Transnational fishers’ movements: emergence, evolution, and contestation

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Received: 29 December 2021 / Accepted: 16 August 2022 / Published online: 16 September 2022
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Abstract
Global transformations in fisheries have contributed to the expansion of transnational movements, as they continuously seek out new ways to strengthen their global linkages and find spaces and platforms for engagement. As more platforms emerge for addressing international concerns, intergovernmental bodies have become increasingly implicated in navigating the political integration of diverse global actors, such as transnational fishers’ movements. Focusing on the World Forum of Fisher Peoples and the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers, this article tracks their engagement in the politics of global fisheries. It explores the history of these movements, beginning with the first steps that were taken toward building an international fishers’ network between 1984 and 1997, and follows their evolution into the movements they are today. It also examines their political agendas and strategies, and their representation of small-scale fishers in international spaces over the last two decades. The article argues that three pivotal developments offer important insights into the politics of transnational fishers’ movements. First, they are internalizing overlapping fisheries, food and climate crises, and are aligning their activities and demands accordingly. Second, fishers’ and agrarian movements and platforms are increasingly converging around common struggles. Third, international intergovernmental bodies have broadened their attention to fisheries issues in their analysis and activities. These developments have been crucial in shaping the movements’ political agendas, and for building alliances in order to scale up and strengthen their advocacy work.

Keywords Transnational movements · Small-scale fisheries · Mobilization · Resistance · Politics · Fisheries justice

Introduction

Transnational fishers’ movements, like all social movements, have a history marked both by periods of politically charged, lively mobilization, and quieter moments, plagued by a lack of capacity and organization. It is a history full of inspiring events, general assemblies, protests, alliance-building, convergences, internal and external tensions, conflict and agreements, and political and social gains. Despite being an exciting journey, it is a history that is not easy to piece together, due to the lack of a complete or organized archive. There are fragments of archival documentation here and there, mainly in the private collections of individuals who have been part of the movements, or organizations who have worked closely with them. There are also vivid stories shared between long-term and newer members and allies, and different perspectives on how things played out in various meetings and processes. Much of the movements’ historical fabric and organizational memory is preserved within the minds of the founding and early members of the movements, and those from allied organizations who have worked with the movements for many years. Some of this history has also been lost along with those who have passed away. This makes it all the more crucial for movement history to be preserved and shared—both internally and externally—as an effort toward their future viability. This article explores how transnational fishers’ movements have evolved over time, and their political agendas and strategies. It highlights historical developments which contributed to the conception and emergence of the fishers’ movements in the 1980s and 1990s, and how they built transnational alliances with civil society and intergovernmental organizations around the world.

Transnational fishers’ movements have been representing small-scale fishers in international politics and spaces for more than two decades. The World Forum of Fish Harvesters...
and Fishworkers (WFF), established in 1997, defines itself as “an international organization that brings together small-scale fishers” organizations for the establishment and upholding of fundamental human rights, social justice, and culture of artisanal/small-scale fish harvesters and fish workers’ (WFF, 2020a). Meanwhile, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), which split off from WFF in 2000, considers itself “a mass-based social movement of small-scale fisher people from across the world… established in response to the increasing pressure being placed on small-scale fisheries, including habitat destruction, anthropogenic pollution, encroachment on small-scale fishing territories by the large scale fishing fleets, illegal fishing, and overfishing” (WFFP, 2020a). In terms of membership, public lists show that WFF currently has 44 member organizations (WFF, 2020b), while WFFP has 75 member organizations and claims to represent 10 million fisher people around the world (WFFP, 2020a; 2020b). Both Forums can be described as “fisheries justice” movements, or collective struggles involving local, national, and transnational alliances of small-scale fishers, fishing communities, and their allies, who are concerned with issues of inclusion, equity, human rights, democratizing access to and control of natural resources, and the politics of climate change (Mills 2018).

Taking a global multi-sited ethnographic approach, this research employs complementary archival, virtual, and in-person methods. Combining qualitative methods allowed me to gain important insights into the evolution and political path of the fishers’ movements that would have been difficult to uncover otherwise. These methods included gathering documents and photos; conducting anonymous formal and conversational interviews; and engaging in participant observation in spaces where movements were present. Since 2016, I have collected stories, insights, and information from diverse sources, in order to build a historical narrative of the fishers’ movements. Considering historical accounts are told and understood differently by actors based on their own subjectivity and personal experiences, this historical account likely leaves out some moments or interactions which others may see as important. Therefore, the history that is told here is not presented as the definitive story of the transnational fishers’ movements, but rather presents a narrative that has been carefully assembled and woven together using primary data and available secondary sources.

In the rest of this article, the first section explores the steps that were taken toward building an international fishers’ network, beginning with a movement-led conference in Rome in 1984, followed by the birth of a World Fishers’ Forum in 1997, and the internal split that divided the movement in half in 2000. The second section discusses the evolution of WFFP and WFF between 2000 and 2020, including the development of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) between 2009 and 2014, and the post-Guidelines endorsement period from 2014 and 2020. In the third section, I turn to three pivotal developments which have been crucial in shaping the movements’ political agendas, building alliances with other movements and intergovernmental organizations, and scaling-up and strengthening advocacy work. They include the movements’ internalization of overlapping fisheries, food and climate crises; transnational agrarian movements and the international platforms they participate in increasingly engaging with the fisheries aspect of converging food and climate crises; and intergovernmental UN bodies broadening their attention to fisheries issues in their analysis and activities.

Building an international network of fishers’ organizations

A key step in building a global network of fishers’ organizations was the 1984 International Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters in Rome. Many movement members and supporters highlight “the 1984 Conference” as an historical moment for fishers’ organizations. It was organized in response to the rapidly globalizing fisheries sector, in which small-scale fishers were being swept aside by the industrial sector, and continuously excluded from decision-making and policy processes that had a direct impact on their livelihoods (Interviews, 2018; 2019; WFF, 2000). The civil society-led conference was conceived as a first step toward building solidarity between fishers’ organizations from around the world. A hundred participants from 34 countries, including 50 fishworkers (small-scale fishers, fishing crew workers, processors, and sellers) and 50 supporters (individuals and organizations working with fishing communities) from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America, and Oceania joined the event (Cooperation of People 1984). The fishworkers’ conference was organized following the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)’s World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development, which was held a

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1. While this article focuses on the history of both WFF and WFFP, many of the movement-authored documents and empirical examples that are drawn upon are published by, or focus on, WFFP. This is mainly because WFFP has historically produced more reports, statements, and briefs, particularly between 2004 and 2010 when WFF was more loosely networked and less active (see WFF, 2010).

2. The small-scale fishers represented by these movements are people that fish to meet food and basic livelihood needs, and/or are directly involved in harvesting, processing, or marketing fish. They typically work for themselves, without hiring outside labor; operate in near shore areas; employ traditional, low-technology or passive fishing gear; undertake single day fishing trips; and are engaged in the sale or trade of their catches.
few days prior. The FAO conference, which aimed to develop an international strategy for tackling critical social and environmental issues in global fisheries, included 147 national delegates, 62 fisheries ministers, representatives from 14 United Nations bodies and 3 African Liberation Movements, and observers from 24 intergovernmental organizations and 29 international NGOs (FAO 1984; Kurien 2007, 1996).

