



The SEAFDEC Working Group on Regional Fisheries Policy

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Introduction

SEAFDEC, the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, is an autonomous intergovernmental body established as a regional treaty organization to promote sustainable fisheries in Southeast Asia. The Secretariat, based in Thailand, is its administrative arm. Four technical departments are hosted by Member Countries: the Training Department in Thailand; the Marine Fisheries Research Department in Singapore; the Aquaculture Department in the Philippines; and the Marine Fisheries Resources Development and Management Department in Malaysia. Staff hired and employed in the Departments are mostly local.

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As an organization, SEAFDEC’s existence is supported financially by contributions by Member Countries and by various donors involved in the implementation of regional programs, projects and activities. Its funding is partly supported by the host governments of its technical departments, in the local currency. Such unique mechanism has made SEAFDEC more stable despite the financial crisis experienced in the region and enabled its survival through the years.

The Secretariat, as the administrative arm of SEAFDEC, has to coordinate and oversee the general policy and planning of the Center, generate and formulate regional fisheries policy concepts, and coordinate the development and implementation of programs seen as of first priority in the region by the respective Departments. However, as most Secretariat staff are locally hired, a legitimate concern has been that other Member Countries might not recognize the validity of policy options, in relation of proposals taking insufficient account of actual national situations. To

enhance the Secretariat's coordination and policy formulation functions, the setting up of a group composed of staff from all Member Countries was believed necessary. The SEAFDEC Working Group on Regional Fisheries Policy was established in response to this need.

Inception

The origins of the Working Group on Regional Fisheries Policy (WGRFP) can be traced to the 30th Meeting of the Council of the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center in March 1998. The meeting tackled the need for a mechanism of cooperation between ASEAN Member Countries and SEAFDEC for the development of sustainable fisheries in the region. The proposed mechanism was envisioned as having two stages: strengthening SEAFDEC regional functions, and preparing a working mechanism within ASEAN Member Countries. The establishment of the Working Group was proposed as one of the major undertakings under the first stage. Council Members approved the proposal, marking the establishment of the WGRFP.

“The establishment of the Working Group was proposed as one of the major undertakings under the first stage [i.e. strengthening SEAFDEC regional functions]”

Composition

In the proposal presented during the 30th SEAFDEC Council Meeting, the number of Working Group members was initially set at four, selected from among the Member Countries. It was considered as an effective size, at least until the appropriate mechanisms were settled down. Establishing the Working Group took time, due to various administrative difficulties, communication among Member Countries, and their eventual nomination of candidates. The first Working Group member from the Philippines arrived at the Secretariat in October 1998, followed by delegates from Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia. The Working Group on Regional Fisheries Policy was officially inaugurated at the SEAFDEC Secretariat in October 1998.

Membership has expanded progressively with increasing recognition by Member Countries of the Working Group's relevance. At present, the Working Group is composed of members from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. Other SEAFDEC Member Countries like Brunei and Singapore have not been able to send representatives due to limited available staffing in relevant government agencies, but nevertheless they do participate in the activities of the Working Group on a short-term basis.

Given the difficulties of nominating senior level officials, and in view of the cost of seconding officers, Member Countries make sure that staff come from the middle-level positions of concerned government agencies, are of high calibre, preferably with international experience, and with a good command of English. Seconded staff are expected to have the potential to be involved in future policy-making processes. The secondment period is for a period of six months, renewable for a subsequent period of six months depending on performance, as evaluated by the SEAFDEC Secretariat and the Special Advisor, Dr. Yasuhisa Kato.

Working mechanism and terms of reference

The WGRFP is stationed at the SEAFDEC Secretariat in Bangkok, Thailand. Currently, the Working Group is under the direct supervision of the Policy and Program Coordinator (PPC) of the Secretariat. It is supervised by the Secretary General, under the leadership of the Special Advisor.

