishworkers, was responsible for his attitude.

15. The representative was Michi Hotta, whom I did not personally know at that time. He eventually turned up to witness the cultural event at the Piazza Novona, along with a close friend of mine in FAO, Dr. Francis Christy Jr.

16. Much later, we learned, that this request was made at the prompting of Margarita Lizarraga, who was staff in the Representation of Mexico in Rome. She had been closely following the moves being made by us from her vantage position in Rome. She was one of those important, silent supporters whom we did not know.





**Preparing for the conference:**  
Handmade posters and info sheets  
from different countries



Jeremy made a quick trip to the British Council in Rome and used his influence and contacts to get them to agree to lend their large stack of huge display boards with wheels and folding tables for the exhibition.

#### **REST ROOM TALKS LED TO THE VATICAN!**

The commotion Claireaux had created led to other propitious dimensions. Pierre and I had moved over to Domus Pacis on the evening of July 2. In his humorous manner, Pierre narrated in gory detail the valiant efforts of Claireaux and the struggle with the security staff. But the best was yet to come.

That afternoon at WCF, during a rest room break, Pierre noticed another person wearing a priest's collar. After they had greeted each other, the priest got talking about the incident at the pigeonholes. He was keen to know if Pierre knew more about this fishworker's conference.

Pierre filled him in, with his characteristic charm. This was when the priest revealed that he was the official representative of the Holy See (Vatican). He told Pierre that he would be pleased to arrange for the fishworkers an audience with the Pope, the Big Fisherman. Pierre then showed the priest the tiny little cross on his shirt pocket which he always wore to mark his identity as a priest.

Pierre, Nalini, and I had earlier talked about the possibility of an audience with the Pope for those who wanted to go. But this could be tried only after the conference was over; arranging it during the event could have sent wrong signals about the secular nature of our event. Nalini was not at all in favour of the idea. However, after Pierre explained how difficult it would be to get an audience with the Pope—some wait for a year or two to get a suitable date—we had set aside the idea.

But this opportunity was different: an unexpected fast-track appointment. On the day ICFWS began, we learned that an audience was confirmed for 11.00 am on the July 9 with Pope John Paul II, the first non-Italian Pope, who supported Poland's Solidarity Trade Union.

We decided to not announce this formally at the conference.

#### **THE MORNING BEFORE**

That night we slept in bunk beds of the residence where all

He told Pierre that he would be pleased to arrange for the fishworkers an audience with the Pope, the Big Fisherman.

- 
17. However, as the delegates began to arrive at the venue on July 3, 1984, began to unpack gradually, and brought out their exhibition items, we noted that the response was overwhelming. The fear that we had grossly underestimated the space requirements for the event suddenly dawned on us! Rome. She was one of those important, silent supporters whom we did not know.

...we learned that an audience was confirmed for 11.00 am on the July 9 with Pope John Paul II, the first non-Italian Pope, who supported Poland's Solidarity Trade Union.

of us were to stay over the coming week. Breakfast on the July 3 was our first encounter with the dining room of Domus Pacis. It was certainly not the most enticing breakfast we had since arriving in Rome.

Based on the ticketing details, Marion had prepared a list detailing the arrivals of participants in Rome. However, we had no information if indeed they had taken the long trips from their respective villages/towns and boarded the flights. Just good faith and optimism that things would happen as per plan!

We waited eagerly for the auspicious moment, the arrival of the first delegates. We wanted to be around to welcome them to this event that was finally going to materialize after six long months of collective hard work and excitement.

Just before noon the delegates from Sri Lanka arrived. They got off their taxi at the parking lot of the Domus Pacis. As they began picking up their bags and fishing equipment for the exhibition, Pierre turned to me, hugged my shoulder, and said, "John, I think we will have a conference, after all!"

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6.

# Rome Conference in Pictures

**Inaugural  
Session**



**Prof. Johan  
Galtung**  
addressing the  
Conference







Plenary Session in Progress



**Left top:**  
Group sessions

**Left bottom:**  
Listening to national  
presentations

Clarification sessions—  
Fishers with Supporters.







"In the hall where the plenary sessions was to be held, I took the measurements for the banner that was to bear the conference title, and the sidescreen paintings. **John Devaraj** used these measurements to design and paint, on large handloom cloth, mural-sized art pieces to adorn the walls."

Discussions by the African groups.