The aim of the fishworkers’ conference was to share concrete life experiences; gain insights into the problems faced by fishers’ organizations and the solutions they proposed; reach a better understanding of political and economic mechanisms operating at the global level; develop alternatives that ensure the reappropriation of the sea and the future survival of fishworkers; and to devise ways to build up national, regional, and international solidarity and coordinate activities. The conference included country reports by participants; plenary sessions on key issues and collective discussions; interregional group meetings; audio-visual displays on participant concerns; an exhibition of newsletters, photographs, pedagogical materials and models of fishing crafts expressing peoples’ experiences and struggles; a field visit to an Italian fishing cooperative; and a demonstration of song, dance, and storytelling in the center of Rome (Cooperation of People, 1984; Kurien 2007, 1996).

The participants established two overarching conclusions: first, despite geographical, political, social, and economic differences at the national level, common factors cause the same problems in fisheries globally. They recognized that national boundaries and polarization between “Third World” and “First World” interests must be overcome, and that “unless the problems are analyzed in the framework of a world capitalist system which integrates the economic sectors of all countries, no effective solution can be found to improve the predicament of fishworkers” (Cooperation of People, 1984, 8). Second, although numerous positive lessons can be drawn from country-level experiences, workers’ organizations and collective actions must acknowledge the concrete socio-political context that they operate within. The crucial outcome of the conference was to begin building up a solidarity network of national level fishers’ organizations, by directing efforts toward creating a mass-based movement. This included facilitating communication between sub-regional groups of fishers, establishing a coordination committee of regional network representatives, and taking steps to ensure that small-scale fishers’ organizations got representative status in the International Labour Organization (ILO) (Cooperation of People, 1984; Kurien 2007, 1996).

Two years later, a second crucial step in building a global fishers’ network took place. During a meeting of fishers’ organizations from Africa, Asia, North America, and Latin America in Quebec City, Canada in 1995, representatives decided to organize a World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers. This decision emerged partially in response to fishing being largely absent from the agenda of the FAO Symposium on World Food Security, which the fishers’ organizations were attending in Quebec at the time. The establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) earlier that year, and the increasing neoliberal globalization of fish trade, were also highlighted as central threats to small-scale fisheries. The fisher representatives that were present at the FAO Symposium agreed that the discussions that were taking place at the international level, about issues such as the exploitation of fishworkers, threats to sustainability, and the fisheries resource management, were meaningless without fisher participation. They recognized that this participation could only be made possible through political organization at the international level and representation in a global forum of fisher peoples, in order to propose concrete alternatives that would protect small-scale fishers’ livelihoods and ways of life (WFF 1997; 2000).

The unfolding process of neoliberal globalization, which had begun in the 1970s and continued to escalate in the following decades, were crucial catalysts in the emergence of transnational movements of small-scale food producers in the 1990s—namely the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF) and La Via Campesina (LVC) (Smith
As Gaventa and Tandon (2010) argue, globalization changed forms of political power, created new spheres of authority, and facilitated the emergence of new spaces of public action in which citizens could make their voices heard. The WTO and the neoliberal policies it promoted, further intensified the international trade of food to the benefit of large-scale industrial fishing and agricultural companies, with the political and economic capacities to expand their markets. This system posed a direct threat to small-scale fishers and farmers, who lacked these capacities, and in many cases, were not interested in selling their products internationally. In response to the corporate takeover of the global food system, many small-scale producers, who were challenging the predominant neoliberal model of globalization, decided to link their struggles and form transnational movements like LVC in 1993, and WFF in 1997 (Edelman and Borras 2016; Smith 2013).

The birth of a World Fishers’ Forum (1997)

The World Forum, also known as the 1st WFF General Assembly, was held in November 1997 in New Delhi, and hosted by the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) of India. Participants also celebrated the first World Fisheries Day in November 21, an event focusing on the crucial contributions of fishers and fishing communities, and which continues to be celebrated annually. The Forum’s aim was to bring together fish harvesters and fishworkers from around the world to discuss “how to preserve the world’s fish resources through an appropriate conservation and management regime, which includes the regulated common property rights of coastal communities to the coastal sea and its resources” (WFF, 1997, 5). With 150 fisher delegates from 32 countries, and 126 observers and advisors participating, this would be the first time a critical mass of fishers’ organizations from around the world would come together to develop a strategy for tackling the global fisheries crisis. After much discussion and debates, the delegates “reached an understanding on the formation of a new world body to represent their interests at the international level” (Johnston 1997, 2).

By the end of the meeting, WFF was officially inaugurated, a Charter was drafted, included an organizational structure, and an interim Steering Committee and head coordinator were elected to guide the process. The elected coordinator was Thomas Kocherry, an activist, priest, and chairman of NFF, who was a prominent leader in fishing communities in India (WFF, 1997; Sall et al. 2002). The Steering Committee, which would later become a larger Coordination Committee (CC), was responsible for carrying out all regular coordinating duties and organizational tasks; facilitating the formation of regional councils; drafting a constitution, including guidelines for certification of voting and non-voting membership; and holding a constituent assembly (including all WFF members) within 3 years of the 1st General Assembly. The structure of the WFF was also proposed, which included a General Assembly involving all member organizations, and a CC formed through regional representation, including Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and Latin America (WFF, 1997; WFF, 2000) (see Fig. 1).

The initial intention was to register WFF as an international organization; however, some participants expressed concern in the General Assembly that organizational status would make membership too strict. The 1997 Acts of WFF state that members can include trade unions, associations,
federations of cooperatives that are democratically constituted, and indigenous nations dependent upon fisheries livelihoods. There should preferably only be one member organization per country, and if there is more than one, organizations seeking membership should be able to prove that they are representative of the majority of the constituencies listed above (WFF, 1997). The terminology used in the membership rules became quite contentious, due to terms like fishworker, owner/operator, artisanal, indigenous, and traditional having different meanings in the context of diverse national fisheries (Johnston 1997). Interestingly, several members suggested that instead of an organization, it would be better for WFF to be considered a movement, in order for membership criteria to be broader and more inclusive. This would allow the membership rules to simply state that members must be legitimate fishers’ organizations that agree with the WFF objectives, and are approved by the regional review committees (WFF, 1997; WFF, 2000). This debate about the organizational-versus-movement status of WFF, membership criteria (who is in and who is out), and the politics surrounding these issues were telling signs of internal friction bubbling up within the movement. This friction ended up being an important precursor for the political divisions that would emerge, and the organizational split that would transpire 3 years later at the 2nd General Assembly in Loctudy, France.

In the 3 years following the 1st General Assembly in Delhi, the WFF worked toward building its network and strengthening coordination, communication, and connections between the member organizations. The interim Steering Committee transitioned into a CC, as planned in the WFF organizational structure, and held their 2nd and 3rd meetings in Namur, Belgium in 1998, and in San Francisco, USA in 1999. The aim of these meetings was for the CC to finalize the logistical and administrative requirements of establishing an international organization, including the organizational structure, as well as the Constitution and the various policies within. During the constitutional discussions in San Francisco, the CC agreed that membership would be simplified to “independent owner-operators,” and the WFF objective was finalized as follows:

To protect fishing communities, fish resources, and fish habitats, such as coastal zones, watersheds, and mangroves, from both land-based and sea-based threats. These include displacement by tourism, pollution (including the use of the sea as a dumping ground for toxic waste), destructive industrial aquaculture, overfishing, and destructive fishing practices (WFF, 1999, 3).

