



# COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES

## Thirty-sixth Session

8-12 July 2024

## SAFETY AT SEA IN THE FISHING INDUSTRY

### Executive Summary

This information document provides additional information in relation to working Document COFI/2024/11. It includes information on:

- FAO's on-going activities on fishing safety and decent work with an emphasis on fishing vessel safety standards, capacity building, and promotion of insurance in fisheries.
- The establishment of a repository for fisher safety data and accident and mortality information, as per COFI 35 recommendation
- The expert workshop to improve safety and protection of fisheries observers, following the Fifth meeting of the Joint FAO/IMO/ILO ad hoc Working Group on Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing and Related Matters (JWG 5), held in Geneva from 8-12 January 2024.
- Outcomes of the International Fishing Industry Safety and Health Conference (IFISH6), held at FAO in Rome from 8- 12 January 2024.
- The gap in global safety at sea guidelines for small-scale fisheries.

*Queries on the substantive content of this document may be addressed to:*

Florence Poulain  
Fishery Industry Officer  
[Florence.Poulain@fao.org](mailto:Florence.Poulain@fao.org)

## I. INTRODUCTION

1. This information document provides additional information in relation to working Document COFI/2024/11 (FAO's Programme of Work in fisheries and aquaculture under the FAO Strategic Framework).
2. Fishers and fish workers are essential for aquatic food value chains that serve local, regional and global markets. The sector provides direct employment to approximately 61.8 million people<sup>1</sup> and generates a large number of jobs in the processing industry and services, that are vital for local economies and international trade.
3. Commercial fishing remains one of the most dangerous occupations globally. Most accidents and fatalities happen in small-scale and artisanal fisheries. The small-scale fishing sector is estimated to account for approximately 40 percent of global catch and employs 90 percent of those working in capture fisheries.<sup>2</sup> However, small-scale fisheries receive less attention in terms of training programmes for crews and regarding vessel construction standards. Minimum safety standards for small scale fisheries (e.g. small vessel stability, Personal Flotation Device [PFD] requirements, training and licensing) are lacking in most countries.
4. The issue of safety at sea for small scale fisheries has been on FAO's agenda since 1987 and was raised again in 2022 at the 35th Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI). The Committee appreciated FAO's joint work with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) on safety and decent work in fisheries, called on Members, regional fishery bodies (RFBs) and other relevant international organizations to share information and experiences on these issues, and encouraged all Members to ratify and implement the 2007 ILO Work in Fishing Convention (C. 188), and the 1995 International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel (STCW-F) and 2012 Cape Town Agreement to enhance fishing safety of IMO.<sup>3</sup>
5. In addition to this, the Committee welcomed FAO's capacity building work on decent working conditions and safety at sea, with an emphasis on reducing accidents and fatalities amongst small-scale fishers, fishing vessel safety standards and promotion of insurance and social protection in fisheries, and requested FAO to increase its support to developing countries on fishing safety matters and to take a lead on the establishment of a repository for fisher safety data and accident and mortality information.<sup>4</sup>

## II. FAO ACTIVITIES ON FISHING SAFETY

6. FAO's activities on fishing safety are built around three pillars. The first pillar is concerned with safety guidelines, codes and policy assistance. In 2023, FAO collaborated with the Bay of Bengal Programme Intergovernmental Organization (BOBP-IGO), to develop a regional plan of action for enhanced safety, decent work and social protection in the fisheries sector of the Bay of Bengal Programme region (BOBSAFE). The plan was prepared in consultation with primary stakeholders, experts and governments concerned and addresses

---

<sup>1</sup> FAO. 2024. The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture. Blue Transformation in action. Rome.