The primary tasks envisioned for the Working Group include a) giving timely advise to the Secretary General of SEAFDEC and Department Heads on relevant regional and global and, if necessary, suggest appropriate actions to be taken; b) prepare draft regional fisheries



policies for the Southeast Asian region; and c) coordinate the implementation of regular and extra-budgetary funded regional programs with concerned Departments. With these in mind, the Working Group's Terms of Reference were crafted as follows:

1. Careful identification and prioritization of fisheries issues, and monitoring of activities on issues at global, regional, and national levels, with periodic reporting of the issues to National Coordinators of ASEAN-SEAFDEC Member Countries;
2. Initiation and promotion of the formulation of regional fisheries policies, including the preparation and finalization of required working papers and position papers;
3. Facilitation and promotion of activities and cooperation with other organizations such as ASEAN; and
4. Coordination, formulation and implementation of regional programs with SEAFDEC Member Countries.

“Over the years, SEAFDEC and its Member Countries have acknowledged the important role played by the WGRFP in overall SEAFDEC regional functions”

Each member of the Working Group serves as liaison officer for their respective governments and ensures coordination between SEAFDEC, its Departments and Member Countries. Each member is also assigned responsibility for specific technical issues, on which they serve as the focal person to coordinate identified activities. They are also consigned to coordinate and monitor certain projects such as those under the ASEAN-SEAFDEC collaboration mechanism – the Fisheries Consultative Group (FCG) and those projects under the Special Five-Year Program. In addition, the Working Group also provides technical inputs in the preparation of each issue of *Fish for the People*.

Significance of the Working Group's work

The WGRFP's importance is two-fold. First, in carrying out its mandate and its terms of reference, it has contributed substantially to identifying relevant international issues with regional or national implications. Second, it has been involved in formulating policy proposals relating to those issues. The Working Group has also been involved, in one way or another, in assisting the SEAFDEC Secretariat in program



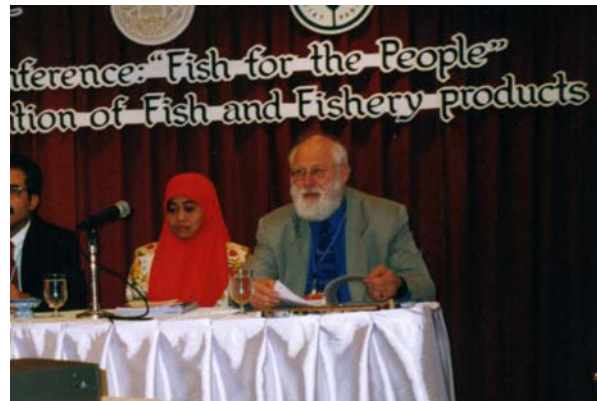
Members of the Working Group on Regional Fisheries Policy in 2002 (above) - from left to right: Mr. Myint Pe (Myanmar), Mr. Mao Sam Onn (Cambodia), Ms. Saadiah bt Ibrahim (Malaysia), Dr. Mala Supongpan (Thailand), Mr. Vu Dzang Tien (Vietnam), and Mr. Severino Escobar, Jr. (Philippines);

and the current Working Group members (right) - from left to right: Mr. Than Oo Wai (Myanmar), Dr. Smith Thummachua (Thailand), Ms. Tran Thi Tuyet Lan (Vietnam), Mr. Trian Yunanda (Indonesia), Mr. Sammy A. Malvas (Philippines), Mr. Buoy Roitana (Cambodia), and Mr. Abdul Rahman bin Abdul Wahab (Malaysia).



formulation and development, and in monitoring the progress of various regional programs. Over the years, SEAFDEC and its Member Countries have acknowledged the important role played by the WGRFP in overall SEAFDEC regional functions. The increase in membership from four to seven may also be an indication of a continuing and growing commitment by Member Countries, and their recognition of the importance of the work being carried out by the Working Group.