The CC was designated as the only body that could admit new active members, as well as to suspend or expel members (through a two-thirds vote) for non-payment of fees, or actions deemed detrimental to the objectives of WFF. During the San Francisco Meeting, it was also decided that the 2nd WFF General Assembly would be organized in Loctudy, France, the following year (WFF, 1999; WFF, 2000).

Internal splits and new beginnings (2000)
Following 2 years of extensive preparations, 200 delegates from 34 countries came together for the General Assembly in 2000. The French WFF members who were hosting the meeting in Loctudy—a small fishing village with only a few thousand inhabitants—arranged everything, including soliciting support from the French authorities and the European Union. The participating delegates included a broad spectrum of fisheries actors, such as national fishers’ organizations and committees, large and small-scale fishers from the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts, and women’s groups. While the Assembly began relatively smoothly and constructively, 3 days in, tensions began to bubble over between the members (O’Riordan 2000). There are many different perspectives on the details of what transpired during the infamous Loctudy meeting. Written accounts and the people I interviewed reflected on slightly different aspects of what happened. Yet, the result was that half of the WFF members walked out of the meeting to form a second movement—the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP). A common theme in many accounts of the split was that there was a clash between members from Europe and North America, and those from Africa and Asia, about how the organization should operate and the criteria for membership. One big point of contention was what is considered “small-scale fisheries” in the North and South, in terms of boat size and gear and methods used, with some southern members accusing northern members of being too commercialized to understand the struggles of real fishworkers (Interviews, 2018; 2019; Sall et al. 2002).

A Canadian WFF member from the Maritime Fishermen’s Union (MFU), Michael Belliveau, wrote: “The leader of the walkout is said to have stated that the split was inevitable and that he was satisfied to be free from the “harvesters” to get on with his “fishworker” concerns” (Sall et al. 2002, 164). Meanwhile, a South African member, who joined the newly-formed WFFP, noted: “We from the South, and they from the North, had a difference of opinion. There are two things I realize now: One, it was a power struggle, people did not want to give up positions. And secondly, it was a different ideology completely” (Interview, 2019). In another account, Brian O’Riordan, a British ICSF member, wrote: “On Thursday afternoon, as the Indians and Canadians struggled to wrest control of the WFF, heated and emotional exchanges ensued… As the tide turned against the Indians, chaos ensued, and half of the assembly walked out” (O’Riordan 2000, 4). Savarimuthu Santiago, a former Indian member of the WFF Secretariat, and subsequently
of the newly formed WFFP Secretariat, further highlighted: “…while the lobby led by the Canadian delegation struggled for power, the lobby led by the Indian delegation was forced to join the struggle, not to wield power, but for freedom, equality, and survival” (Santiago 2001, 1).

The common thread running through all of these accounts was that the split was caused by internal power struggles and differences of opinion over how the organization should be structured and led. This was largely the result of ideological, personal, and political tensions that exist within all social organizations or movements, whether it be at the local, national, or transnational level. The dynamics that exist within transnational movements are particularly complex, due to the diversity of the membership within these groups in terms of national, political, economic, social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. While transnational movements typically require a high level of cohesion, shared collective identity and regular horizontal communication between members, a strong feeling of connection is often difficult to maintain (Diani 2015; Bernstein 2014; Fox 2010; Tilly 2002). This becomes even more difficult when there is little direct contact between members, aside from triennial general assemblies and occasional meetings for coordination or international events, which do not involve all members. Many of the people I spoke to highlighted how crucial it is for movement members to regularly meet each other in person in order to build up trust and rapport, and without that, relationships can quickly become strained (Interviews, 2019; 2019).

Regardless of what was said or done in Loctudy, the outcome is the same: the WFF split in half to form a second transnational movement, the WFFP. While the North and South American, Icelandic, and French members chose to remain in the WFF, the newly formed WFFP included members from Africa, Asia, New Zealand, Spain, and a First Nations community in Canada (Bear River) (Sinha 2012). Despite the split, both WFF and WFFP have maintained important commonalities in the overarching issues they focus on, such as human rights and industrial encroachment on small-scale fishing territories. In both movements’ constitutions, the commitment to challenging the dominant model of industrial development, globalized markets, and concentration of ownership over fisheries resources and property in the hands of the powerful, also remained (WFFP, 2020c; O’Riordan 2000). These commonalities are arguably the main reason why both movements have continued to collaborate in various ways over the years, particularly since 2012 when WFF re-emerged after a period of inactivity (WFF 2010), and many of the people who had been centrally involved in the split had either passed away, or were no longer actively involved with the movements. The two movements have also had different historical trajectories, evolving into somewhat different movements in terms of their political character, level of mobilization, and activities. As highlighted earlier, important tensions had emerged between those who believed WFF should be registered as an international organization—which would offer more political legitimacy and access to external funding or as a social movement—which would allow more autonomy and flexibility. Interestingly, many of those who ended up joining WFFP had been the ones calling for the latter option, and this ideology is still very evident in the movement’s character today.

The evolution of transnational mobilization

In the years following the split, WFF and WFFP both went through their own processes of growth, developing distinct advocacy strategies and approaches to collaboration and resistance. One WFFP member highlighted four distinct periods of growth for the global movement, in which certain characteristics, similarities, and challenges can be identified: (1) 2000 to the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami; (2) 2005 to the 2008 Global Conference on Small-Scale Fisheries in Bangkok; (3) 2009 to 2014, SSF Guidelines development and endorsement; and (4) 2014 to 2020, post-guidelines endorsement (Interview, 2019). In the early years, WFFP’s focus was on the movement itself, so in planning events, everything was centered around when a Coordination Committee (CC) meeting was going to be held, and when a General Assembly (GA) would be organized. In each GA, plans would then have to already begin for the next two CC meetings and next GA, and if there was a Committee on Fisheries (COFI) session at FAO in between, then participation in that space was also planned (Interview, 2019).

In March 2001, the newly formed WFFP CC held its first meeting in Mumbai, India. The main aim of the meeting was to develop a concrete plan of action for the next 3 years of WFFP’s international work, and establish ways to carry it out. The opening paragraphs of the meeting report highlight that the first General Body meeting of WFFP, which took place in Loctudy after the split, “had unanimously accepted a new constitution”, in which they excluded “corporations, transnational companies, and allied affiliates owning fishing vessels and engaged in harvesting, processing, and distribution of fish and those carrying out destructive fishing or industrial aquaculture” from joining the movement (WFFP, 2001, 3). The report also points out that while it was an important achievement for WFFP, as a young organization,

3 The COFI is a body of the FAO established in 1965, as the only intergovernmental forum where issues and challenges related to fisheries and aquaculture are discussed at the global level, and which provides recommendations and policy advice to governments, regional fisheries bodies, civil society organizations and private sector actors (FAO, 2021a).
to have already become visible at the international level, that it still had “miles more to go in building up international fishworkers’ solidarity and also to devise effective means of resistance to the rapid economic changes happening in the name of globalization and open markets” (WFFP 2001, 5). The report further notes that another major decision that was taken by the General Body in Loctudy was to continue to observe World Fisheries Day in November 21 each year, as a day “to establish the right of fishing communities to own water bodies, fishing implements, and to manage the distribution of their catch” (WFFP 2001, 4). The annual celebration of World Fisheries Day represents another commonality which both WFF and WFFP maintained, and which would continue to serve as a unifying moment for years to come.