**The Exhibition:  
Posters and Models**



**Top:** Joe Valencia exhibition preparation

**Bottom:** Preparing models.





**Top:** Exhibition preparation.

**Bottom:** The Display Panels.





Posters and boat and net models from **India**

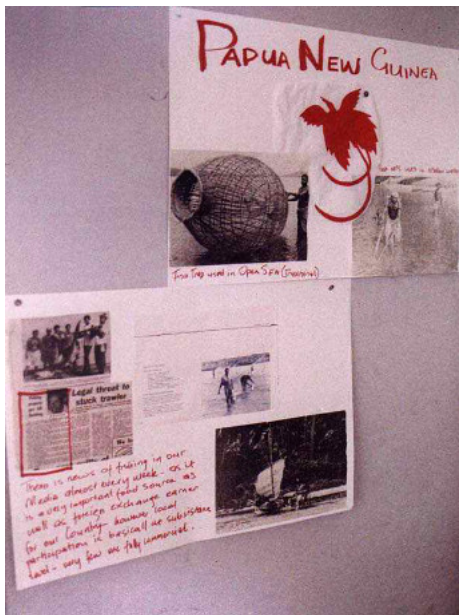


Poster from **Chile**

Poster from **Sri Lanka**





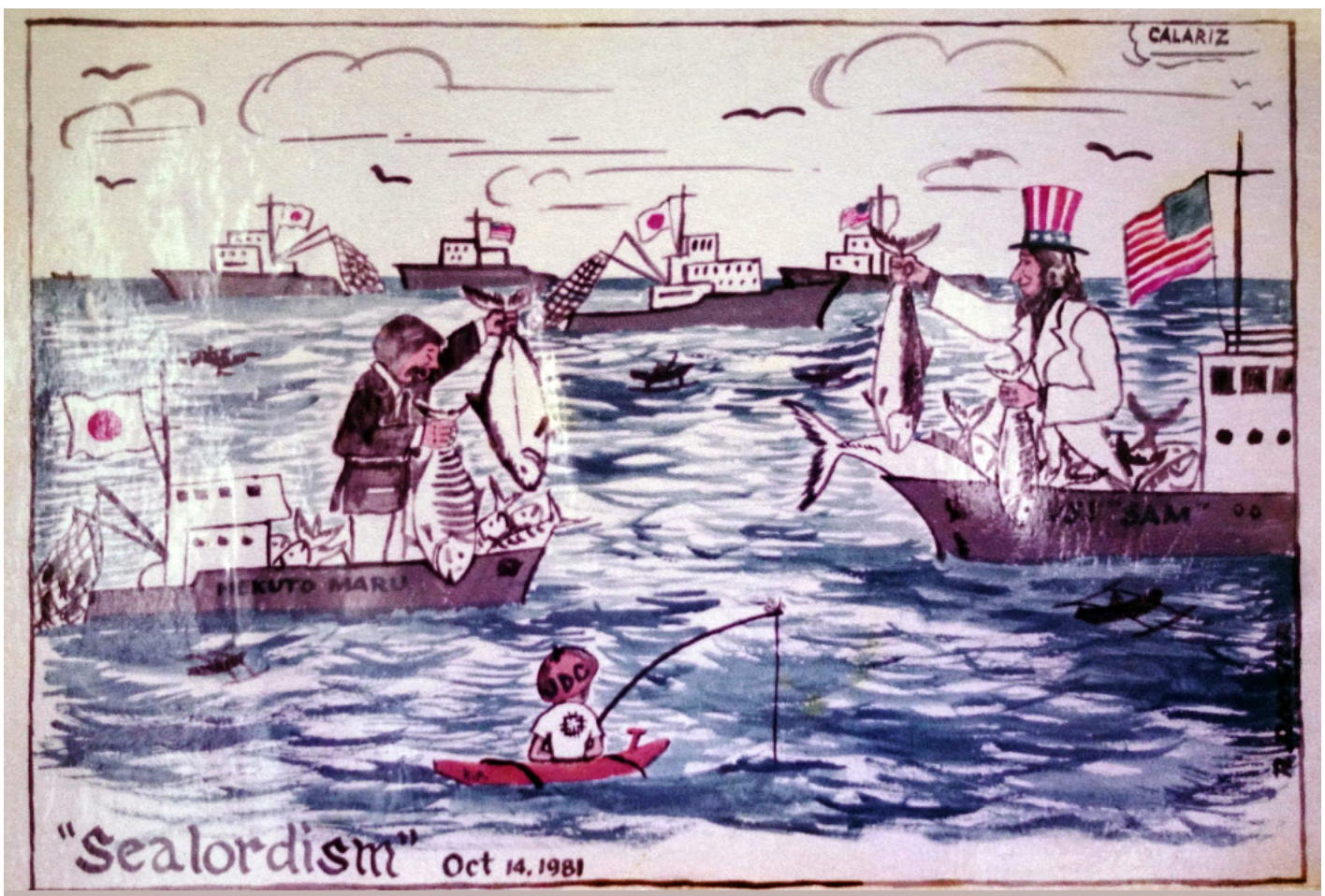


Posters from **Papua New Guinea**



Posters from **Philippines**

Poster of **CALARIZ**, Philippines





## Fishworkers March to the Piazza Novona



July 1984 rally in Rome: Delegates at Piazza Navona





Latin American delegates at Piazza Navona with **Rosario Hornung** and **Luis Morales** (in black)



Delegates from Africa and Europe at the Fishworkers March



**Africa-South Korea Solidarity**



**Fishworkers from Indonesia** protesting violence against fishers



**Sri Lankan** Delegates at the Fishworkers March



**Delegates from India:** Velayuthan, Vijayan, Lauretta, Nalini, Matanhy, John, Pierre, Alice



**Cultural Event  
at Piazza  
Navona**



**Jacques Bugnicourt  
and Jean-Philippe  
Platteau** (Standing)  
watching the cultural  
event at Piazza Navona



**Pierre Gillet** helping with stage arrangements for the Cultural Event



Preparing the **Philippine** Presentation

Inter-continental Group



Gathering at the Piazza after the Fishworkers' Walk





## Cultural Event at Piazza Novona



Songs of protest  
at Piazza Navona



**Rosario Hornung**  
and **Dao Gaye** at the  
Piazza Novona

Delegates from  
**Mauritania and Senegal** dancing





**Cultural Event  
at Piazza  
Novona**



**Reciting poetry  
at Piazza Navona**



**Dao Gaye** exhibiting more than his fishing skills





## Report Writing



The final Rome Conference Report was hand-written in three languages by John Devaraj and then printed in Hong Kong.



**Juan Crespin Torres**, fishworker from Peru. A key point from his fiery speech on the last day of the Conference made history. He suggested that supporters should set up their own initiative to encourage the national actions of fishworkers. This became the prime motivation for initiating the **International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF)** in 1986.