<sup>2</sup> FAO, Duke University & WorldFish. 2023. *Illuminating Hidden Harvests – The contributions of small-scale fisheries to sustainable development*. Rome

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 18 i of the report of the Thirty-fifth Session of COFI.  
<https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en?details=CC3652EN>

<sup>4</sup> Paragraph 18 j of the report of the Thirty-fifth Session of COFI.

the priorities of BOBP-IGO Members for the 2023-2032 period.<sup>5</sup> FAO also worked with the BOBP-IGO and Sri Lankan experts on the translation of the FAO-IMO-ILO Safety Recommendations for Decked Fishing Vessels of Less than 12 metres in Length and Undecked Fishing Vessels in Tamil and Sinhala languages.<sup>6</sup>

7. The second pillar is technical assistance provided to FAO Member countries using regular programme and extra-budgetary funding. In 2023 FAO carried out train-the-trainers' courses on fishing safety for small-scale fisheries together with government counterparts in Asia (Philippines, Sri Lanka), the Caribbean (Grenada) and Latin America (Nicaragua). In partnership with Shanghai Ocean University, a training guide on the rules of the road at sea for small scale fisheries was developed in Chinese language.<sup>7</sup> The latter builds on and complements the online "Rules of the road at sea for small-scale fishers" course.<sup>8</sup> A sea safety guide for small-scale fishers in the Pacific was produced focusing on aspects of fishing boat construction and outfitting.<sup>9</sup> Safety posters to capture the attention of small-scale fishers on safe fishing practices were made available free of charge.<sup>10</sup>

8. The third pillar regards the ongoing and long-standing cooperation on fishing safety with international and other organizations in particular the ILO and IMO. FAO supports the promotion and ratification of international fishing safety conventions (IMO Cape Town Agreement, IMO STCW-F Convention) and assists Members with implementation. FAO started collaborating with the World Health Organization (WHO) on the development of a global drowning prevention strategy. FAO contributes to global advocacy events of WHO related to the World Drowning Prevention Day on 25 July.<sup>11</sup>

9. The FAO Fishing Safety website provides a useful platform for sharing information. The website is available at <https://www.fao.org/fishing-safety/en/>.

### III. FISHING VESSEL SAFETY STANDARDS

10. FAO supported the Sri Lankan fisheries sector with new designs for small-scale undecked fishing boats. These safer, stronger and better small-scale fishing boats<sup>12</sup> can reduce loss of life at sea and support the climate change adaptation process in the fisheries sector in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Various factors including existing boats' weaknesses, fishing methods, safety at sea and today's climate change challenges were considered in the design. The resulting multi-purpose boats come in 20-foot (6-metre)<sup>13</sup> and 23-foot (7-metre)<sup>14</sup> versions. The hull is manufactured from glass fibre reinforced plastic, following internationally agreed construction quality and safety standards. The boat is structurally strong, resulting in a longer lifespan. Reserve buoyancy incorporated into the boat makes it

<sup>5</sup> FAO. 2023. Plan of action for enhanced safety, decent work and social protection in the fisheries sector of the Bay of Bengal Programme region (BOBSAFE). Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc8204en>

<sup>6</sup> FAO/ILO/IMO. 2023. Safety Recommendations for Decked Fishing Vessels of Less than 12 metres in Length and Undecked Fishing Vessels. <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/3d78177f-bfeb-5566-ae97-a4cb55984b4f>

<sup>7</sup> 粮农组织。2023。《小型渔船海上航行准则》。罗马。 <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc8214zh>

<sup>8</sup> The online course on the Rules of the road at sea for small scale fishers was released in 2021 and is available in Chinese, English, French and Spanish at the following link: <https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=704>

<sup>9</sup> FAO. 2023. *Sea safety guide – A guide for small-scale fishers*. Apia. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc6257en>

<sup>10</sup> The posters are available on the <https://www.fao.org/fishing-safety/news-events/news/detail/en/c/1628567/>  
<sup>11</sup> <https://www.who.int/campaigns/world-drowning-prevention-day>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc8154en>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.fao.org/fishery/en/vesseldesign/sri-20>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.fao.org/fishery/en/vesseldesign/sri-23>

difficult to sink. Blocks of polystyrene built into the front, rear and sides of the vessel add buoyancy that keeps it afloat even when swamped by waves. Another safety feature is the boat's stability, which is achieved through extra width. This helps when hauling nets on board.