For WFFP, the period between 2000 and 2004 was the first distinct phase in the movement’s history, in which its strength was largely situated in Asia, particularly among movement leaders in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka who had longstanding experience organizing fishers nationally. This phase ended abruptly with the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, which killed more than 225,000 people. The vast majority of those affected by this disaster were coastal and fishing communities in Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, some of which WFFP members were part of or worked with directly (Ahmadun et al. 2020; De Silva and Yamao 2007). Reflecting on the tsunami, one movement member highlighted that the aftermath of this disaster changed the character of WFFP. WFFP members, both inside and outside Asia, collected money to send to effected areas to support recovery and burial processes, and rehabilitation and rebuilding in fishing communities that had been destroyed. This triggered a sense of mobilization around support and solidarity, and a sense of global purpose among the members (Interview, 2019). Between 2004 and 2008, solidarity and mobilization continued to grow in the fishers’ movements as the network expanded (Interview, 2019). The second distinct phase began in 2008 when FAO and the Thai Government organized the Global Conference on Small-scale Fisheries in Bangkok. This conference was held in response to a request from UN Member States at the 27th COFI Session in 2007, for FAO to convene an international conference on small-scale fisheries. It focused on developing a strategy for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries by bringing together responsible fisheries and social development. More than 280 participants from 65 countries attended the conference, including fisheries managers, fishers, scientists, government officials, and representatives from professional associations, NGOs, civil society, and private sector actors. The format centered around presentations, panel statements, and working group discussion, covering a wide range of issues, including social and economic development, human rights, fisheries management, governance and policy processes, and access to post-harvest markets. Special emphasis was also placed on securing access and user rights to coastal and inland fisheries resources for small-scale fisheries, fishing communities, and indigenous peoples (FAO 2008).

WFFP, together with ICSF and several Thai CSOs, organized a civil society workshop and a CC meeting in Bangkok a few days before the conference. This workshop turned out to be one of the most important in fishers’ movement history, as it was during those days that the Bangkok Statement was drafted, in which the global demands of small-scale fishing communities were set out. Several interviewees mentioned that this statement was extremely important for making movement demands visible at the international level, particularly within the FAO (Interviews, 2019; Pictou 2015). The Statement, which is a collaboration between 106 representatives from small-scale fishing and indigenous communities and their supporters from 36 countries, notes that it builds upon prior preparatory processes and workshops organized by the WFFP, ICSF, and allied organizations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The Statement presents 36 specific demands, calling upon the FAO and other UN agencies, regional fisheries bodies, and national governments to secure the access rights, post-harvest rights, and human rights of small-scale fishers (WFFP 2008). A few WFFP and WFFP members were also able to make interventions in the plenary of the FAO conference, challenging the participants to actively implement human rights in fisheries nationally and internationally, and highlighted that it was crucial for fishers themselves to be involved in such governance processes (FAO 2008).

The events that took place in Bangkok gave the fishers’ movements a new impetus, and were critical for increasing the international visibility of the movements for two reasons. First, the Bangkok Statement served as the foundation for the development of a set of international guidelines on small-scale fisheries, which were envisioned by fishers’ organizations themselves. The demands articulated in the Statement presented a unifying vision and a mobilizing force, and provided a basis upon which the movement members could collaborate at the international level, and ensure their voices and perspectives were at the core of the guidelines. Second, the convergence of the fishers’ movements and the FAO in the Bangkok conference was the beginning of a new chapter in the relationship between the two, in which they discovered a common goal, beginning a 5-year collaboration toward the development and international endorsement of the guidelines. These two developments in internal capacity—building and alliance-building with the FAO were pivotal to the future longevity of the fishers’ movements, and which continue to be crucial factors for maintaining movement participation in intergovernmental fisheries governance spaces.
Developing the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines (2009–2014)

Following the Bangkok meeting, WFFP, WFF, ICSF, and FAO entered into a period of extensive discussions around developing a set of international guidelines on small-scale fisheries. These would later become the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) (Pictou 2018). The intention was to present the completed Guidelines for endorsement by the COFI member states. While some movement members had participated marginally in COFI sessions since the early-2000s, such direct engagement with this space was a relatively new experience for the movements, since COFI had historically been a space primarily for discussion between national government delegations. The development of the Guidelines marked a turning point for the movements in both the COFI space and broader FAO spaces, due to their recognition as central actors in the Guidelines process with relevant knowledge and perspectives to contribute (Interviews, 2018; 2019).

The SSF Guidelines bring together the 2008 Bangkok Statement’s calls for securing the access rights, post-harvest rights, and human rights of small-scale fishers, and recommendations emerging from the 2011 and 2012 COFI Sessions. Its two central themes include responsible fisheries and sustainable development, and ensuring an enabling environment that supports its implementation. The Guidelines were developed through a participatory and consultative process, facilitated by regional FAO bodies, involving over 4000 participants from governments, small-scale fishers and fish workers organizations, researchers, and development practitioners from over 120 countries. The participants contributed to the process via 6 regional discussions and more than 20 consultative meetings organized by civil society organizations (CSOs). The FAO Technical Consultation then used the outcome of these meetings to draft the text of the SSF Guidelines between 2013 and 2014 (FAO 2014; FAO 2015; Nakamura et al. 2021; Chuenpagdee and Jentoft 2018; Jentoft 2014).

Processes for negotiating UN declarations and guidelines have historically been long and arduous—particularly for the social movements that have led civil society efforts toward approval or endorsement. While the UN system, with its efforts to establish global frameworks for the protection of human rights, is the leading institution in universal rights-making, such efforts are also plagued by the voluntary and non-binding nature of many of its instruments (see McKeon 2017b, 2013; Franco et al. 2015; Künneumann and Monsalve Suárez 2013; Edelman and James 2011). This means that while COFI members can endorse instruments like the SSF Guidelines, their implementation at national level is still voluntary and can essentially be carried out as governments see fit. Implementation may also be co-opted by private sector interests in order to achieve particular goals that benefit companies or generate profits. The process of negotiation is also typically a long-term struggle which often forces participants—particularly social movements—to compromise on many of the details and demands set out in the document. There is a delicate balance that must be reached between doing justice to civil society perspectives, and reflecting a language that is not too radical, and therefore acceptable to diverse government institutions (McKeon 2017b, 2013; Edelman and Borras 2016).