## Meeting the Pope After the Conference

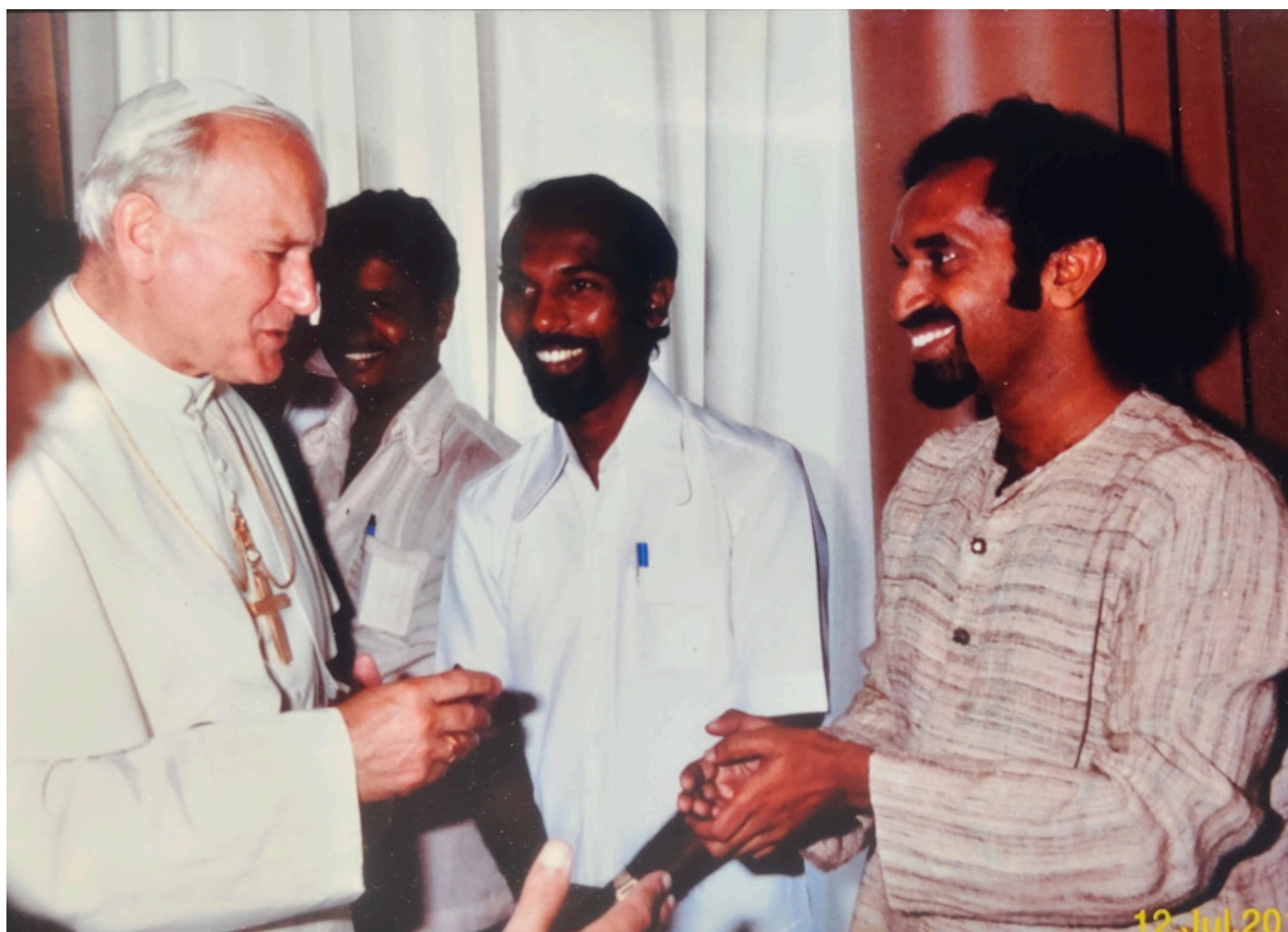
**Pope John Paul II**, the first non-Italian Pope, who supported Poland's Solidarity Trade Union, spent an hour with the delegates. There was much comradery and laughter and an exchange of gifts. Many of the fishers – Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian -- presented the Pope with models of boats which they had brought along with them for the exhibition.

The Pope also said while posing for this photo: "It is a blessing for me to be amidst the fisherfolk of the world"



**Meeting the Pope  
After the Conference**

The Pope gave a rosary to each one of the participants. On being introduced as the Secretary-General of the event, the Pope said to me: **"You are on the right path"**



The lighter moments!  
I do not remember the joke!





## Post Script: Memories of Rome

"The fishworkers who gathered in Rome did not come from the same country, they did not have the same religion, did not speak the same language, undertook very different types of fishing. And yet we understood each other perfectly. We felt part of the same community."

**- Pierre Gueguen, fishworker from France**

I write this at the age of 73 years. I was 33 when the Rome conference took place. Looking back, I realize that most of the participants, particularly the fishworkers who attended, must have been older than me. This dawned on me while trying to contact those who were there, who can recount their memories of the conference. Many of the fishworkers had passed on.

Other than the flamboyant Dao Gaye, there were many other fishworkers with whom I enjoyed special relationships of solidarity for at least a few years after the Rome Conference. They have left me with fond memories. Let me mention some names: **Victoria Mora** (Costa Rica); **Juan Crespín Torres** (Peru); **Melecio Pérez Chan** (Mexico); **Ivan Arismendi** (Chile); **Dao Gaye** (Senegal); **Babacar Niasse** (Mauritania); **Sofronio Balagtas** (the Philippines); **Joyachen Antony** (India); **Velayudhan K.K.** (India); and **Bin Warjan Syamsuri** (Indonesia).

Today's global movement of fishworkers stands on their shoulders.

