

Some Thoughts on Hammering out a CARICOM Common Fisheries Policy

Milton Haughton, Oct. 13, 2005

The initiative to develop a common fisheries policy (CFP) for the region began in early 2003, with a mandate issued by the CARICOM Heads of Government to begin preparatory work on such a policy. A CFP holds potential for making major contribution to the quest for sustainable development and improvement in the standard of living of our people, particularly the poor and marginalized who live in the coastal areas and depend upon fishing for their livelihood. Realizing such a goal is, however, only possible if the CFP includes carefully developed measures to address three main areas. Firstly, it must increase the region's food security by providing consumers in the region with adequate supplies of safe and affordably priced fish and seafood. Secondly, it must enhance employment and improve income, personal development and security of fishers and their families, and transform the marginalized fishing communities into economically and culturally vibrant communities. Thirdly, it must protect and conserve the fish stocks and associated ecosystems from over-exploitation and degradation due to pollution and other human activities.

I shall consider some key aspects of the architecture of a common fisheries policy, but before I do, I will make a few comments on the nature of the resource and why, given our social and economic aspirations, a common fisheries policy is good for the region. The first point is that we are indeed people of the sea. Our food security and health, our social and economic development, our culture and our destiny is inextricably linked to the sea and ocean surrounding us. Collectively, the land area of our countries represents only about 18 percent of the total area falling under our jurisdiction, the remaining 82 percent being sea and ocean with living and non-living resources within the water column, on the seabed and ocean floor, and also under the seabed. Fishing by local fishers is largely confined to the coastal waters. While there is very little fishing by nationals in the outer reaches of the EEZs, or beyond on the high seas, in recent years, some CARICOM countries, notably Belize, St Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago, have pursued policies which facilitate third countries' distant water fishing fleets, either through the provision of flags of convenience or facilities for transshipment and taking of supplies, to conduct deep sea fishing on the high seas in the region and beyond. Today there are hundreds of foreign fishing boats that rely on these policy arrangements to exploit fishing opportunities on the high seas. The big question is whether similar fishing and economic opportunities could also be encouraged and exploited by local fishers. The answer is yes of course, but an enabling policy framework is needed.

The second point is that fish stocks are living, dynamic resource systems whose population size and abundance fluctuate in response to human intervention and natural factors. Many fish species migrate or are dispersed by ocean current during their life cycle, and are thus distributed across jurisdictional boundaries laid down by man, frequently moving through the waters of several different states. The point is that fish stocks are common resources. They are described as "shared stocks", or "common property resource", or, "common heritage of man". This interconnectedness was painfully demonstrated in the summer of 1999 during the massive fish kill that stretched from Guyana all the way up to Dominica. The primary cause of death was

stress from bacterial infection (*Streptococcus iniae*), arising from a combination of slightly elevated sea temperature and decreased salinity due to increased volume of fresh water discharge from the South American river systems arising from heavy rainfall in the Brazil/Guiana rainforest at the beginning of the rainy season. The only way to ensure that we use the resources in a rational manner, and obtain optimum sustainable benefits while protecting the stocks from decline is through closer cooperation among all states sharing the common resource in all areas including development, management, and trade. A common policy, which is binding on all the states, is a pragmatic way of achieving these goals, though it is not without its challenges.

The third issue is that CARICOM countries have committed themselves to a development path of ever closer cooperation and integration of their economies in social and economic matters. This includes the creation of a single market and economy (CMSE), which means that territories of Member States will comprise an internal area without barriers where the free movement of goods, people (labour), money and services, and freedom of establishment will be ensured. Business people and service providers, which presumably include persons connected to fishing, will be free to establish themselves and conduct businesses in any part of the internal market, i.e., any Member State forming part of the single market, on a non-discriminatory basis. The CSME also has a common trade policy which will govern internal and external trade, including fish imports and exports.

The binding commitment of our Governments to the CSME, which already includes significant aspects of fisheries, is by itself a compelling reason for the preparation of a comprehensive, coherent common policy that will ensure the integration of fisheries into the rest of the new economy in a purposive and rational manner. But in addition to the above, CARICOM countries have also committed themselves to other international and regional legal instruments such as UNCLOS and its associated instruments and the decisions of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002.