After several years of complex and difficult international negotiations, the 2014 endorsement of the SSF Guidelines marks a pivotal moment and a historical achievement for fishers’ movements at both the international and national levels, since the SSF Guidelines are the first international instrument dedicated completely to the small-scale fisheries sector. There had long been a critical need for such an instrument, which provides guidance and principles for addressing the challenges faced by small-scale fisheries (WFFP 2014; FAO 2015; Nakamura et al. 2021). The endorsement also “created a new ‘space’ in the international fora, where the protection of rights of small-scale fisheries (SSF) people is promoted, and where indifference, unfairness, and injustice within and against SSF are placed under the world’s pur-view” (Nakamura et al. 2021, 1). WFFP, WFF, and ICSF were key forces driving the development of the Guidelines, and played central roles in the negotiations and advocacy work that took place in the years leading up to the endorsement. One movement member noted that this was extremely hard work and involved putting a lot of pressure on FAO to make sure the demands of the fishers’ movements were reflected in the Guidelines (Interview, 2019). The fishers’ movements spent a lot of time strategizing and preparing themselves for the four COFI sessions that took place between 2009 and 2014, and lobbying governments for their support on the side-lines and during breaks from COFI plenaries (WFFP 2014). Several interviewees further commented on how the process of collaboration between WFFP, WFF, and ICSF around the SSF Guidelines was key to building strength and solidarity, both within and between the organizations. As movement member highlighted: “We spent a lot of time on that… I’m proud of what we did, to actually have brought it from nothing to what it eventually became… I think WFF, WFFP, and ICSF should be proud of what we did there” (Interview, 2019).

Post-guidelines endorsement and ongoing challenges (2014–2020)

While the endorsement of the SSF Guidelines was considered a crucial victory for the fishers’ movements, the next big challenge would be national implementation. The
continuation of the collaborative effort that began during the Guidelines development, and the participation of small-scale fishers’ organizations in particular, are crucial for the Guidelines to be successfully implemented and retain their relevance (Singleton et al. 2017; Jentoft et al. 2017; Espinosa-Romero et al. 2017). Yet, despite their endorsement of the SSF Guidelines, many governments do not prioritize the implementation of voluntary instruments, or end up implementing them in a way that is molded to their own interests. As highlighted above, co-optation also becomes a risk once guidelines reach a certain amount of international prominence and various actors see involvement in their implementation as a potential vehicle for promoting their own interests, or receiving government funding or private sector investment (McKeon 2017b, 2013; Edelman and Borras 2016). Perhaps the biggest challenge is translating the importance of international instruments to the local level—where resources and capacities are limited—so that local organizations will take on implementation (Claeys and Edelman 2020; Espinosa-Romero et al. 2017; Jentoft 2014).

For WFFP, WFF, and ICSF, maintaining the same level of collaboration in the post-endorsement period also poses challenges, as the development of the Guidelines involved a clear common task and goal, while implementation must take different forms depending on the regional and national context. This means it is more difficult to build a common international vision around which to mobilize transnationally, making the implementation process more of a national project which has to be taken up by movements locally. This diverts attention, and already limited organizational funds, away from international advocacy and capacity-building, toward national fisheries policy and local empowerment to understand and engage with the Guidelines. In the post-2014 period, this would prove to be a key challenge for maintaining energy in the transnational fishers’ movements.

Propelled by the momentum that was built around the SSF Guidelines, energy and mobilization remained relatively high in the fishers’ movements in the years immediately following the endorsement. Between 2014 and 2016 in particular, many events and meetings were organized, and WFFP and WFF continued working toward strengthening their collaborative relationship. However, the endorsement of the SSF Guidelines was only the first step toward having a functioning international instrument that would prioritize and uphold the rights of small-scale fishing communities. In the first 3 years after the endorsement, while there were some efforts to exchange knowledge and success stories between communities, most of the implementation activities revolved around incorporating the Guidelines into regional and national legislation. While this is certainly important for FAO’s intergovernmental mandate and the long-term enforceability of the Guidelines, it also fails to address the issue that small-scale fishing communities have historically been overlooked by national governments and policies. In order for the SSF Guidelines to have material impact on small-scale fishers’ lives, implementation needs to be addressed from the ground up, by linking broader national, regional, and international efforts with those being organized by small-scale fishing communities themselves (Singleton et al. 2017).

After the excitement of the Guidelines endorsement started to wear off, and attention shifted toward national-level implementation, proactiveness and mobilization in the transnational fishers’ movements began to wane. Some interviewees noted that they felt that after the Guidelines were endorsed, there was a kind of “now what?” moment, in which movements felt they no longer had a common goal to work toward at the international level. Many movement members felt it was a good time to scale back and focus on SSF Guidelines implementation in their own countries, national level work, and local fisheries issues (Interviews, 2018; 2019). This shift in the intensity of international mobilization can be partially understood as what some social movement scholars describe as protest cycles or the ebb and flow of social movements and political struggle over time (Tarrow 2011; McAdam 1995). Ebbs and flows are a regular part of social movement dynamics which may be influenced by external global politics, internal member dynamics, the strength of national members, organizational capacities, time available, and funding cycles, among other things. Ebbs can make it more difficult to maintain steady or constant mobilization within a movement (Tarrow 2011).

In the context of fishers’ movements, which are relatively small in comparison to agrarian movements like La Via Campesina, the core group of active members that were involved in the development of the SSF Guidelines had expended a significant amount of their time, energy, and organizational resources on the process. Some understandably needed to regroup and refocus their attention on issues closer to home. A few members, particularly in South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda, used the internal strength and capacity of their organizations to maintain some momentum and keep tabs on SSF Guidelines implementation and fisheries governance processes and debates taking place at the international level. One key initiative several WFF and WFFP members began developing with FAO in 2016 was the Global Strategic Framework (SSF-GSF), serving as a complementary mechanism for FAO’s SSF Umbrella Programme.4 The SSF-GSF supports the implementation of the

4 The SSF Umbrella Programme promotes and applies the SSF Guidelines to enhance the contribution of small-scale fisheries to food security and sustainable livelihoods. It is particularly focused on raising awareness about challenges and opportunities in small-scale fisheries; strengthening the science-policy interface through data collection on the small-scale sector; empowering fishers’ organizations; and increasing governments’ knowledge, skills and capacity for implementing the Guidelines (FAO, 2021b).
SSF Guidelines at all levels, facilitates interactions between COFI members and other interested actors, and is guided by fishers’ movements through their participation in the Advisory Group (AG) (IPC 2019b; FAO 2018b).

The preceding sections have explored the history of the transnational fishers’ movements since 1984, highlighting some of the key similarities and differences that have emerged between WFF and WFFP as they have evolved into the movements they are today. There have been important overlaps in their activities, particularly leading up to and shortly after the SSF Guidelines endorsement, as well as convergences with other allies and resource justice struggles. Fishers’ movements have been visible political actors, a role which is partially illuminated by their historical evolution and the movement-building processes they have engaged in. Building on the preceding discussion, I argue that three pivotal developments provide insights into the movements’ political agendas and alliance-building strategies, which have had important implications for their contributions to global fisheries politics in the last two decades. These include: (1) the internalization of overlapping fisheries, food, and climate crises; (2) the convergence of fishers’ and agrarian movements and platforms; and (3) intergovernmental bodies addressing fisheries issues. These three developments are expanded upon in the following sections.