Happily, I was able to touch base with **Pierre Gueguen** from France, one of the many industrial fishworkers who attended the Rome conference. Pierre is now 80 years old. He narrated his experience of Rome to Alain Le Sann, saying:

"In 1984 I was a skipper on an industrial trawler, but also had experience on artisanal tuna boats. The fishworkers who gathered in Rome did not come from the same country, they did not have the same religion, did not speak the same language, undertook very different types of fishing. And yet we understood each other perfectly. We felt part of the same community. This experience motivated me to take up work in several Southern countries—Senegal, Peru, Indonesia—with artisanal fishers, often as a trainer. I lived with them in their villages. Accompanied them out at sea to improve their knowledge of navigational tools. We were part of the same world. We got on perfectly. I was also able to see the important role played by women, a subject that had been so well highlighted at the Rome conference.

I have two grandsons who are fishermen. One owns a sardine seiner

and is doing well. The other is training at the Guilvinec Fishing School.

I have the feeling that fishing is disappearing in our region and in Lorient, particularly under pressure from environmental organizations who consider dolphins to be more important than fishermen.

I continued fishing until I was 75 with my small boat. My doctor has forbidden me to fish professionally, but I continue as an amateur. At 80, I cannot imagine ever stopping."

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There were other supporters with whom I renewed my contacts and obtained their reminiscences of the Rome conference.

There was **John Garbutt** and his wife **Marion Fortgens**. Both, by virtue of handling the responsibilities of raising funds for the Rome conference and making the travel and visa arrangements for the fishers to travel to Rome, had an 'insider perspective.' Here is what they had to say:

"The conference was the result of the collaboration of a group of people with varying talents, being able to work together to make this happen. There were those planning and organizing the meeting in Rome and for the international participants from many countries and cultures; the content material was presented in an attractive form with art work and clear texts which contributed to the quality of the discussions; the financial supports which were required at the right time came from several places in the world and were raised in amounts and at the times needed so that most things planned could take place as hoped.

The Rome conference had a special energy, which could be experienced, for example, in the event held in the Piazza Navona, a beautiful square in the heart of Rome. It was also evident in the visit to a port where the fishermen lived and worked. Finally, it also was present in the surprise invitation from the Vatican to visit the 'home of a fisherman' at St Peters and meet the Pope after the conference was over.

Part of the energy in Rome also had its negative and conflict-related aspects. In many countries, working fishermen were exploited or oppressed by powerful interests with, for example, large trawlers from other countries entering local waters. These tensions spilled over at times into the gathering.

Just before the conference began, there were important participants blocked or delayed from leaving their homes to come to the meeting

due to visa requirements. In some cases this required hard efforts to arrange for their participation, even at a very late stage.

Also revealed later was the presence at times of a few invited or uninvited persons who were not in solidarity with the real struggles of the fishermen and had links with other interests working in conflict with the fishing communities in certain countries. That shows how negative energy will often be present but the positive energies did not allow it to inflict damage during the conference.”

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Or consider **James Smith**, who chanced upon information about the conference and went on to become a pillar of support. In 1972 he worked as a deckhand on a lobster fishing boat in Ireland. Then trained in aquaculture in France and Israel. Thereafter he wanted to devote his life working in the maritime sector in an international capacity, but with a social objective. He read about the Rome conference in an article in some grey literature. It was in a typed publication he found in the Ecole de Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) where Prof. Ignacy Sachs was director. Here is what James had to say about the Rome conference and how it influenced his life and work:

“I am afraid my memory is a little hazy. Following my letter to John Kurien, I was very pleased to be invited to participate in the Rome conference. I remember the conference was an audacious event, organized at the same time as FAO was holding in the same city a major meeting aimed at designing fisheries policy for the future. The ‘alternative conference’ was an exhilarating but exhausting experience. I did a lot of translation and interpreting. One thing I do recollect is how impressed I was by some of the Indian participants’ command of English, which was greatly superior to mine. My upbringing had been bicultural, and French had really become my main language.

In retrospect, the Rome conference in 1984 appears to me as the beginning of a life’s work. There was a participant at this meeting called Simon Kerzerho, from Brittany. He informed Francois Bellec of what I did at the conference, and Francois subsequently invited me to join the Groupe Mer at CCFD, an informal group of people with a life commitment in the maritime sector. Almost two years later, CCFD offered me a job as a co-funding officer. This was just about the time (1986) that preparations were on for the Trivandrum meeting, where the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) was founded. I immediately asked CCFD to fund it and to allow me to attend the meeting, to which I had been invited. I was honoured to become a founder member of ICSF.



My discovery of the Indian movement was a milestone educational experience. It showed me what could be the role of supporters in a planned and concerted effort to improve recognition of the living and working conditions of people who would normally have difficulty in expressing their point of view in official circles. I discovered how supporters could act as intermediaries to produce rights and laws, both at the national and international levels.

At CCFD as a salaried person from 1986, I had set up a Programme Mer, which was an innovation in the sense that it was an international rather than a geographical programme. It enabled me to support, by funding, the organizational efforts of artisanal fishers in countries as diverse as Chile, Brazil, Peru, India, the Philippines, Senegal, and Madagascar. I also established a relationship with French fishermen from Brittany, and organized several conferences aimed at informing fishworkers' organizations about the working conditions and problems of their fellow fishers in various countries, and about international events affecting their sector.

Another aspect of the Programme Mer was the support that the CCFD gave to the creation of Seafarers' Centres in France. It was through this work that I met Patrick Chaumette, professor of maritime social law at the University of Nantes. We had many exchanges by email, and both supported the idea of setting up an Observatory of Seafarers' Rights, which eventually came into being in the early 1990s.

It was with my experience of the way that university professors and researchers in India could produce law through working in close contact with people in various—and even the lowliest—occupations in a particular sector, that I was convinced that there was an important task to be accomplished by the Observatory of Seafarers Rights.

