

Whose labels? Whose benefit?

**Quality labels certainly have a future—
but only if their *modus operandi* is sufficiently broadbased**

Under the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), Unilever and WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) have decided to create a quality label for fish caught under sustainable conditions and practices. This must be viewed as a major landmark for global fisheries and the future development of agricultural and agribusiness activities as a whole. It shows that multinational companies (MNCs) are increasingly aware of conservation principles. Unilever's refusal to henceforth buy oil from the fish-meal oil industry must also be hailed as a decisive step forward.

It is, however, necessary to ponder over some aspects of this new approach. For one thing, it will deal a severe blow to the Danish fleets that specialize in such activity. They have, for long, been criticized by the majority of European fishermen. Though these Danish boats primarily target fish-meal species, they can also catch juveniles of other species. When such by-catches occur on a massive scale, the delicate balance of the food chain in the oceans is upset. At first glance, therefore, the move to control fishing activities is clearly a positive measure for European fisherfolk. However, the joint WWF-Unilever approach raises several questions.

First, the agreement between the powerful MNC and the famous international environmental organization seems to have ignored the fisher people, though it is precisely their future which is at stake in this venture. It may be recalled that the Breton fishermen, who targeted tuna with drift-nets, were outraged when another environmental group, Greenpeace, campaigned for a ban on that type of gear. These fishermen were, however, able to engage with other organizations in a debate on the matter.

The evolution of the European market, with a bias in favour of industrial fisheries, has been a major factor in the price slump which has affected the welfare of fishermen. With initiatives like the MSC, from now on, environmental movements and MNCs may have a decisive influence not only on prices but also on the conditions that determine access to the market.

On the other hand, fishermen will find it more and more difficult to become masters of their own progress. Unilever and WWF, of course, say they will hold consultations on a broad basis and establish an independent body for the MSC. But it is most likely that certain actors will outweigh others. For instance, fishermen will find it more difficult to promote their case than environmental groups that are well established in the media and thus have an easier task to get their viewpoints across.

The second area of concern is the principles on which the MSC will draw to work out the modalities of such labelling. The joint statement of Unilever and WWF refers to relevant UN documents such as the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries. These documents, however, primarily emphasize the environmental aspects of resource management, not the social aspects.

Welfare ignored

Present European efforts to save resources are based on limiting the number and capacity of vessels, without due consideration for the welfare of fishermen and market conditions. In fact while the number of boats and fishermen has been decreasing, fishing effort has been increasing. The workload on board fishing vessels is becoming unbearable and accidents have also increased.



In such a context, will social aspects be included in defining ecolabels? In view of the diversity of fishery traditions and situations around the world, attempts to work out principles at a global level will, by nature, face major problems.

Resource management is a complex matter, and fisher-people must be closely and largely involved in the process. Through moves like the MSC, are we not going to replace a varied, regionalized, participatory approach with standardized principles that will apply uniformly to all the seas and oceans, without paying due attention to specific conditions? Think of the campaign for a ban on drift-nets.

Finally, trying to influence fishing practices by introducing new conditions on markets will inevitably lead to a bias in favour of financially sound consumers. The major markets are in Europe, Japan and the US. Consumers and large producers in these countries will, therefore, impose their views on responsible fisheries.

Promoting imports to countries whose food requirements are already largely met, while simultaneously refusing to address the needs of the more underprivileged countries, does not really exemplify the principles of sustainable development. Are the companies which have embarked on this

new ecolabel venture really blameless? Significantly, Unilever promoted the development of large-scale salmon farming. This was not really in tune with the principles of sustainable development.

If this policy of awarding quality labels to ecofriendly fish is to play a role in promoting responsible fisheries, then there must be wider consultation, with fishermen participating right from the onset of the process.

Such an approach is indeed becoming more and more frequent. For example, hundreds of Breton fishermen have, for the past two years, been furnishing a label for sea breams caught by liners. They have thus been able to take on the competition from farmed sea breams.

To be sure, there is most certainly a future for quality labels. But the central issue remains the decision-making process. Indeed, the whole MSC affair underscores the urgent need for an international fishworkers' organization to work to influence the policies of major environmental and industrial groups. ♣

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