Pivotal developments for political agendas and alliance-building

The emergence and evolution of the fishers’ movements have involved ebbs and flows in mobilization, internal capacity, and international visibility, influenced by transformations in fisheries globally. Such transformations, stemming from the processes of globalization and industrial development both in the fisheries sector and more broadly, have also contributed to the transnational expansion of fishers’ movements. They have responded to the marginalization of small-scale fishers by developing new ways to amplify their voices, build their international networks, strengthen their alliances, and engage in strategic spaces and platforms (Mills 2021). In the context of the rapidly globalizing world of the 1990s, and the increasing prominence of UN bodies, such as the FAO and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), such organizations have become increasingly involved in integrating a wide range of global actors, such as transnational movements, in political processes (Tarrow 2011; Smith and Guarnizo 2006; Sundar 2012). In this context, transnational citizenship has become a useful tool for those concerned with extending human rights and political and social equality beyond nation-state borders (Fox 2005). For fishers’ movements, they have recognized transnational citizenship as a strategic avenue for scaling up their struggles for fisheries justice and human rights, and linking up with like-minded resource justice allies and sympathetic international organizations. As Fox argues, “the rise of transnational civil society and an associated public sphere is extending claims to membership in cross-border civic and political communities grounded in rights-based worldviews, such as feminism, environmentalism, indigenous rights, and human rights” (2005, 173). Gaventa and Tandon (2010) also highlight the importance of transnational engagement, and why we need to learn more about the implications of global governance for ordinary citizens and the experiences of specific groups. Three pivotal developments provide important insights into this in relation to the transnational experiences of fishers’ movements.

Fishers’ movements internalizing overlapping global crises

The first development is that fishers’ movements have increasingly internalized the overlap of the fisheries, food, and climate crises, and are aligning their activities and demands accordingly, by putting food and climate issues forward as central pillars of their agendas. Food sovereignty, for instance, which strives for food and climate justice, has become an important mobilization tool, analytical guide, and alternative that fishers’ movements have increasingly engaged with since the 2008 Bangkok Statement (Mills 2021). The concept of food sovereignty was first introduced by La Via Campesina in 1996 at the World Food Summit in Rome—the year before the official establishment of WFF—and within a few years gained traction with a wide range of rural food producers (Claeys and Duncan 2019). Food sovereignty involves peoples’ right to both healthy and culturally appropriate food, which is produced using ecological and sustainable methods, as well as to define their own food production systems. In the context of food systems and policies, food sovereignty also prioritizes the needs and aspirations of the food producers, distributors, and consumers over the demands of markets and corporations (Nyéléni 2007). As a counter-narrative, food sovereignty challenges corporate-controlled food systems, and responds to neoliberal globalization that contributed to fragmenting rural labor, weakening workers’ unions, privatizing industries, and intensifying international competition (Edelman and Borras 2016; Smith 2013; Scholte, 2011).

In the context of fisheries, food sovereignty is a useful tool for exploring fish as food, which illuminates how fishers are embedded in and impacted by the “neoliberal logics of the corporate, industrial food system” (Levkoe et al. 2017, 66). Concerned about the broad impacts of neoliberalism and climate change on fishing communities, fishers’ movements have mobilized around food sovereignty, arguing that it is an effective long-term solution and way forward.
The food sovereignty debate within fisheries is not without its challenges. The SSF Guidelines, for example, do not engage directly with food sovereignty, and the concept appears very little in discussions around fisheries and fisheries governance. It has also proved difficult to scale down the food sovereignty debate from international debate to tangible national level activities. The fishers’ movements have recognized that more time is needed for its national member organizations to deepen and build upon their understandings, through “learning exchanges led by fishing communities, documentation of best practices and debates among WFFP members, and communication strategies to disseminate information about food sovereignty and agroecology to fishing families” (KNTI and WFFP 2017, 17). The issue of international trade also complicates food sovereignty discussions in fisheries, considering many fishers around the world depend on selling their catches to the international market—an element which some movement members do not feel is adequately addressed in food sovereignty debates. Several participants at the 2017 food sovereignty workshop highlighted that their livelihoods depend on catching species which are not eaten locally (e.g., octopus), and they felt that food sovereignty is too focused on the localization of food (Interviews and fieldnotes, 2017; 2018; 2019). The localization issue does not only emerge in the context of fisheries, but presents a contradiction in agrarian food systems as well. Robbins (2015) explores this dilemma, highlighting that local food systems alone are not enough to challenge the global industrial food system, and even local food systems that fit an ideal food sovereignty type, do not constitute food sovereignty in and of itself. Therefore, if food sovereignty is going to have long-term, wide-reaching mobilization power within fishers’ movements, it is important that the discussion continues to evolve, both within movements and more broadly, to determine which aspects are useful and which are not in the context of fisheries.

Linked to the food sovereignty debate, fishers’ movements are also prioritizing issues of privatization and ocean grabbing. In order to analyze and strategize around these issues, WFFP established an ocean grabbing working group, organized an ocean grabbing workshop during its 2017 General Assembly, released statements, and published a paper on Human Rights vs. Property Rights: Implementation and Interpretation of the SSF Guidelines (WFFP 2015a, 2016). The report notes that “in addition to denouncing the negative effects of property rights-based fisheries programs, small-scale and artisanal fisherfolk have been actively developing and promoting a human rights-based approach to fisheries; this is the backbone of the SSF Guidelines” (WFFP et al. 2016, 9). Fishers’ movements have also increasingly highlighted how in the context of climate change and related politics, privatization strategies are being reframed within new “blue” agendas, using concepts such as the blue economy, blue growth, and blue carbon (Barbesgaard 2018; WFFP, 2015b, 2015c). In 2015, WFFP and WFF co-organized the “Blue Carbon: Ocean Grabbing in Disguise?” workshop in which members from both movements discussed the blue carbon mechanism of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), arguing that it perpetuates a politico-economic system that profits from the commodification of nature (Mills 2018; WFFP 2015b, WFFP 2015c; Damanik 2015). The workshop report highlights that “blue carbon needs to be understood as part of broader processes of the privatization of nature, and grabbing resources under the guise of conservation.” One movement member further noted that “in Indonesia, the fishers say: “the sea is our mother who provides, protects, and loves us.” The Blue Carbon project asks us to sell our mother” (WFFP 2015b, 3). How fishers’ movements grapple with and respond to reframed privatization agendas is an ongoing internal discussion, considering the complexity of such agendas and the wide array of actors involved often make it unclear who to direct responses to and what strategies will be most effective (Interviews 2018; 2019).

Fishers’ movements’ internalization of overlapping fisheries, food and climate crises, mobilization around food sovereignty, and criticism of fisheries privatization and ocean grabbing, have arguably demonstrated their commitment to participating in, and shaping, the future of the fisheries sector and its socio-political context in a way that addresses the concerns of small-scale fishers. Through their trajectories of

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5 Ocean grabbing refers to powerful economic actors capturing control of decision-making in fisheries, including around the use, conservation and management of marine resources (TNI 2014; Bennett et al., 2015).
Convergence of Fishers’ and agrarian movements and platforms

The second pivotal development is that transnational agrarian movements and the international platforms they participate in, namely La Via Campesina (LVC), the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), and the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSM), are increasingly engaging with fisheries issues. This is reflected in the issues they raise, the demands they make, and the convergence of fishers’ and agrarian movements in various events and spaces (Mills 2021). At the center of this convergence is a focus on building food systems that are based on food sovereignty and agroecology models, centered on small-scale food producers’ access to and control over land and natural resources (Tramel 2018; Water Grabbing 2015). Over the last three decades, the global food sovereignty movement has “created and in different ways enforced, systems of categorization to build unity and convergence between different participant movements, while negotiating and maintaining differences” (Claeys and Duncan 2019, 1). Movement convergences illuminates a common thread linking agrarian and fisheries justice struggles, uniting to criticize current modes of production, distribution, and consumption in the global food system, and the threats they pose to the health of the global environment and climate (Tramel 2018).

