



<b>WESTERN CENTRAL ATLANTIC FISHERY COMMISSION</b> Eleventh Session
<b>WECAFC LESSER ANTILLES FISHERIES COMMITTEE</b> Eighth Session
St. George's, Grenada, 21-24 October 2003
<b>CURRENT STRATEGY OF WECAFC – a discussion paper</b>

## SUMMARY

The Commission, during its Ninth Session, in September 1999, adopted a new strategy to organize its work and provide technical assistance to its members with a view to achieving sustainable fisheries. At the centre of this strategy is the working group approach. This document reviews the accomplishments achieved through this new strategy and identifies the constraints which the Commission is facing.

### I. Background Information

1. The Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC) was established in 1973 by Resolution 4/61 of the FAO Council under Article VI of the FAO Constitution in light of the challenges faced by the fishing nations operating in the area. The purpose of the Commission is to assist in international cooperation efforts for the conservation, development and utilization of living resources, especially shrimp, of the Western Central Atlantic. The present membership comprises: Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Dominica, European Community, France, Grenada, Guatemala, Guinea, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Netherlands, Nicaragua, Panama, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Spain, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom, United States of America and Venezuela. WECAFC, a fishery management advisory body, provides fishery management advice to its members.
2. WECAFC has contributed significantly to fisheries management and development in the region, particularly through the work of its Working Parties on Assessment of Marine Fishery Resources, on Fisheries Statistics, and on Economics and Planning, as well as through several expert consultations that were held on specific subjects such as shared resources in the Lesser Antilles, the use of micro-computers in fisheries, the use of length-based stock assessment methods, and sustainable fisheries development in the WECAFC region. These activities resulted also in the production of a substantial body of literature on fisheries management and conservation in the region. In addition, the special needs of the small island states of the region were addressed through the establishment of the Lesser Antilles Committee, which provided a forum for articulating these needs.
3. The Ninth Session of the Commission, September 1999, adopted a new strategy for WECAFC, centred upon the working group approach. The Tenth Session of the Commission, October 2001, requested a paper to be prepared on that strategy for review and discussion by the members of the Commission.

## **II. The strengths and weaknesses of WECAFC:**

4. Most of the area under the jurisdiction of WECAFC constitutes what may be defined geographically and legally as a semi-enclosed sea. By virtue of their location and the juxtaposed nature of their EEZs, the countries situated around its shores share a common interest in protecting the coastal and marine ecosystem, conserving its resources and managing its use. They have also common obligations in this regard, in accordance with international law as reflected in the relevant provisions of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, particularly those contained in its Part IX “Enclosed or semi-enclosed seas”<sup>1</sup>.

5. Although the countries of the Western Central Atlantic belong to a maritime/geographic community from which they derive common traits, their main characteristic is their considerable diversity: ethnic, historical, linguistic and cultural as well as in terms of their respective levels of economic and social development and the amount of their natural resource endowments.

6. A similar diversity may be observed in the fishery sector. Rather than a hindrance or an impediment, this diversity constitutes a vital and unique opportunity, given the countries' firm commitment to the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, and the existence of the institutional structure of WECAFC. It allows for a number of activities of technical cooperation and exchanges that should be mutually enhancing. These activities can be combined at different levels in terms of geographic units (regional, subregional, bilateral, global levels); subject areas (e.g., trade and the environment, training, implementation of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, etc.); and taxonomy (e.g. Caribbean Spiny Lobster, Queen Conch). In addition, various types of south-south and north-south forms of cooperation are possible. This broadens the range of opportunities and benefits that technical cooperation can offer.

7. Countries of the Western Central Atlantic have been very active in establishing several regional and subregional bodies to build up a cooperative institutional framework with objectives ranging from the formulation of common fisheries policy to the implementation of important technical activities. Of all these bodies, WECAFC is the only regional cooperation institution whose geographic jurisdiction covers the entire region and whose membership includes all of the countries bordering it. There are also a number of regional bodies with more limited geographic coverage and membership whose specific spheres of competence include technical cooperation activities of a similar nature, in many cases, to those pursued by WECAFC.

8. Reinforcement of WECAFC would enable its member countries to take advantage of its main positive features and of the unique role that the Commission may play in favour of sustainable development. It would also make possible the surmounting of the two main weaknesses that currently affect the Commission: the difficulties in attracting the necessary financial resources to support the implementation of its technical cooperation programmes, and the limited participation, commitment and ability of some of its member countries to support technically and financially such programmes.

## **III. The Role of WECAFC:**

9. The Ninth Session of the Commission unanimously expressed strong support for WECAFC. It recommended that it be kept under Article VI of the FAO Constitution and requested FAO to maintain its support to WECAFC, at least at the present level.

