

RFBs Fact Sheet

Role of RFBs

The role of RFBs has been increasing their importance and their expected contribution to sustainable and responsible fisheries management on a global basis. While the role and priorities of RFBs vary according to their mandates and other factors, including the political will of the members, trends in some major issues cited by RFB secretariats were as follows:

i. *Management*

These included issues surrounding responsible fisheries management, the ecosystem approach to fisheries, bycatch concerns and IUU fishing. These concerns were cited as important by the greatest number of RFBs. This is consistent with prominent issues in recent international instruments, which in turn have responded to broad international concerns;

ii. *Science and research*

Most RFBs centred their responses around practical issues, including producing scientific advice that met decision-makers' needs (including integrating fisheries and environmental information), the need for continuing, accurate, comprehensive stock assessments, and assessments of associated species and ecosystems at national and regional levels;

iii. *Institutional*

The greatest number of issues identified by the RFBs in the survey fell within the institutional area. Of these issues, those relating to finance and strengthened external cooperation were the most prominent, with capacity building, information exchange and human resource development following closely;

iv. *Development*

The least number of RFBs cited fisheries development issues as important. But within this rubric issues ranged from aquaculture and artisanal fisheries development impacts, tuna industry developments and assisting member States with the change in balance between subsistence and commercial fisheries²

The evolving role of RFBs in decision-making for international instruments for conservation and management measures was particularly reviewed in one recent publication³. Key areas relating to decision-making in RFBs described in the international instruments included the precautionary approach, agreement on decision-making procedures that facilitate the adoption of conservation and management measures in a timely and effective manner, transparency in the decision-making process, decision-making procedures for dispute prevention and strengthening decision-making to implement relevant policies.

The particular role of the RFBs to prevent, deter and eliminate IUU fishing was also reviewed⁴. The role of RFBs as highly effective vehicles for concentrating efforts and moving forward to combat IUU fishing activities is widely recognized. The IPOA-IUU reflects the international recognition of the potential contribution of RFBs to this objective by identifying a toolbox of appropriate actions and measures for their consideration and use. However, most RFBs indicated, that many challenges remain unaddressed. One significant and continuing challenge is estimating the extent and effects of IUU fishing. Nevertheless, RFBs, including those with and without management mandates, have demonstrated that they are well positioned to achieve success in preventing, deterring and eliminating IUU fishing in future. For the RFBs that are in the front line of the assault against IUU fishing for

² Swan, J. Summary information on the role of international fishery organizations or arrangements and other bodies concerned with the conservation and management of living aquatic resources. FAO Fisheries Circular. No. 985. Rome, FAO. 2003. 114p.

³ Swan, J. Decision-making in Regional Fisheries Bodies or Arrangements: the evolving role of RFBs and international agreement on decision-making process. FAO Fisheries Circular. No. 995. Rome, FAO. 2004. 82p.

⁴ Swan, J. International action and responses by Regional Fishery Bodies or Arrangements to prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. FAO Fisheries Circular. No. 996. Rome, FAO. 2004. 64p.

shared stocks and high seas fishing, the measure of success they will depend, to a great extent, on the cooperation of members and non-members to implement and enforce the agreed measures and actions.

Twenty-sixth Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI 26)

The Twenty-sixth Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI 26) and the Ministerial Meeting on Fisheries held last March in Rome underscored the importance of Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) and expressed its expectation that these organizations would take the lead as we move toward more responsible fisheries. In particular, COFI 26 encouraged RFMOs to consider introducing and implementing the ecosystem approach to fisheries, requested RFMOs, as appropriate, to collect and submit information on deep-sea fisheries to FAO and noted that RFMOs would need to interact with other relevant Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) when introducing Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).

The report of COFI 26 is available at:
http://www.fao.org/fi/NEMS/events/detail_event.asp?event_id=24536

Fourth Meeting of Regional Fishery Bodies (RFB 4)

In accordance with the recommendation of COFI at its 23rd Session in 1999, the FAO has facilitated meetings on a biennial basis, coinciding with COFI meetings. Immediately after COFI, the Fourth Meeting of Regional Fishery Bodies (RFB 4) was held and also reconfirmed the important role that RFBs have to play in sustainable fisheries. Furthermore, the Meeting discussed a number of essential matters for RFBs such as external factors affecting fisheries management, harmonization of catch documentation, relations between RFBs and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and the status of the Fisheries Resources Monitoring System (FIRMS) of FAO. It was also agreed that the title of “RFB Secretariats Network” would be more applicable than the current meeting’s title.

