

Captain Iglo mustn't come to Africa!

During the last few years, the donor community has increased its efforts to reduce the large amounts of fish lost in the distribution chain in artisanal fishery, an endeavour that ought to be welcomed in principle. However, focusing on one single solution, the development of an expensive cool chain and the supply of fresh or frozen fish, represents a massive interference with the traditional processing and distribution channels, with women being the main losers. Our author calls for more foresight in international co-operation.

Over the last 30 years, fish consumption has doubled world-wide. However, the developments this has entailed have virtually eclipsed people in Africa. This is despite the fact that, in terms of today's US dollar value, approximately ten billion dollars of official development assistance (ODA) was provided by the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for around 1,400 projects to develop the fisheries sector of sub-Saharan Africa. The assessment by the World Bank in its critical study on the state of the world's fisheries sector, "The Sunken Billions", applies especially to Africa. But for the people living on the coasts in the region, more is at issue than a business news item. With the decline in fish stocks, cultural values and social contexts in the fishing villages are disappearing as well. This is also the case in particular for the women's economies, for unlike, for example, in agriculture, women play a dominant role in artisanal fishery.

■ Returns on foreign exchange as the top priority

For decades, the fishing grounds in Africa were one of many natural resources that its governments and the international donors used to serve the economic development of the countries or at least to reduce their debts. A glance at the development projects reveals a long list of large-scale investments – in ship fleets, port expansion, warehousing and logistics, and all for industrial fisheries and to get those species of fish ready for export that earn foreign exchange on the world market. In this respect, fish, such as the Nile perch in Uganda, tuna in Mozambique or hake in Namibia, do not differ from the other foreign exchange favourites of the international donor community such as cotton, coffee,

fruit and vegetables, sometimes offering short-term success for the government budgets, but often having a disastrous impact on the fishing grounds of artisanal fishery.

■ Overfishing from all sides

One typical example of "catching-up development" can still be "admired" in the industrial port of Tema, Ghana's most important port city. Here, 30 tuna fishing boats are rusting away – all that is left of a proud fleet once numbering 150 vessels that the Soviet Union built for the country, albeit certainly not for altruistic reasons. Towards the end of the 1980s, when the European Union was staking its claims in the newly declared 200-mile zones for its own fishing fleet, there was no longer anything to do for most of the Ghanaian fishing boats. But by the time they were withdrawn, just like the European Union's fleet or the Japanese and Korean ships, many of them had decimated the fishing grounds of artisanal fisheries to an extent that in the 1990s, development co-operation no longer saw any point in further involvement in West Africa's fisheries sector. German development co-operation in particular withdrew from the seas – with one big exception. Mauritania has set an example of sustainable development in fisheries management that secures revenue for the state as well as fishing licences for the EU and other countries while massively promoting artisanal fishery (also see Article on page 27). Most of the other fisheries projects supported by the international donors are not in the same league as Mauritania's success story. Even Norwegian development co-operation, which strictly observes sustainability, has to note in an evaluation report on its biggest financial effort, the establishment of fisheries monitoring in Mozambique, that alone the annual follow-up costs of a rebuilt patrol ship are far higher than total revenue from the licences for industrial fishing boats.

■ Donors discovering artisanal fishery

In the wake of their experiences with supporting industrial fishery, international donors came back after the turn of the millennium to address artisanal fishery. It is no coincidence that, alongside Japan, the harshly criticised fishing nations off the coast of Africa such as Spain, France and Portugal,



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with EU, World Bank and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) support, should be trying to rid themselves of their guilty conscience by backing artisanal fishery, after decades of ruthless overfishing in African waters.

Since then, there is hardly any fishing village that has not become the object of some study on fisheries management. As the communities have had no feedback on the results of these analyses and the projects have no impact whatsoever on the conditions they are living in, people view new projects, also those of NGOs or environmental associations, with scepticism, well-meant thought they may be. Despite selected representatives of the fishing communities being invited to the countless workshops of the donor communities and international NGOs, levels of catch have hardly changed, and fishers still have to go to great lengths to finance boats, engines and nets in advance. There is hardly any training and absolutely no support for the formation of professional organisations that could address governments and the international community at eye level.