11. Two demonstration boats were built and handed to the Ministry of Fisheries of Sri Lanka. Local boat builders were trained in two practical workshops on how to build higher quality boats. One boat builder informed the Ministry that they plan to build at least 50 boats of the new designs in 2024.

#### **IV. SAFETY OF OBSERVERS**

12. The Fifth meeting of the Joint FAO/IMO/ILO ad hoc Working Group on Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing and Related Matters (JWG 5) was held in Geneva, Switzerland from 8-12 January 2024. The JWG 5 recommends FAO, IMO and ILO Secretariats to organize, in the framework of the JWG, an intersessional experts' meeting to identify and analyse the gaps in protections for, and authorities over, safety of fisheries observers, including with respect to insurance coverage, jurisdictional conflicts, and safe and decent working conditions, and explore ways to enhance the safety, working and living conditions of fisheries observers, including possibly through a review of relevant international instruments. Resources and interested partners are sought to organize this expert meeting.

#### **V. DECENT WORK**

13. In the intersessional period, FAO continued its work on decent work. FAO works with RFBs to integrate decent work, including the elimination of forced labour and child labour, into their agendas. In 2024, FAO and ILO supported South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO) Members to submit a decision to address decent work conditions and the protection of crew working on fishing vessels under relevant national legislation and international standards. In September 2024, as agreed by JWG 5, FAO, in collaboration with the ILO, will host an experts' workshop to develop guidance for national fisheries agencies to contribute to the implementation of ILO and IMO instruments governing fishers and workers in the seafood industry throughout the supply chain.

#### **VI. PROMOTION OF INSURANCE**

14. The FAO supported Global Network for capacity building to increase access of small-scale fisheries to financial services (CAFI SSF Network) organized various well-attended webinars<sup>15</sup> in 2022 and 2023 to share experiences and promote access to insurance in the fisheries sector in Africa and Asia. Collaboration with the Asia-Pacific Rural and Agricultural Credit Association (APRACA) and the African Rural and Agricultural Credit Association (AFRACA) to promote such access is continuing.

15. In 2024, FAO, with financial support from the Lloyd's Register Foundation (LRF), began the development of Guidelines for seaworthiness and safety inspection of small-scale fishing vessels, and Guidelines for value assessment of small-scale fishing vessels. These guidelines are expected to facilitate the supply of insurance services to small-scale fishers worldwide, with an emphasis on small-scale producers in developing countries.

---

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.rfilc.org/event\\_keywords/fao-cafi-ssf-network-webinar-talk-series/](https://www.rfilc.org/event_keywords/fao-cafi-ssf-network-webinar-talk-series/)

## **VII. FISHER SAFETY DATA AND ACCIDENT AND MORTALITY INFORMATION: IDENTIFICATION OF NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

16. In 2022, COFI35 requested that FAO take a lead on the establishment of a repository for fisher safety data and accident and mortality information. At its 107th session in June 2023, the IMO Maritime Safety Committee “encouraged continued cooperation of the Secretariats of ILO, FAO and IMO regarding safety and decent work in fisheries and the fight against IUU fishing within their respective competencies”. In line with the above, FAO produced a working document with recommendations for future steps, which was discussed at JWG 5.<sup>16</sup>

17. The JWG 5 agreed that an expert workshop on causalities’ related data should be organised. The purpose of the expert workshop is to agree on the overall aim of the repository, and responsibilities, and develop a roadmap for the establishment of the repository. JWG 5 further suggested that FAO, ILO and IMO should cooperate in developing capacity-building activities for the investigation of casualties in the fisheries sector and reporting thereon. For the organization of this global expert workshop and advancement of recommendations FAO seeks financial support from Members.