The report of RFB 4 is available at:
http://www.fao.org/fi/NEMS/events/detail_event.asp?event_id=24538

Review Conference on UNFSA

It was widely agreed that the improvement of regional organizations’ functioning and alignment of their conventions and adopted measures with the Agreement’s standards should be priority, during the Review Conference on UNFSA held in May 2006⁵. The implementation of precautionary and ecosystem-based approaches to fisheries management, strengthening of monitoring, control and surveillance regimes and performance review were underscored in order to modernize RFMOs. Development of the standards of RFMOs and best practice guidelines for RFMOs was proposed.

Establishment of new RFBs

The South Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement (SIOFA) was signed in July 2006 by the Comoros, France, Kenya, Mozambique, New Zealand, Seychelles and the European Community for aiming at ensuring the long-term conservation and sustainable use of fishery resources other than tuna on the high seas in the South Indian Ocean⁶.

Australia, Chile and New Zealand initiated a process for establishment of the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization (SPRFMO) and the first international meeting took place in February 2006⁷.

⁵ Report of the Review Conference on the Agreement for the Implementation of the Provision of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks (A/CONF.210/2006/15)

⁶ <http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2006/1000360/index.html>

⁷ <http://www.southpacificrfmo.org/>

There is another effort going on among Japan, Republic of Korea, Russia and the United State of America to establish a regional management framework in the North Pacific for non-highly migratory fish stocks.

Conclusions

FAO notes that RFBs are critical for the promotion of long-term sustainable fisheries where international cooperation is required in conservation and management. Significantly, all post-UNCED instruments assign RFBs a key role in the facilitation of international cooperation to this end. It is of relevance to note that the 1998 High-level Panel of External Experts reached the conclusion that there is no realistic alternative to RFBs.

Though RFBs are composed of independent States they are not supra-national organizations. States come together under the aegis of a RFB because of their common interest and concern for conserving and managing their mandated fish stocks. However, RFBs can only be as effective as their members permit. Members must collaborate effectively and take difficult decisions if they are to be successful even though not all members have congruent interests.

Fisheries issues confronting RFBs are becoming more complex and the conclusion of new international instruments, to which RFBs must respond, may strain the capacity of these organizations and their members to effectively implement them. Critical issues such as the accommodation of new entrants, decision making, the application of the precautionary approach, the ecosystem approach to fisheries and IUU fishing, are some of current issues that are already affecting RFBs in an unprecedented manner. Further, international demands are more frequent that RFBs should be more accountable for their actions and inaction and should be quantitatively assessed to gauge their performance. Such calls will put additional strains on RFBs and their ability to respond to their primary mandate.

For example, the Conference on the Governance on High Seas Fisheries and the UN Fish Agreement held in St. John's, Canada, from 1 to 5 May 2005, recognized that RFMOs faced new challenges and responsibilities and adopted the Ministerial Declaration in which Ministers declared, *inter alia*, to review and strengthen RFMOs. During the Review Conference on UNFSA RFMOs were recognized as the primary mechanism for international cooperation in conserving and managing straddling fish stocks and highly migratory fish stocks.

FAO will continue its technical and administrative support to its own RFBs⁸ with a view to strengthening the effectiveness and will promote collaboration and consultation among all RFBs or arrangements on matters of common concern. The FAO will also continue to facilitate meetings of RFBs, implementation by RFBs of sustainable policies and practices and the effective implementation of the post-UNCED instruments, including cooperation between RFBs and FAO programmes such as FIRMS, and issues relating to reporting on status and trends of fisheries. FAO will continue to report to, and liaise with, the United Nations and other international and regional organizations regarding collecting and disseminating information.

FAO also expects active participation of RFBs in its decision-making process and any technical forums such as COFI and relevant technical consultations. Without such collaboration, the FAO believes that it will be impossible to accomplish the goal of responsible and sustainable fisheries.

[\(A link to COFI/2007/9 Strengthening Regional Fisheries Management Organizations and Their Performances Including the Outcome of the 2007 Tuna RFMOs Meeting\)](#)

⁸ The FAO regional fisheries bodies are APFIC, CECAF, CIFA, COPESCAL, CWP, EIFAC, GFCM, IOTC, RECOFI, SWIOFC and WECAFC.