10. With respect to the role of the Commission, the Ninth Session of the Commission, Saint Lucia, September 1999, agreed that:

- a regional approach to the management of many of the region's fisheries was a feasible arrangement for achieving sustainable fisheries in the region, and that WECAFC is in a unique position to serve as an umbrella organisation for this purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> Article 123 (“Cooperation of States bordering enclosed or semi-enclosed seas”) stipulates that these States “shall endeavour, directly or through an appropriate regional organization: (a) to coordinate the management, conservation, exploration and exploitation of the living resources of the sea; (...)”.

- regional technical cooperation was a crucial element if members were to benefit from the current globalisation process within the context of clearly defined national and regional objectives for sustainable development and responsible fisheries management.
- in order to enhance the effectiveness in providing fisheries management advice, it needed to:
  - Limit its activities to a few key areas supported by its Members;
  - Strengthen partnership arrangements with other regional and international organisations and donors;
  - Ensure that the programmes of action were more specific and pragmatic with clear objectives, taking into account, the needs of the Members and their capacities to realise such activities;
  - Develop national and regional capacity in international fisheries management, negotiations and conflict resolutions;
  - Improve communication among the agencies involved in fisheries in the region, with a view to encouraging complementarity and avoiding overlapping;
  - Provide avenues for other regional fishery bodies working in the area to report on their activities to the Commission;
  - Intensify efforts in undertaking joint activities and actions, in particular through networking arrangements; and
  - Increase its efforts in seeking external funding and sharing the costs of intersessional activities.
- responsible fisheries management requires regional and subregional cooperation through working groups for the application of the precautionary approach to the fisheries of the region and that the ad hoc working groups should continue their activities.

11. The Ninth Session also agreed, in view of existing constraints, that the Commission should have a simple structure consisting of the Secretariat, a Scientific Advisory Group (SAG), which will act as advisory body to the Commission and ad hoc working groups with clearly defined terms of reference and time bound clauses, established as and when required.

12. These ad hoc working groups are at the centre of the current strategy of WECAFC. They presently cover the shrimp and groundfish resources of the Brazil-Guianas shelf, the Caribbean Spiny lobster, flyingfish of the Eastern Caribbean and the sustainable use of anchored FADs in fishing for large pelagics in the Lesser Antilles. The primary purpose of these working groups is to facilitate regional cooperation to enhance management of these resources by the members of WECAFC, in accordance with the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and using the best scientific information and management advice generated by the working groups.

13. The Scientific Advisory Group (SAG) has met twice and its last report (April 2003, document WECAFC/XI/03/Inf.3) is available to the Commission.

14. The Secretariat of the Commission is based in the region, at the FAO Subregional Office in Barbados. Current FAO support to the Commission includes the Secretariat, the Secretary of the Commission, a part-time (30%) stock assessment specialist, a part-time (30%) fishery economist, a part-time fisheries officer and a secretary. Ad hoc technical support is provided by the FAO Fisheries Department, as and when required. The FAO library and documentation services, the FAO Web page, the FAO network and contacts, and the FAO communications infrastructure and network are also at the disposal of WECAFC.

15. In spite of the serious constraints that WECAFC is facing, especially financial, the Commission continues to provide technical assistance as well as sound scientific advice and has made good use of the opportunities for technical assistance provided by and through FAO to the region<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> See documents WECAFC/XI/03/5 – Summary Report of the Activities of the WECAFC Working Groups and WECAFC/XI/03/6 – Intersessional Activities and Follow-up Actions.

#### IV. Accomplishments of the Current Approach

16. The approach recommended by the Ninth Session of the Commission has provided technical flexibility and financial pragmatism. This should allow for a greater independence of the Commission, as appropriate, and for making the most of its broad geographic coverage and policy scope. As referred to above, WECAFC is promoting technical cooperation processes relating to straddling stocks and resources through the establishment of ad hoc working groups for research and management of straddling stocks such as shrimp and groundfish in the Brazil-Guianas shelf, Caribbean spiny lobster and flying fish in the Eastern Caribbean. The Commission has also promoted technical cooperation in the fields of institution building, policy design and harmonisation of legislation, technology transfer and others. This approach contributed to:

- raising the awareness of member countries on the potential benefits of taking advantage of the unique features offered by WECAFC in relation to regional cooperation and responsible fisheries; and
- building up the confidence of member countries on the benefits of their gradual direct technical involvement and contribution to activities of measurable impact that are related to their direct and more pressing needs in fisheries.