Some concrete examples of convergence between agrarian and fishers’ movements include WFFP’s participation in LVC’s 7th International Conference and LVC’s participation in WFFP’s 7th General Assembly, both in 2017, and the increasing number of fisher-related stories, statements, and reports appearing on LVC’s website—which rose steadily from 3 to 49 between 2000 and 2016 (LVC 2017; WFFP 2017; Interviews and fieldnotes, 2018). This coordinated effort to enhance the alliance between agrarian and fishers’ movements is also demonstrated by the launch of the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles during the 2015 World Social Forum in Tunisia. The joint declaration emerging from this convergence highlights that collaborations between social movements and organizations engaged in defending land and water rights have contributed to the recognition of the vital link between land and water struggles, particularly when faced with the increasing and overlapping threat of land and water grabbing globally (see LVC, 2015a).

The convergence of agrarian and fishers’ movements is also evident within the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), which is an international CSO network established in 1996 that LVC, WFFP, and WFP are all members of. The IPC brings together organizations representing farmers, fishers, agricultural workers, indigenous peoples, and NGOs, and provides a common space for mobilization that links local struggles and global debate. Since 2002, the IPC has been the official platform charged with coordinating civil society participation in some of the FAO processes, such as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and COFI (IPC 2019a; IPC 2017). In 2018, WFFP’s 2014–2017 Secretariat, Masifundise, hosted the biennial IPC General Meeting in South Africa. LVC members who participated noted that they were impressed with the organization of the meeting and with the strong voices and presence of fishers, also highlighting that the exchanges that happened there strengthened the alliance between WFFP and LVC (Interviews, 2018). Several social movement allies further pointed out that the role of fishers’ movements in the IPC space has contributed to increasing the visibility of fisheries issues in the IPC and FAO processes and spaces (Interviews, 2018; 2019). Despite important gains in alliance-building in recent years, there is still work to be done in strengthening modes of communication and collaboration, and as one WFFP member noted, for fishers’ movements to “really learn from the experiences of farmers’ movements in scaling up our struggles more visibly at the global level” (Interview, 2018). Such alliances may contribute to important victories in the fisheries sector, and in the global food system more broadly, in which small-scale producers are increasingly finding ways to demand recognition of their rights, secure access to resources, and participate in decision-making processes at the local, national, and transnational levels (Claeys and Duncan 2019; Tramel 2018).

Transnational movements offer spaces to address threats stemming from converging fisheries, food, and climate crises, among diverse groups of people from different cultures and epistemologies, from every corner of the globe. They offer the possibility of uniting representatives from diverse social groups to “debate, analyze, strategize, build consensus...”

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6. The CFS was established as part of the FAO in 1974, and serves as a UN forum for monitoring and reviewing world security policies, such as those addressing production and access to food. It is considered the most inclusive intergovernmental platform for collaboration and coordination between diverse stakeholders working toward ensuring global food and nutrition security (FAO, 2021c).
around collective readings of reality, and agree on collective actions and campaigns with national, regional, continental, or global scope” (Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2014, 138). Transnational movements and the alliances they build have also contributed to reframing a wide range of debates around agrarian reform, land rights, human rights, food sovereignty, climate change, environmental sustainability, global trade, neoliberal economics, and gender equity. This is part of the reason why, for scholars, policy-makers, and activists alike, understanding transnational movements and their impact is “essential for grasping interconnections between these thematic areas and between these and the ‘big picture’” (Edelman and Borras 2016, 1).

In the context of the global food sovereignty movement, and more specifically within the IPC, Claeyts and Duncan (2019) highlight two tools that have been particularly useful for movements in alliance-building and ensuring they are effectively represented in global policy-making spaces. (1) The first is the use of constituency categories, including small-holder farmers, fishers, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, women and youth, as a way to “identify, protect, foster, and guarantee autonomy of movements and organizations representing different groups of people with distinct identities and lives realities”. (2) The second is the use of gender, age, constituency and geographical quotas, in order to “to protect diversity, prevent the consolidation of power, and ensure the prioritized participation of affected or marginalized groups within the Movement, notably over NGOs”. These tools have been particularly useful in intergovernmental spaces at UN level, namely within the FAO, which in the last decade has increasingly created space for civil society participation. Intergovernmental processes are complex, involving a diverse range of actors and knowledge, and movement participation in these spaces often involves tensions. Yet, despite divergences that can emerge between movements, global convergence around particular processes and goals has become an important unifying and mobilizing strategy that is increasingly connecting transnational movements.

**Intergovernmental bodies addressing fisheries issues**

The third pivotal development is that key intergovernmental bodies within the UN, such as FAO and the IPCC, have increased attention to fisheries in their analysis and activities. UN bodies have become important spaces for transnational movement engagement since they began opening up to civil society participation in the midst of 1990s globalization and the shift toward global governance (Mills 2021). The UN system, which had been somewhat of a government fortress since its founding in 1945, began to recognize that there was a need to move away from closed-door intergovernmental processes and involve a more diverse range of actors. In 1992, a Commission on Global Governance was established, and the 1990s became the decade of UN global summits, which provided an opportunity to rethink strict intergovernmental approaches and extend an unprecedented invitation to CSOs. While the relatively closed negotiations for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was a disappointment to CSOs, the global food and agriculture agenda centered in FAO offered a promising channel of engagement for food producers’ organizations (McKeon 2017a; Scholte 2011; UN 2000).

Another key factor in movements’ participation in UN spaces was their increasing recognition of the transnational value of the human rights framework which is at the core of much of the UN’s discourse. When comparing the key issues that transnational movements engaged with between the 1970s and 1990s, such as human rights, environment, women’s rights, peace, and development, human rights was a focal point for more than a quarter of the movements (Smith 1998, 47). By the 2000s, CSOs working on food issues, and agrarian and fishers’ movements increasingly engaged with this framework, particularly when highlighting the impacts of neoliberal processes on small-scale food producers and framing their demands for secure livelihoods and food security. This approach allowed them to gain space and legitimacy in the international system, and extend their participation beyond the scope of traditional state-based representation (Marchetti 2017).

Situated within this context, several examples illustrate increasing engagement between intergovernmental bodies and fisheries issues. The increased participation of fishers’ movements in intergovernmental spaces, such as the FAO, has arguably raised the profile of small-scale fisheries and drawn more attention to the demands of the movements. For example, members of both the WFFP and WFF have been participating in the CFS via the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism (CSM) since its establishment in 2010. WFFP and WFF each have one member participating in the Coordination Committee of the CSM, which is the largest international space of CSOs working to eradicate food insecurity and malnutrition (CSM 2021). There has also been greater attention to the protection of fisheries resources and territories in UN agendas. The most prominent example of this is the inclusion of Goal 14: Life Below Water in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were adopted by the General Assembly in 2015, and are a central pillar guiding the IPCC assessments (UN 2019; IPCC 2018). More importantly, Goal 14 includes Target 14.B to “provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets.” and countries’ progress will be indicated by the application of legal, regulatory, policy, and institutional frameworks that recognize and protect small-scale fishers’ access rights (UN 2019; Jentoft 2020). In relation to other
UN instruments, the 2014 endorsement of the SSF Guidelines and the subsequent 2018 adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), which is an international governance instrument that was written by and for small-scale producers, are also landmark achievements for both fishers’ and agrarian movements (FAO 2018a; Claeys and Edelman 2020).

