



THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OF SIERRA LEONE

A FOCUS ON SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES

In a groundbreaking move to strengthen the human rights framework surrounding small-scale coastal fishing communities, the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL) recently partnered with the Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR) to host a training session intended at building the capacity of its Commissioners, senior staff, and representatives from the Fishermen's Union.



The training, held on February 5th and 6th, 2025, at the Saphyre Court Multi-Purpose Hall in Freetown, was designed to improve participants' understanding of the link between human rights and small-scale fisheries in Sierra Leone.

The training, supported by funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), meant to equip HRCSL staff with the knowledge and tools necessary to address human rights issues within the small-scale fishing sector. The two-day session explored how the Commission can effectively exercise its mandate to address the specific challenges faced by coastal fishing communities, especially concerning tenure rights, disputes, and access to remedies.

Sierra Leone's small-scale fisheries are a key part of the nation's economy and food security, providing around 80% of the protein consumed by the population. However, as the training emphasized, the sector has not been sufficiently integrated into a human rights-based framework, leaving many small-scale



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fishers vulnerable when facing challenges such as poor weather conditions, displacement, and lack of legal support.

Victor Idrissa Lansana Esq., Vice Chairperson of HRCSL, described the training as a critical step in understanding the link between human rights and fisheries. “Our business as a Commission is to cater for those very small fishing enterprises who suffer when the sea is not favorable, and to ensure there are mechanisms for redress.” V.I. Lansana said. He further noted that the urgency of adopting a human rights approach in the country’s fisheries sector to safeguard the livelihoods of small-scale fishers, who form the backbone of Sierra Leone’s coastal communities.



The primary objective of the training was to help the HRCSL staff reflect on how to incorporate human rights principles into the fisheries sector and examine ways to resolve disputes and strengthen the rights of fishers. Participants also gained insights into how small-scale fisheries linked with broader human rights frameworks, including international human rights law and environmental law, with a particular focus on the “Sustainable Oceans II project”, which aims to promote sustainable fisheries management.

Professor Andrew Baio, the Consultant who steered the training, guided participants through the complexities of fisheries policies in Sierra Leone and the West African region, introducing them to key concepts in fisheries management. He discussed the challenges faced by small-scale fishers, including access to fishing grounds, conflicts over tenure rights, and the need for a more robust legal framework to protect their rights.



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Maria Petersen, Team Lead and Adviser on Human Rights and Development at the Danish Institute for Human Rights, provided a global perspective on sustainable ocean and fisheries management. She underlined the importance of aligning international human rights law with environmental and fisheries regulations to create a protective framework for small-scale fishers.

“Small-scale fisheries are often overlooked in national policies, despite being vital to the livelihoods of millions. Sustainable oceans and fisheries management are key to realizing the human rights of people in the country, especially in coastal communities. This training is a step in the right direction toward addressing these issues,” she said.

Madam Petersen expressed hope that the training would empower the HRCSL staff with the necessary knowledge to advocate for and implement human rights-based solutions for small-scale fishers. She mentioned the importance of ensuring that international frameworks and local laws work together to protect the rights of this vulnerable group.

The training also served as an introduction to the Sustainable Oceans II project, which will support Sierra Leone in addressing the challenges of small-scale fisheries through human rights-based approaches. By applying international human rights instruments and environmental laws, the HRCSL will position itself to play a central role in advocating for the rights of small-scale fishers and ensuring their voices are heard in the broader conversation about ocean sustainability.

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