

Sustainability through unity

On World Fisheries Day, CAOPA vowed to promote sustainable fisheries through strong artisanal fishing organizations in Africa

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On 21 November 2016, hundreds of men and women from 16 African countries gathered in Lomé, Togo, to celebrate World Fisheries Day, an event organized every year for the last six years by the African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organizations (CAOPA). This year, the occasion also saw CAOPA hold its second General Assembly, renewing its board comprising four women and four men, to lead the organization for the next three years.

Togo was no random choice. Some months ago, a team consisting of members from CAOPA and the West African Journalists Network for Responsible Fisheries (REJOPRAO) went there in connection with a report that was published in January 2016, titled 'Voices from African Artisanal Fisheries'. In Lomé, a new autonomous port had been built without any consultations with fishing communities. The port had eaten into a large part of the fish landing and processing sites. Pirogues lay piled up one on top of another, waves destroying them as they collided. To avoid dangerous encounters with the continuous flow of commercial vessels passing in and out of the autonomous port, fishers had been forbidden from accessing their traditional fishing zones.

The team that met with Togolese artisanal fishing communities encountered a sense of despair, a sense of being forgotten by those who were deciding their futures. The leaders among the fishermen spent much time squabbling with and contradicting each other. Men in fishing organizations seemed annoyed to hear women expressing themselves. "These women, they are going to spoil it all!" said one fisherman, a leader who couldn't understand why women fish processors were being allowed to speak at all in these meetings.

For the 2016 World Fisheries Day Conference, which was on the theme 'Strong artisanal fishing organizations for sustainable fisheries', Togo therefore was the right choice.

CAOPA's member organizations too are plagued with issues: the lack of information sharing among fishing organizations, the lack of solidarity, issues related to representation, leadership, internal transparency and governance, and women's low participation in professional organizations being some. In the words of Micheline Dion, in charge of CAOPA women's programme: "Non-elected, non-representative organizations which sometimes claim to speak on behalf of coastal communities, have a disproportionate influence on the decision making process. It is very important to be able to change this situation. It is also vital that women active in the artisanal fisheries sector can participate in decision making processes. Women's legitimacy as professionals should be recognized by policy makers and professional organizations alike."

To address these issues, the CAOPA at its General Assembly adopted, as part of its strategic plan for the period 2017-2021, a specific programme of support for the organization of its members at national level. Gaoussou Gueye, the newly elected president of CAOPA explained: "The objective is for CAOPA to facilitate an inclusive dialogue between all *bona fide* local professional organizations of fishworkers, men and women equally, so that, at the end of the day, they put together a single transparent, democratic, nationwide platform which can become a credible and representative interlocutor for the decision makers."

With opportunities for dialogue increasingly opening up at the national, continental and international level, strong organizations are needed now more than ever before. As CAOPA members said in a statement released on the occasion: "The greatest recognition of the importance of the artisanal fisheries has been obtained

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through the adoption, in 2014, after a participatory process, of the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Alleviation (VGSSSF).”

The statement also endorsed the proposal issued by the FAO regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean at the 32nd Session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) to establish an ‘International Year of Artisanal Fisheries’ in order to promote the implementation of the VGSSSF. In that context, CAOPA called on African states to promote this initiative, including through the development, in a participatory manner, of national action plans aimed at the implementation of the VGSSSF.

CAOPA welcomed the African Union reform strategy for fisheries and aquaculture which identifies sustainable artisanal fisheries as a key component of the economy, and is committed to strengthening the contribution of artisanal fisheries to poverty reduction, food security and nutrition. CAOPA also took a favourable view of the recent initiative of the African Union to create a structure for consultations for the harmonization of policy inputs from African stakeholders into the reform strategy, seeing it as a platform for artisanal fishing professionals to make themselves heard.

A major rising concern identified in the discussions was the threat posed to African artisanal fisheries from other competitive uses of the coast, including seabed mining, drilling for oil and gas, mass tourism, and maritime traffic. There are also renewed pressures on all African coasts from industrial fishing companies based in foreign countries, through chartering arrangements, fishing agreements and joint ventures. “The opaque management of these arrangements does not present any guarantee, either in terms of social and economic benefits expected by our

countries, or in terms of contributing to the sustainable exploitation of our resources and respect for eco-systems,” insisted Antonia Adama Djalo, vice president of CAOPA, and president of a women fish processors cooperative in Guinea Bissau.

Antonia initiated discussion on this topic through a presentation on foreign fishing presence in West Africa. “There is no transparency whatsoever about the activities of fishing boats from China, Russia and Korea in our waters. From the fishing agreements, we have some information on the role of the European Union (EU), but the EU is also present in our water through joint ventures, about which we have no information,” she said. In Antonia’s view, foreign trawlers in coastal areas represented competition over fish with the artisanal sector, and incursions of trawlers in the coastal zone meant accidents with traditional pirogues and the destruction of the coastal environment.

Women also suffer in this situation. Their fish supply from artisanal fishers dries up. Accidents often leave them the sole person in charge of their families. “Our governments focus more on the needs of these fleets rather than on the needs of the artisanal sector,” added Antonia.

CAOPA members are today demanding that all access arrangements with fleets from China, the EU, Russia, Korea and other nations be renegotiated, taking full account of the needs of local fishing communities.

Plans were also made at the meeting for the next International Women in Fisheries Day to be held on 8 March 2017, in Uganda. Like the event in 2016, organized jointly by CAOPA and the African Union, which brought together women in artisanal fisheries from 47 African countries, the International Women in Fisheries Day in Uganda will serve as a vehicle to raise awareness about the rights and roles of women in artisanal fisheries. ❏

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