In relation to the SSF Guidelines, Ratner et al. (2014) highlight three important antecedents for its human rights framing: First, the institutionalization of human rights approaches to development in the UN system, which gives particular attention to the right to food. Second, the recognition that small-scale fishers, including indigenous groups, are typically socially, economically, and politically marginalized and face numerous obstacles to participating in decision-making processes. Third, the rise of social movements that oppose the expansion of state ownership and private property rights over land, water, and other resources, and recognize and protect traditional and communal tenure systems of small-scale producers and indigenous peoples. Fishers’ movements have recognized that a human rights-based approach provides a means of tackling the social, economic, and political marginalization of small-scale fishers by “addressing the root causes of these inequities, which lie in unequal power relations and the failure of states and other powerful non-state actors to respect and uphold the rights of all citizens” (Ratner et al. 2014, 121). WFFP et al. (2016) further define the three main criteria of a human rights-based approach to fisheries: First, it must be multi-dimensional and holistic, meaning all human rights are interrelated, independent, and indivisible and must be respected and upheld equally. Second, it must have a pro-poor stance on decision-making and impact, meaning the most marginalized communities and individuals within communities must receive extra attention to ensure their rights are respected. Third, it must involve an accountability structure in which the state is the key duty bearer, meaning nation states play a central role in respecting and protecting human rights, particularly due to their membership in the UN and related international treaties and obligations.

While participation in intergovernmental spaces has not always been a smooth or productive experience for fishers’ movements, such spaces have been critical to both the development of their political agendas, as well as strengthening their alliances with particular UN bodies—especially the FAO. Transnational movements’ structures and activities help activists to familiarize themselves with the ways that intergovernmental institutions function and develop skills to be able to work effectively within them. Movements’ participation in their own regional and international meetings allows members to gain experience engaging with global political processes and strengthen their ability to make strategic connections between national and international issues and agendas (Smith 1998). For fishers’ movements, their engagement in intergovernmental spaces has strengthened over time, as they expand their knowledge and analysis of global processes and hone their political strategies.

**Conclusion**

The road to establishing a transnational movement and maintaining unity and momentum over time is one replete with bumps and crossroads. For the fishers’ movements, this road included the famous 1984 Rome Conference, the official establishment of WFF in 1997, and the split that produced WFFP 3 years later. Considering the diversity of membership in transnational movements, the split may not have come as a surprise to some. Tensions around movement boundaries, and who or what has the privilege of being included in a movement—or rather who is in and who is out—presents a dilemma that has been grappled with in social movement literature for decades. Members within a movement often have conflicting ideas about political strategy, how inclusive to be, and what criteria should determine membership. Understanding cohesion and shared identity within a movement, and the construction of membership bases, requires critical reflection on what this means in practice. This becomes even more complicated by the range of direct and indirect social and political relationships that connect individual activists, local organizations and national movements (Diani 2015; Bernstein 2014; Tilly 2002).

The evolution of WFFP and WFF in the years following the 2000 split, has been punctuated by a great deal of mobilization and energy, particularly leading up to and during the development of the SSF Guidelines. Centring the Guidelines on a human rights-based approach was an important strategic direction which further strengthened fishers’ movements’ relationship with UN bodies such as the FAO, and enhanced their capacities to engage with and negotiate in intergovernmental spaces. Fishers’ movements have also developed a critical level of analysis of global issues of structural inequality, unequal power relations, and the failure of states to uphold the rights of all citizens. This has contributed to their recognition that a human rights-based approach provides a useful pathway for addressing the social, economic, and political marginalization of small-scale fishers (Ratner et al. 2014). Important antecedents to the success of the Guidelines, such as the opening-up of UN spaces to civil society participation; the UN’s institutionalization of human rights-centered development approaches; and the rise of social movement opposition to privatization processes, highlight the importance of historical influences and interconnections continuously building on and influencing each other (McKeon 2017a; Ratner et al. 2014; Tilly 2002).
Since 2014, the post-guidelines endorsement period has raised a lot of questions for fishers’ movements about how to maintain the momentum they built around developing the Guidelines, while ensuring they are implemented at the national level in a way that truly reflects the holistic human rights principles they are built upon. While the process of developing the Guidelines involved a clear common goal which fostered unity within and between WFFP, WFF, ICSF, FAO, and others, the implementation process takes diverse forms in national contexts. This makes it difficult to maintain the same level of transnational mobilization within the movements. This is, firstly, because it is harder to pinpoint a clear common pathway toward implementation that such a diverse membership can rally around, and secondly, because many members are busy working with local fishers’ organizations and governments on national implementation plans. These challenges are part of complex ebbs and flows in internal resources and capacities, that emerge at different political moments and determine how active a movement is able to be over time (Tarrow 2011). Considering the high level of cohesion, shared collective identity, and regular communication between members that is required to maintain a strong sense of unity in transnational movements, the ebbing moments require the most work in order to ensure gains made during moments of high mobilization are not lost (Fox 2010; Tilly 2002). This means, for example, organizing more collaborative activities, campaigns, and online and in-person meetings to maintain connections between members.

Considering the rarity of extensive archives on movements, especially at the transnational level, there is a need for more information to be collected on their evolution over time, and how this evolution influences their engagement in collective action and the issues that they prioritize and highlight (Diani 2015). For fishers’ movements, the need to collect and preserve historical data and organizational knowledge is critical, not only as a publicly accessible resource for researchers and other interested actors, but also as a tool for movement-building between the members themselves. The evolution of the fishers’ movements has involved gaining new knowledge and skills, developing political agendas and strategies, overcoming tensions and obstacles, and celebrating victories. Woven together, all of these elements have created the historical, social, and political fabric of the movements, a fabric unique to the WFF and WFFP. In order for current or new members to understand what the movement is built upon and what it stands for, it is critical that these historical intricacies be shared more widely and openly between members. While it is certainly important for movements not to dwell too much on the past, and to continue to move forward, the movement-building process itself can also provide valuable fuel to keep the momentum going well into the future.

Acknowledgements My deepest thanks to the members of WFFP, WFF, and numerous allied organizations for the invaluable conversations, knowledge, insights, and archival data, which have provided crucial material for this article. Without their contributions, this research would not have been possible.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

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Contribution to the field statement The study of transnational social movements has become increasingly popular among scholars in social and political sciences in the last few decades, yet this attention has focused predominantly on agrarian and farmers’ movements. Similarly, in research on fisheries, food and climate politics, and related global governance processes, there has been notably little examination of the participation and contributions of transnational fishers’ movements. This article contributes to empirical and analytical work on these themes through a study of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF), exploring how they have evolved over time, their political agendas and strategies, and their representation of small-scale fishers in international spaces over the last three decades. The article presents three pivotal developments, which offer important insights into the politics of fishers’ movements, and have been crucial in shaping the movements’ political agendas, building alliances, and strengthening their advocacy work. These include movements’ internalization of overlapping fisheries, food and climate crises; the increasing convergence of fishers’ and agrarian movements and platforms around common struggles; and intergovernmental bodies broadening their attention to fisheries issues in their analysis and activities.