In 1995, I left CCFD. Before leaving, I was most pleased to be allowed to spend three weeks writing up my experience at CCFD, and I was heartened by Prof. John Kurien's acceptance to grant me accommodation at the Centre for Development Studies in Trivandrum to accomplish this task."

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**Prof Johan Galtung**, the famous peace activist, now 93, was a star speaker at the Rome conference. Here is what he remembered of the event four decades ago:

"Of course I remember the Rome meeting in 1984. The meeting was very broad and took place parallel to a FAO meeting on similar topics.

For most of the participants this was the first time the theme had been internationalized, which gave a basis for comparisons, learning from each other, and for solidarity.

The four major arguments, as I remember them, were:

- Traditional fishing is a way of life, not only a way of making a living, involving the whole family, neighbours, villages, communities, millions of people worldwide.
- Labour-intensive fishing can pay much more attention to detail, preservation of species, care for the environment and mutual aid in the fishing community under crisis.
- It is not a question of traditional or modern, but both—walking on two legs, if one fails there is the other. In fact, some of the small-scale fishing present at the meeting were not that small-scale.
- Traditional, small-scale fishing are often closer to poor segments of the population badly in need of fish as a source of protein, eliminating at least some middlemen.
- Hope this is useful and thanks for all our cooperation.”

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And then there was **Nalini Nayak**, who was responsible for me getting into the world of fishing communities in 1973. She along with Cornelia Quist took on the task of ensuring that the role of women in fishing communities was never pushed to the sidelines of the Rome conference. This is how she remembers Rome 1984:

“Recalling the Rome conference still flashes a warm flame in my heart. That spirit of togetherness of fishworkers and supporters from around the world. Everyone reaching out across language barriers, food differences, even assisting people to get used to living facilities they were not familiar with, like western toilets, soft beds, and blankets!

The conference itself was a great learning experience. Listening to academic voices but more so the fishers themselves—all emphasizing the importance of the artisanal fishery and the need to safeguard this way of life. I recall noticing how different peoples expressed the same ideas. The Latin Americans with their articulate speeches, the Africans with their stories, the Asians with their songs and examples of organizing.

The need for fishworkers to organize themselves for recognition and rights emerged very strongly and the call for continued support was also clearly articulated. This was also a great achievement that fishworkers were able to see the need to organize, distinguishing themselves from the supporters who were needed to work in the background. So there was conceptual clarity, which for me has been the success of the processes that emerged later and kept going for the following 40 years.

But what touched me deeply was an incident in a group discussion when women from France, who had accompanied their husbands, were shy to speak. But when they did, they spoke about their husbands being away for a month or more fishing, while they managed the homes alone and got busy when their husbands came back. But they were not considered fishworkers and, I later learned, that they had no social security either.

This is what set me thinking. What were these long voyages about? Are they actually artisanal fishers, similar to ours in India who also go out for a week sometimes? Why were these women so reluctant and shy when our fisherwomen in India are so loud and outspoken?

In Rome we used the term 'fishworker' and not fisherman, including both men and women, nobody really objected but not all were convinced. I understood that this needed to be taken further as women in the West were really being excluded. I understood that there are several things the 'developed' West could learn from the Third World.

I was a young feminist at the time and these issues fed into my search for a feminist perspective in fisheries. I was aware of the way modern fishing technology raped the sea bed, just as fishermen in India related violently to their women in India. Violence and exploitation were an expression of patriarchy and we needed a more nurturing approach to fisheries.

These sentiments and realizations later led to the Women in Fisheries programme in ICSF, which Cornelie Quist and I coordinated in six countries from 1992 to 1996. This created ripples, with academics like Barbara Nies being inspired by the newsletter of ICSF Yemaya and organizing an international conference of women in fisheries in Newfoundland. Also fishery institutional leaders like Meryl Williams moving these issues forward to the gender fisheries and aquaculture network."

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**Cornelie Quist**, who was a friend of mine since 1980, narrated her experience of Rome, where she helped a great deal in the organization and took the initiative to facilitate an exposure to the Netherlands for some of the fishworkers who participated. Cornelie reflected in detail:

“I came to Rome a week before the conference to work with Gloria Bellezza on general logistics. I remember that the team of organizers of the ICFWS in Rome were all very dedicated and energetic people. We all worked on a voluntary basis, no money was wasted on luxuries.

I remember how Gloria and I crisscrossed Rome together on her scooter to arrange all kinds of things, including buying rice and hot chilli sauce for the dietary needs of Asian participants.

One of my main tasks was organizing the exhibition on the theme ‘The Life, Work and Struggle of Fishermen’. At this exhibition, small-scale traditional fishers and fishworkers displayed paintings, photographs, posters, models of fishing boats, fishing gear and accessories that expressed their work and life, their struggles and aspirations.

Another task of mine was organizing a cultural programme with songs of fishermen and fish workers, storytelling and poetry reading. And I was involved in organizing the Fishworkers’ Walk, seeking support from the citizens of Rome. The Fishworkers’ Walk and gathering in Piazza Navona was one of the highlights of ICFWS, with delegates from each country singing their traditional songs and displaying other cultural expressions in their cultural attire. A leaflet was distributed to the public attending the march, explaining the reason for this Fishworkers’ Walk and asking for support. In these activities, I worked closely with Joe Valencia, a Filipino refugee living in Rome, and Indian artist John Devaraj.