17. Fisheries managers and decision-makers of the region have recognized that substantial progress have been made in building national capacity for stock and fisheries assessment and the use of scientific information in the provision of management advice by the fisheries administrations of the countries which have been participating in the working groups. This is apparent from the fact that the successive Working Groups' reports<sup>3</sup>, generated by the participating countries using their data, contain a growing amount of information and an increasing sophistication in assessment approaches. These reports constitute currently the best scientific information available to the participating countries for making management decisions. For instance, two countries of the Brazil-Guianas working group have acknowledged that the scientific information generated by the Working Group on Shrimp and Groundfish in the Brazil-Guianas shelf would be an important contribution to bilateral fisheries negotiations between the two countries. Other countries have used the information as a basis for the adoption of fishery management measures such as closed seasons and areas, freeze on fishing effort, and minimum size of capture.

18. In addition to strengthening fisheries management among member countries in the region, the approach recommended by the Ninth Session of the Commission has yielded other positive results, despite the modest means available to the Secretariat. The work of the WECAFC ad hoc Working Groups has demonstrated to the fishery officers concerned the advantages of working together (networking) and the importance of the results attained and of their direct use. There are also examples of recent actions taken by industry stakeholders that indicate their willingness to get more involved in the work of WECAFC. For example, based on the results of the Working Group on Shrimp and Groundfish Resources in the Brazil-Guianas shelf, the shrimp industry in Guyana took the initiative to implement on its own a closed season in 2002, without the intervention of the fisheries authorities.

19. However, it should be noted that the activities of the two ad hoc Working Groups on shrimp and groundfish in the Brazil-Guianas shelf and the Caribbean spiny lobster, have been almost totally dependent on extra-budgetary support, most recently from the Government of Norway. Such support is inherently variable, in spite of the continuous efforts of FAO to encourage and secure on-going extra-budgetary funds to facilitate the work of WECAFC. It is therefore important for the members of the Commission to acknowledge the need there is for each of them to contribute a proportion of the financial resources that are required for ensuring the continuous functioning of the ad hoc working groups. It is encouraging to note that some Governments have already expressed their willingness to increase their support, including through additional financial contribution, to make it possible for their national bodies to participate in the work of the ad hoc Working Groups.

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<sup>3</sup> See document WECAFC/XI/03/05, which contains a list of the reports published by the WECAFC ad hoc Working Groups.

## **V. Evaluation by the Scientific Advisory Group**

20. The Second Session of the Scientific Advisory Group (SAG) of WECAFC, held in April 2003, discussed the strategy adopted by the Commission, which has been in place now for over four years. The SAG recognised that some problems had been experienced in the implementation of the working groups' activities, including a lack of continuity in membership of the working groups for some countries, disparities in the human capacity, data availability and effectiveness of management systems between the countries, and very limited financial resources that meant the activities of the working groups had been largely constrained by the availability of donor funds. Nevertheless, the SAG agreed that the approach had made good progress towards the objectives of building national capacity and strengthening regional cooperation in order to improve the sustainable utilisation of the region's living marine resources. The SAG recommended that the working groups should strive to continue and strengthen their activities. The SAG recognised that a greater commitment by the participating countries to support the working groups, including greater progress towards self-sufficiency, was important for the survival and effectiveness of the working groups in the future, and requested the Commission to discuss the matter.

21. No changes in the focus of the working groups were recommended at this stage, but it was recognised that the coastal resources of the Central American Atlantic coast represented important fishery resources for those countries, and that consideration should be given to establishing an ad hoc working group to address these resources and the fisheries dependent on them, if adequate funds for this could be found. In the longer term, WECAFC should monitor regional developments and needs in relation to other shared resources such as those large pelagics restricted in their distribution to the Western Central Atlantic (the 'coastal' large pelagics), and issues of regional interest such as coral reefs, the management and conservation role of marine protected areas (MPAs), in order to determine if, and when, some regional activity or intervention may be required on these themes.

22. The greatest threat to the future of the current strategy was seen as uncertainty about the funding required for the ad hoc working groups' activities. The working groups are almost entirely dependent on FAO and donor funds channelled through FAO. The sources of funds utilised to date have come to an end and there were no immediate prospects of additional funds for future activities. This problem needs to be addressed urgently by the Commission, in particular by the countries participating in the working groups, if they are to continue.

23. The SAG recommended strengthening the links between the working groups and the Commission. One means of facilitating this would be to request the scientific chairs, and other key members, to make presentations during the sessions of WECAFC on the most recent results and the work of each working group. SAG agreed that there was a need to promote the good scientific work that was being undertaken by the working groups as well as other activities carried out by WECAFC both within its own framework and beyond it. Suitable approaches to that promotion will be discussed at the next SAG meeting in 2005.

## **VI. Suggested Action by the Commission**

24. The Commission is invited to review and discuss the strategy that it has adopted during its Ninth Session. In doing so, reference should also be made to document WECAF/XI/03/5 – Summary Report of the Activities of the WECAFC ad hoc Working Groups and WECAF/XI/03/6 – Intersessional Activities and Follow-up Actions.