The establishment of the Working Group, and the secondment of staff by Member Countries, is also a means of human resource development. Staff seconded to the WGRFP get valuable experience in policy formulation and technical discussions, and exposure to regional fora. They have the chance to widen their perspectives while working on relevant international, regional, and even national issues, and are able to analyze and formulate policy recommendations for consideration by higher policy and decision-making bodies. They are exposed to wider



From top to bottom: Ms. Nor Ainy Mahyuddin, Working Group member from Malaysia, making her presentation during the ASEAN-SEAFDEC Conference in 2001; Working Group Members at the Preparatory Meeting on Issues Related to Fish Trade and Environment in Hat Yai, Thailand in 2004; and the Working Group Members during the ASEAN-SEAFDEC RTC on Fishery Statistics in Hua Hin, Thailand in 2004.



international and regional issues related to issues including fisheries management, aquaculture, fish trade and the environment, utilization of fish and fishery products, and regional and international policy

formulations. The work also requires serious coordination and constant communication with the Member Countries, the Departments, and with other regional and international organizations, including

funding and donor agencies. Working Group members are able to establish linkages and gain better appreciation of the relevance of coordinated works. The experience is most useful when seconded staff return to their respective countries after completing their service on the Working Group.

Because of the experience gained by serving on the Working Group, former members are frequently tapped by other international organizations in the region, including FAO; others have been promoted in their respective government units. In this sense, the Working Group has also become a stepping stone for professional and career advancement.

The future

The WGRFP will continue to be a SEAFDEC program under the management of the Secretariat. During the recently concluded SEAFDEC

Past and present WGRFP members

Cambodia

Mr. Mao Sam Onn June 2002 – June 2003
Mr. Buoy Roitana July 2003 – present

Indonesia

Mr. Saut Tampubolon May 2002 – Nov 2002
Mr. Bambang Edi Priyono April 2003 – February 2004
Mr. Trian Yunanda May 2004 – present

Malaysia

Mr. Abdul Hamid Yasin May 1999 – April 2000
Mr. Nik Ab. Wahab bin Mat May 2000 – April 2001
Ms. Nor Ainy Mahyuddin May 2001 – April 2002
Ms. Saadiah bt Ibrahim June 2002 – June 2003
Mr. Abd. Rahman bin Abd. Wahab February 2004 – present

Myanmar

Mr. Khin Ko Lay August 2000 – July 2001
Mr. Myint Pe October 2001 – March 2003
Mr. Aung Htay Oo April 2003 – April 2004
Mr. Than Oo Wai May 2004 – present

Philippines

Mr. Rafael V. Ramiscal September 1998 – October 2000
Mr. Severino Escobar, Jr. February 2001 – June 2003
Mr. Sammy A. Malvas September 2003 – present

Thailand

Mr. Choomjet Karnjanakesorn December 1998 – November 1999
Dr. Mala Supongpan January 2001 – May 2003
Dr. Smith Thummachua January 2004 – present

Vietnam

Mr. Phan Hong Dung March 1999 – March 2000
Mr. Nguyen Lam Anh May 2000 – November 2001
Mr. Vu Dzong Tien June 2002 – June 2003
Ms. Tran Thi Tuyet Lan July 2003 – present

Program Committee Meeting in Manila, members of the Committee reiterated the two main functions of the Working Group, in liaising with Member Countries and assisting SEAFDEC in the coordination of regional programs, and emphasized their importance. The Committee also supported the suggestion that members be assigned to specific technical issues and topics in order to further enhance the effectiveness of the Working Group.

“...the two main functions of the Working Group [are] in liaising with Member Countries and assisting SEAFDEC in the coordination of regional programs”

In essence, the future success of the Working Group will depend on how well it continues to carry out its functions, the benefits it provides to SEAFDEC and its Member Countries, and how it can be sustained financially. The WGRFP has played an important role in the coordination process of SEAFDEC and development of fisheries policy options for the region. In many instances, SEAFDEC and Member Countries have recognized the significance of the functions fulfilled by the Working Group, and the relevance of its tasks to national and regional initiatives, not to mention its direct contribution to the country’s human resource development program.

As long as there are regional fisheries-related issues to be addressed, programs to implement and coordinate, and a need for a region-wide manpower development, the WGRFP will continue to fulfil a most useful function. It is also anticipated that the Working Group members will continue to support the regional programs even after their assignment periods, since they will be responsive to the importance of regional collaboration along their carrier in their respective government.

About the author

Sammy Malvas is the current WGRFP member from the Philippines. He is working with the Policy and Economics Division of the Philippines’ Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR). His expertise is in the field of ecological marine management, specifically dealing with environmental risk assessment and ecotoxicology.