During ICFWS, I became aware of the value of the great diversity of knowledge, practices, and experiences of small-scale fishing communities worldwide. Two events left a deep impression with me. One was the ceremony, where delegates commemorated all those fishworkers who had been killed in the struggle to defend their livelihood and life, shot by armed gangs or military who protected businessmen and corrupt politicians. The other event was the informal meeting Nalini Nayak and I organized with women fishworkers from India, Canada, Thailand, France and the Philippines. From the women’s discussion, it became clear that throughout the world, the industrialization of fisheries has led to women losing space and taking on heavier responsibilities of caring for the family and community at the expense of their own development. It was concluded that a future



conference should also address the role of women in fisheries and fishing communities.

Another role I took on with great enthusiasm was to participate in the publicity campaign around ICFWS in Europe. For this, I took a group of five delegates from ICFWS to the Netherlands. They were: Matanhy Saldanha of the Indian National Forum of Fishworkers; Alexander Benedicto from NGO Phildhraa-Cendhraa and trade unionist Delfin Carlos, both from the Philippines; trade unionist Raul Olivera from Uruguay; and Jorge Elicier Rivera Franco of ANPAC, the Association of Artisanal Fishermen of Colombia.

A publicity campaign was organized in cooperation with the India Committee of the Netherlands and the Third World Centre Groningen, a centre for the encounter, awareness, education and documentation of the struggles of people in the Global South. The delegates met with the press, politicians and solidarity activists. Again, all this was organized by highly committed volunteers, who also invited the ICFWS delegates to stay in their family homes.

The delegates also met with Hulp in Nood, the association of small-scale fishermen in the Northern Netherlands, which at that time was uniquely led by a woman, Marjet Witkamp.

Interestingly, many common problems were identified between the small-scale traditional fishers of the Netherlands and those of the Global South. In the Netherlands, small-scale traditional fishers opposed the introduction of the ITQ system, which was supported by their more powerful colleagues who believed in “the race for fish”. Small-scale traditional fishermen valued more a social life ashore and fishing practices that were more in harmony with the ecosystem.

The delegates visited the largest shrimp processing company in Europe, Heiploeg International, which also imports shrimp from the tropics. A visit to the Dutch shipyard company Conoship, which had partnerships with shipyards in India and Indonesia to build trawlers for deployment in Indian and Indonesian waters, was cancelled at the last minute.

The publicity campaign in the Netherlands was followed up with the publication of a book on the situation and problems of small-scale fisheries and fish workers in the Netherlands and the Global South (published in 1985) and several awareness-raising activities organized by the Third World Centre Groningen in collaboration with Hulp in Nood, such as a public debate and an exhibition on World Food Day in 1985.

For me, personally, ICFWS or the Rome conference, as we call it in inner circles, was an enormous inspiring experience that influenced my perspective and direction in work and life.

Of the people who made ICFWS possible, I have warm friendships to this day with John Kurien, Nalini Nayak and the artist John Devaraj, who have inspired me greatly and are dear to me.

In my view ICFWS can be seen as the beginning of a long process of challenging the prevailing narrative in fisheries policymaking. ICFWS brought real people from the ground, fishers and fishworkers, at the doorsteps of the policy makers at the international level, confronting them with their daily realities and their future concerns. ICFWS was also the start of an awareness process among fishers and fishworkers and their organizations, particularly those in the Global South, about the importance of international solidarity and the need to cooperate at the global level, that eventually led to the formation of the two global SSF Forums in the late 1990s.

ICFWS brought ‘supporters’ together—social activists, researchers, educators, technicians—who found each other in a collective mission to cooperate at the global level. Several of them, including myself, joined the founding of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) in 1986, and its members to this day, dedicating their time and resources to the collective cause of people-oriented, equitable and ecologically sustainable fisheries development.

Inspired by the experiences of the women fishworkers attending ICFWS, Nalini Nayak and I became the driving force behind ICSF's pioneering international Women in Fisheries programme, which began in the early 1990s and culminated in 2010 with a global event that for the first time brought together a broad network of women fishworkers, SSF organisations, NGOs, researchers and policy makers, to define together a global shared gender agenda for sustaining life and livelihoods in fishing communities.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of ICFWS, from which were born ICSF and the two global SSF forums. This year also marks 10 years of the SSF Guidelines, which have been championed by ICSF and the two global forums from the beginning. Even though there are successes achieved, especially at the local level, a real transition in fisheries did not take place and the current situation of SSF worldwide remains challenging with new threats such as climate change and the Blue Economy. New inspiring global social movements have also emerged, such as the food sovereignty movement and the movement to reclaim the commons. Perhaps a good time to get together again, fishworkers

and supporters, those who aspire social change, the older generation together with the younger generation, to take stock of what has been achieved in these 40 years and what our future direction will be.”

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From Chile there was **Hector Luis Morales**, who was a member of the planning committee and played a key role in animating the fishworkers from Latin America. This is how he reflected on the significance of the Rome conference:

“The Rome conference was the beginning of serious international concern for artisanal fishing and their organizations. It was a meeting space between diverse cultures, which continued over time. The conference opened a path for fishworkers in the developing world to relate with international NGOs in the Western world. It was the motivation for the development of CONAPACH in Chile.”

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My respects to those who were involved in rallying to Rome  
but are no more with us:

- Pierre Gillet
- Desmond D'Souza
- Matanhy Saldanha
- George Ninan
- Junko Yamaka
- Tsurumi Yoshiyuki
- Jacques Bugnicourt
- Anil Agarwal
- Jeremy Herklots
- S.M. Mohamed Idris
- Rajendran
- Johan Galtung
- Dao Gaye
- Laretta Farina
- Henry Claireaux

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# First Steps to Moving Forward from Rome

THE LETTER INITIATING THE IDEA OF  
A COLLECTIVE IN SUPPORT OF FISHWORKERS<sup>18</sup>

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18. I obtained this letter from Cornelia Quist who has kept all the copies of my correspondences with her.