The Common Fisheries Policy, which is a strategic document, not an operational one, should set out the goals to be achieved, including the desired improvements in social and economic conditions, and the desired targets in respect of conservation and protection of the fish stocks and associated ecosystems. It should also set out the principles to be followed to ensure good governance, fairness, justice and equity in utilization of the resources. Further, the common rules and mechanisms to be applied to achieve the stated goals should also be articulated. The organizations, regional and national, charged with implementation of the policy would, through their work programmes and projects give effect to the policy, exercising such discretion as may be permitted by the policy and other applicable laws. In short, the common fisheries policy should be the Region's main instrument for transforming the fisheries sector and bring it into the main stream of social, economic and cultural development, to create new opportunities for growth and prosperity, to bring security and hope to the tens of thousands of people who depend upon the living aquatic resources for their livelihood. Although it will require changes in the traditional way we do things, including concessions, which are more than marginal, on the part of individual Member States, the likely benefits to be derived from a common policy far outweigh the associated costs.

Turning now to the more difficult issue of the scope and content, the first point is that these must be logically connected to the goals and objectives. If the goals and objectives mentioned above are considered reasonable, then the policy should address the measures listed below, which together will lead towards their attainment and the mainstreaming of fisheries and aquaculture in our national and regional development strategy.

Nutritional, Social and Economic

- Ensuring adequate supplies to meet nutritional goals and consumer preference
- Poverty eradication
- Employment generation
- Improving incomes of fishers and fishing communities – value added, diversification of economic base
- Safety of fishers at sea
- Reducing vulnerability of fishing communities to natural disaster and climate change

Trade and Marketing

- Processing and Product development
- Quality assurance and seafood safety standards
- Market access
- Facilitating mechanism to boost internal distribution and external trade
- Imports, including reducing dependence

Harvesting and Production

- Access to the resource
- Diversification e.g. seaweeds and other non-traditional species
- Shore based facilities including processing plants, ports,
- Vessel and gear technology – modernization and improved efficiency
- Boat design, construction and fishing equipment supply
- Small-scale vs. industrial operation
- Access to credit and financing
- Access agreement with third countries
- Distant water fishing fleet (including flag of convenience arrangements)

Research and Resource Management and Conservation

- Data collection and management (catch and effort, biological, social, economic, demographic)
- Regional database
- Resource assessment, biological and ecological studies
- Integrating environmental issues
- Regional Management
- Community based management

- Marine reserves
- Ecosystems approach
- Participation of Resource Users
- National Fisheries Advisory Committees
- Strengthening laws and regulations
- Improving MCS
- Position on IUU fishing

Training, Capacity Building, Public Education

- Professional and technical personnel in research, planning, support services and resource management
- Fishermen and fishing community leaders
- Priority areas for training
- Regional training institutions (e.g. UWI, CFTDI, Maritime Training Institute)
- Institutional strengthening

Aquaculture Development

- Aquaculture and mariculture development, target species and culture systems
- Smallscale vs. large scale operations
- Resource enhancement / reseedling
- Introduction of exotic species

Cooperation with Third Countries and Organisations

- External relations / cooperation with third countries and organization - including access to third countries' waters
- Technical assistance
- Resource mobilization
- Strategic partnerships

Other Issues

- Development of recreational fisheries
- Development of Ornamental fisheries
- Movement of live specimen of aquatic organisms within the region and from third countries

These are some of the more important technical issues which, insofar as they are not addressed by the CSME, should be addressed by a common policy based on mutual cooperation, which is designed to unlock the vast potential of fisheries and aquaculture to make enhanced contribution to the region's development. In addition to the above, procedural arrangements pertaining to decision-making, implementation of agreed policies, and monitoring and compliance should also be addressed by the policy.

As expected, given the nature of the subject, the process of developing the CFP has been slow. While significant progress has been made, it is clear that the road ahead is not going to be easy. Success will require good leadership, clear thinking, carefully reasoned and logically developed positions, and patient, skillful negotiations to arrive at satisfactory compromises in respect of the substantive and procedural components of the policy. A CFP, this developed, based on the principles of mutual cooperation and respect will, however, be a powerful instrument for achieving enhanced food security, income and employment, and for conserving and protecting the ecological integrity and biodiversity of our aquatic resource systems.