Currently, a development is being hotly debated that shows in an exemplary way how the short-term interest of the donors and governments of the partner countries to score fast economic success can result in conflicts in a professional area or social unrest and ultimately creates even more poverty.

■ Nothing works without women

World-wide, the activities when the catch has been landed have turned into a sector dominated by women. Unlike their role in agriculture, in the fisheries sector, they are not cheap labourers without (land) rights but represent the most important economic actors. Usually, it is women

Kayar, Senegal. More and more often, the women processing the fish are left with these little anchovies, called "Yayyboy" in Wolof.

Photo: F. Marí



Elmina, the centre of artisanal fishery on Ghana's Gold Coast. Far too few landing stages and outdated port logistics.

Photo: F. Marí

who buy the catch, and also women who process the catch and trade it. At least this is the case with the small pelagic species which turn the catch into valuable food. With the income from processing and trading, the women pay the pirogue captains, advance the money for fuel and ice or offer loans for spare components, new nets or cooling boxes. This division of labour is accepted by the men, who are often not the husbands of the women, because they are unable to perform the post-catch activities themselves. This means that fish is only turned into money and food when women process or sell it. Increasingly more women are also becoming boat owners, for on poor fishing days, the fishermen are often unable to repay the money for fuel and loans.

■ The aim: gaining access to the export market

Sea bass, gilthead sea bream and tuna or other premium fish are only rarely processed by the women for the local demand, for only a few Africans can still afford such food. Provided that the expensive fish actually does enter the nets – it too was a target of the industrial fishing fleets for decades – it is almost exclusively earmarked for export. In this area, women are only rarely found as middlemen. They lack relations with clients in Europe or with the local processing factories.

Over the last few years, in their efforts to strengthen artisanal fishery for these export markets, donors and governments have focused on small-scale fishermen fulfilling international regulations such as traceability in the context of combating illegal fishery or the high hygiene standards for fish imports in the EU. The basic precondition for exports is constant, uninterrupted cooling that already starts on the pirogue. This is why French and Spanish development cooperation in particular has promoted the construction of ice factories and cold storage warehouses. The governments

have simplified the import of refrigerated lorries, and investors have been found to set up fish factories that immediately clean, cool or freeze the fish and make it transportable for the night flight to Europe.

In principle, this is sensible from a development angle. In Senegal, for example, where 60 per cent of exports are now provided by catch from pirogues, but partly also in Ghana, a higher added value and a higher share of artisanal fishery in exports has been achieved.

■ Undesirable side effects: competition with local processing

However, the existence of an unbroken cool chain for fish does also have side effects. For more and more often, refrigerated lorries can be seen at the landing stages for pirogues in Senegal or Ghana that are ordered by middlemen so that they can take the prime selection of the catch of local pelagic species (mackerel, anchovies). They then drive their cargo to the adjacent fish factory, which used to solely process premium fish for exports. Now prime selection pelagic fish is also deep-frozen. This fish is then brought into the hinterland or taken to neighbouring countries such as Mali or Burkina Faso on long night hauls. In the past, no fresh fish from the sea was on the market in these remote areas. Both the hinterland and the coastal cities were supplied with smoked, dried or salted fish that the women had previously preserved and that was brought by middlewomen. This ensures that the fish will keep. It is an important product for a healthy diet among the rural population, also in those locations where the lack of electricity does not allow for cooling and deep-freezing. Now frozen fish is becoming a rival product. Even though so far, only restaurants and the local middle classes have been able to afford it, a distribution channel is developing for fish that could dominate the market in the future. For in West Africa, just like elsewhere, supermarkets

Mbour, Senegal. More and more often, middlemen now come from Dakar to take their pick of the best fish for hotels, tourists or exports.

Photo: F. Mari



are penetrating the provincial areas. And this means that international standards are being introduced that can hardly be fulfilled by local products such as smoked fish.