**June 5, 1985**

Dear Friends,

This letter comes to you with warm fraternal greetings.

I write with two objectives in mind: first, to give you some news of events following the International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters (ICFWS) and, second, to 'sound out' with you, for your consideration and comments, the concrete idea of forming a 'collective' of the supporters of fishworkers.

#### **AFTER ROME**

Those of you who were present in Rome in July 1984 during ICFWS will recall that at the level of the fishworkers, the strategy for the future course of action was laid down rather clearly. In brief: it stressed the primacy of building up national movements of fishworkers; called for more sub-regional communication and solidarity; and proposed that a representative international forum be taken up later. The role that supporters are to play was, however, not spelt out so clearly except to the suggestion of Peruvian fishworker Juan Crespín Torres that supporters should have their own initiative. My understanding is that this was the result of the severe lack of time (ICFWS should have been planned for six days rather than five) and is hardly a reflection of any conscious relegation of the role of supporters.

#### **NEWS FROM THE FISHWORKERS FRONT**

On the fishworkers' front you will probably be glad to note that some positive initial steps have been taken in keeping

with the 'hopes for action' spelt out at Rome. The Asian Cultural Forum for Development (ACFOD) took the initiative of calling a fishworkers meet in November 1984 at which persons who were at Rome also participated and resolved to widen and deepen the contacts and solidarity. Exchange programmes and study ventures have also been spelt out.

In the African region plans are afoot to organize in Cape Verde a meeting of fishworkers from French and Portuguese speaking countries. They propose to take up the question of appropriate technologies for small-scale fisheries and the need for fishworkers organizations as the main items for discussion.

In the African context the exchange of views between fishworkers is a very new initiative that began only after the Rome meet was announced. (The first regional meet in Dakar, Senegal, was held in April 1984.) In this short time the steps taken to evolve a common understanding of problems and potential has been encouraging, to say the least.

In the Latin American region we have more news of the steps taken by fishworkers to contact counterparts and supporters in Europe. Some 'cooperation agreements' have been signed between fishworkers unions in Uruguay and Spain. Contacts have also been made in the Netherlands. The Colombian fishworkers' union ANPAC has taken up the initiative of following up on the Rome resolutions. They hope to get the active collaboration of counterparts in Brazil to organize this. Fishworkers' organizations in Chile will also join these efforts.

#### **COLLECTIVE ACTION BY SUPPORTERS?**

Between July 1984 and writing this letter, I have had occasion to meet with and hear about numerous activities of supporters to the movements of fishworkers in their respective countries and at the regional level. I have also received letters from organizations concerned with fishery issues, asking how they can contribute to the cause of the movement of fishworkers. My colleagues in Trivandrum have given much thought on the issues wherein supporters must necessarily take a lead role in helping the fishworkers' movements nationally, regionally, and internationally.

#### **THE OBJECTIVES OF THE 'COLLECTIVE'**

The basic idea is to form a small 'collective' of concerned persons from all over the world who are convinced about the

need to extend support to fishworkers' movements. In this new era of world fishing the objectives of this collective will be primarily to: (in the words of the pamphlet announcing ICFWS):

- set up a network for global monitoring and dissemination of information regarding the impact of planned fisheries development schemes on the fishworkers.
- suggest concrete alternative action programmes to devise just, participatory and sustainable fisheries development and management programmes making special attempts to ensure their actual implementation.

You will perhaps agree with the importance of these two tasks as well as the need to begin work on the first, so that before the end of the decade we have a mechanism by which it is possible to make timely assessments about the state and well-being of fishworkers' consequent to the new strategies for fisheries development adopted by national governments and international agencies. As regards the second we have already so many isolated examples of genuinely progressive and new alternatives in technology, forms of organization, styles of living appropriate for and appropriable by fishworkers. The lacuna lies in the lack of popular awareness about these ventures and, consequently, the relative lack of spread even to areas where it may be feasible to implement them. Very little attempt has also been made to draw general lessons from the many concrete experiences the world over.

Both the objectives, you will agree, are as demanding as they are important. This is all the more reason why a small group of persons, largely known to each other, who have the strong inclinations to identify with these tasks, should join hands to get the assignment on its way.

#### **A STRUCTURE FOR THE COLLECTIVE**

The structure of the 'collective' as it would finally emerge is best illustrated in the schematic diagram shown in Figure 1. Initially the collective will be made up of individual fishworkers' supporters in various parts of the world who agree to endorse the idea of the collective; are convinced about the urgency and importance of its objectives and can agree to spend a certain amount of time every year to work to further the objectives. (I feel that you are one such person). The collective would need a 'coordinating group' and would have a small 'secretariat' headed preferably (at least initially) by one member of the collective.



Once the collective is formed it can then be formally registered as a legal entity with an appropriate name, articles of association and so forth.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FUNCTIONING

Thereafter we would solicit formal support for the collective from fishworkers' organizations, non-governmental organizations, funding agencies and individuals who in principle endorse its objectives and seek to cooperate or benefit from its activities.

It may be appropriate to mention that there are strong indications that such support to the collective will be forthcoming from several sources all over the world.

Simultaneously the collective will attempt to facilitate the creation of a series of 'cells' in various existing organizations (most of whom will support the collective as mentioned above) to form the global network of decentralized collection, storage, analysis and dissemination points. In areas where no such on-going organizations exist the collective may have to 'fill the gaps' by initiating such 'cells' that will draw sustenance, at least initially, straight from the collective.