## **VIII. FAO/NIOSH/NEC INTERNATIONAL FISHING INDUSTRY SAFETY AND HEALTH CONFERENCE (IFISH 6)**

18. From 8- 12 January 2024, FAO, the U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the Northeast Center for Occupational Health and Safety in Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (NEC) organized the Sixth International Fishing Industry Safety and Health Conference (IFISH 6) at FAO headquarters. 166 researchers, safety and health professionals, instructors, workers and industry experts, government officers, regulatory authority representatives and other professionals from 31 countries gathered to help advance safety and health research in the industry and increase awareness and knowledge in safety and health issues globally.

19. Important points that emerged include the need for: ensuring that fisheries management and regulations do not limit fishers to make unsafe choices and are practical when applied by fishers and industry groups; rationalising regulations to avoid duplication or overlap; and, that fisheries management should consider fatigue and workers’ health. Experts reiterated that fisheries management can have direct or indirect impact on safety and that it is important to integrate safety into fisheries management decision-making and policies.

20. Concerns regarding the unique vulnerability of small-scale fishers and industry workers in developing countries were shared, requesting more international attention to these groups. The importance of vessel stability and maintenance was underlined. Comprehensive training packages to improve safety for small scale fisheries that are backed by the supply of safety equipment (engine spares, lifesaving and communication) at affordable prices are important. Climate change was identified as an emerging issue that affects fisher’s safety and the safety of fishing vessels. More resources are required to ensure tangible safety improvements for small-scale fishers and industry workers in developing countries.

---

<sup>16</sup> Meeting documents are available here: <https://www.fao.org/iuu-fishing/tools-and-initiatives/joint-working-group-on-iuu-fishing/5/en/>

## IX. SAFETY GUIDELINES

21. At the Twenty-seventh Session of COFI (2007) Members expressed concern regarding safety at sea, especially small-scale fishing vessels. It was suggested that FAO should develop guidelines on best practices for safety at sea and that COFI should consider developing an international plan of action (IPOA) on the subject.<sup>17</sup> IPOAs are voluntary in nature and can be also designed for situations where a regional approach to safety at sea would be beneficial. There is also provision within the IPOA concept for individual States to develop a national plan of action (NPOA).

22. An Expert Consultation on Best Practices for Safety at Sea in the Fisheries Sector was held at FAO in Rome, from 10-13 November 2008. The Expert Consultation strongly recommended the development of an IPOA on Safety in the Fisheries Sector of which the Guidelines would be an integral component.<sup>18</sup> In 2015 FAO published the *FAO Technical Guidelines for Responsible Fisheries: Fishing Operations.3. Best practices to improve safety at sea in the fisheries sector*.<sup>19</sup> The primary focus of these Technical Guidelines is to inform the development of national fisheries safety strategies, and its annex 5 provides an outline of topics that could be considered in an IPOA on Fishing Safety.

23. The IPOA development was discontinued, and not placed on COFI's agenda since. Yet the number of accidents and fatalities in small-scale and artisanal fisheries remains high and global guidance on reducing accidents in small-scale fisheries is lacking.

## X. WAY FORWARD

24. FAO will continue assisting Members and partners, based on their requests, to strengthen their capacity for increasing the safety of fishers and fishing vessels worldwide. FAO's priority is to increase safety of small-scale fisheries with a view to reducing accidents and fatalities. In collaboration with IMO and ILO, FAO intends to fill the gaps in global fishing safety guidelines for small-scale fisheries, and promote existing conventions, guidelines, codes and recommendations that contribute to safety in the fishing industry.

---

<sup>17</sup> Paragraph 82 of the report of the Twenty-seventh session of COFI.

<https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en?details=fbcec2b7-43db-555e-b4ad-550a04e2c0ca>

<sup>18</sup> The report of the Expert Consultation on Best Practices for Safety at Sea in the Fisheries Sector is available at the following link: <https://www.fao.org/publications/card/en/c/f5124991-d5b9-5495-ad09-03312e75f1b2/>

<sup>19</sup> Fisheries operations. Best practices to improve safety at sea in the fisheries sector. FAO Technical Guidelines for Responsible Fisheries. No. 1, Suppl. 3. <https://www.fao.org/publications/card/en/c/a1b72478-f598-43f0-81c6-98f957d7bf4d/>