■ Women are losing their source of income

The situation in other countries of West and Central Africa that are low in fish shows how at least small towns with a power supply can be provided with frozen fish. For the big catches of the EU pelagic “monster” ships casting their nets off the coast of Mauritania are not brought to Europe but are frozen on board and sold as EU exports throughout West Africa. Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana or Côte d’Ivoire rely on this imported fish throughout the year or at least seasonally. Where a local processing tradition exists, this imported fish serves as a year-round input. In a country like Cameroon, which has only little fish off the coast and little experience in fish processing, imported frozen fish is sold on the market in pieces and is only then prepared in private kitchens, similar to meat. This “privatisation” of processing is also thriving in the women’s economies along the West African coast. It is threatening the income of thousands of women in the fisheries sector and, ultimately, also the relationship between fishermen and the downstream women’s economies which, while not being free of conflict, has as yet remained balanced.

Women can still process “second-choice” fish from the pirogues because, at least during the season, enough fish is available. But they are getting smaller and smaller fish that is not so well suited for drying or smoking and then loses even more weight through water evaporation. The women are therefore calling on their governments and on the international donors to take their needs and their role in maintaining fish supplies for the population into consideration. If the women cannot process the fish, poor households will lack food rich in protein in the off-season. If the women are earning a lower income, they will more seldom be able to pay the fishermen sailing out to catch fish that is not exported.

Of course it is not as if women in the fisheries sector were against public-supported cooling facilities for the storage of fish. On the contrary. If cooling and refrigerating facilities with a subsidised power consumption were available, women could process fish throughout the year. Fish would not have to rot on the beaches because it is not processed, and all year round, consumers would have their local fish sold at stable prices that they could afford. But the development of long cool chains along the entire distribution route encourages more women being ousted from the sector.

Women are now beginning to work out their own strategies that also serve maintaining the supply of fish for the poor population. Women’s groups are pooling their assets and financing pirogues and their crews who may only deliver their catch to them. Often enough, thanks to their strong position in the sector, they are already the owners of the fishing boats or the engines and nets and can thus force

the fishermen to exclusively supply them. In Côte d'Ivoire a businesswoman has bought small refrigerated lorries in order to buy fish along the Ivorian coast that is then centrally provided for traditional processing in Abidjan.

■ Lessons learnt?

However, the women in the sector are aware that they will have to meet higher standards in the markets of the future. It remains to be seen whether this will prompt them to invest in more modern smokers, like the one now advocated by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). This new oven, based on the Thiaroye Processing Technique (FTT-Thiaroye), reduces firewood use and health risks through smoke emissions. Unlike the men working in the fisheries sector, women are proficient in business management. They know only too well that donor support will come to an end one day. It is therefore surprising that the FAO should be distributing videos advertising the new smoker in order to persuade women to use it without making any mention of how much they would have to invest and, above all, what the follow-up costs are like. Just like many of the improved and certainly useful predecessor smokers, the FTT-Thiaroye ovens are now probably going to become the favourite tools of the donors and NGOs providing them free of charge. But if they do not pay their way on the market in the poverty economies, they will not find further distribution.

So enough aspects remain for all development co-operation programmes in the entire field of artisanal fishery to rectify mistakes and support and strengthen the sector. But not only must this be performed taking gender issues into account. There must also be greater involvement of all those employed in the sector. Fish products are too important for reducing hunger and malnutrition to dispense with efforts in the fisheries sector of Africa and other developing regions.



Kayar, Senegal. Competition from refrigerated transports is making the marketing of dried fish for exporting more and more difficult.
Photo: F. Marí

So far, German development co-operation has failed to enhance the local value chains supplying the informal markets with a sustainable fisheries strategy of its own, which is what the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) does in the agricultural sector. In its "One World – No Hunger" initiative, for example in the Green Innovation Centres, one will unfortunately look for fish in vain. However, there are indications that this is set to change and that the Ministry has approved of a special "Sustainable Fisheries Global Venture". This would certainly be welcomed in the coastal countries, especially by the women working in the sector – provided that the same mistakes aren't made all over again.

Georg Forster Research Award

The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation grants the Georg Forster Research Award to researchers of all disciplines from transition and developing countries. The award winners should already have an international reputation and be involved in academic work that is expected to help solve issues of relevance to development.

Scientists and scholars at research institutions in Germany can nominate outstanding research personalities in order to develop long-term international research collaborations. Funding for the awards, which are valued at € 60,000 each, derives from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

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