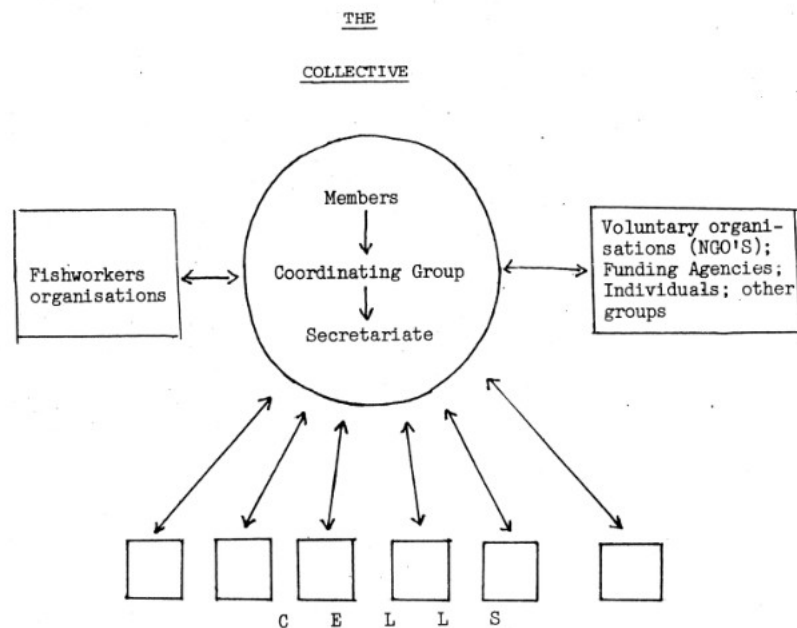


Figure 1: A schematic diagram showing the 'structure and linkages' of the Collective.

The coordinating group should consist of a handful of persons drawn from the various geographic areas and representative of the various disciplines/concerns of the collective. This group should be responsible for the overall policy implementation; should have a tenure of two-three years after which a larger proportion of the members will give way to new comers, with no person serving more than two terms.

The secretariat will be run by one member of the collective—the only member whose services will be paid for. He/She will of course have a small office and the required staff.

As regards the location of the secretariat there are positive and negative points regarding any venue that is ultimately selected. We must possibly leave this largely to the convenience of the person who will take charge of the secretariat. There may, in the long run, be a case for 'circulating' the secretariat.

So that is a brief initial idea of this proposal and this letter is, as you may have guessed by now, written also to request you to become a member of the collective. I hope you will consider the request seriously and inform me about your decision before the end of July 1985.

#### **QUESTIONS FOR YOUR COMMENTS/SUGGESTIONS**

As has probably occurred to you on reading about the proposed collective, there are many loose ends on which I will be grateful if you can apply your mind and share your views about them irrespective of your decision on whether or not to join the collective.

I shall list down some of the areas on which your advice will be invaluable. I am certain that it will not be an exhaustive list and if you perceive other 'problems' please do point them out and give your advice/comments.

1. **The Name of the Collective:** Any bright suggestions? One suggestion was 'The ICTHYUS Collective'.
2. **An emblem for the collective:** A modification of the ICFWS emblem with linked palms encircling the 'fish and fists' was suggested. Any other ideas? Can you give a rough sketch?
3. **Registration:** What sort of legal registration should be made for the collective? I would imagine that this would depend on the country where it is registered. Suppose we

consider for the moment an EEC country for registering the collective, then what is the best form? Company? Literary society? Trust? Can such a legal entity have an international membership? Would there be any restriction, say for example, that the 'initial signatory' must all be citizens of EEC countries? Or alternatively what is the feasibility/workability of a Swiss registration?

4. **Source of Finance:** Are you aware of any agencies which will be keen to finance such a venture. We can break up the financing into various components such as (i) The global monitoring project (ii) Promotion of 'cells' (iii) Secretariat (iv) Meetings and conferences, etc. I have already received some positive indications from agencies like NORAD and a couple of the agencies which financed the Rome meet.
5. **Ensuring participatory functioning of the collective:** A collective composed of individuals located in different parts of the world who will have few occasions to meet all together will quite naturally tend to slacken in enthusiasm. There must be ways and means of living with this reality and yet, overcoming the constraints which it imposes on us. I wonder what suggestions you have to offer to ensure that members of the collective constantly feel part of it and are challenged by a desire to keep spirits high and the task on the rails.

Although most of the 20-25 initial members (to whom I write now) are well known to each other, once the collective is formed there should be an initial occasion where all the members can meet and get to know each other's concerns much better.

Linked to this is also the whole issue of 'working for the collective'. We need to probably devise a variety of ways by which members can render services. Some may earmark two weeks of the year to make a study in another country; some may agree to do some library work at home; others may be able to do some translation and summaries of important documents; some may represent the collective at meetings/conferences; a few may participate in some ongoing struggles of fishworkers.

#### **UNFINISHED LETTER**

This is an unfinished letter. But I hope it is the beginning of a process in which we will all continue to interact with

each other and contribute what we can to further the cause of fishworkers. I look forward to the joy of sharing your views in the near future.

With warm greetings and wishing you success in your endeavours.

In solidarity

S/d

**John Kurien**

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Persons present at the workshop in 1986  
at the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum  
when the ICSF was formed.





In 1984, the UN/FAO was holding the World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development (WFC) in Rome. Government representatives and international agencies were attending. But fishers were not invited, their representatives neither.

This here is a personal account of the collective efforts that went into holding in Rome—parallel to WFC—the first International Conference of Fish Workers and Supporters (ICFWS). It is how a network of fisheries activists, organizations and concerned citizens across the world joined forces to achieve the impossible.

On the 40th anniversary of that historic meet, here is a tribute to those who created a worldwide campaign to support small-scale fishers who feed the world sustainably.

International  
Collective  
in Support of  
Fishworkers



Rallying to Rome:  
Special People. Collective Processes. A Unique Event  
by **John Kurien**

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