

Interview of Mme Diaba Diop, general secretary of Pencum Sénégal (GÉF/ Women's Economic Group)

This interview is by **Assane Deme** (assanedeme00@gmail.com), General Secretary of the Network of Journalists for Responsible and Sustainable Fisheries in Africa (REJOPRA), Senegal, transcribed by **Béatrice Gorez** (cffa.cape@gmail.com), Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements (CFFA), Belgium, and translated from French to English by **Gildas** (digormor@orange.fr), France



Assane Deme



Béatrice Gorez

How did you become a fish processor?

I became a fish processor when I left school. I had sat twice for the Bac ('A' Levels). My grandmother, who worked in that trade, was growing old. So I decided to join forces with her. By 1999, I became a full fledged processor. The site where I work is located at Thiaroyeur-Mer, along the road leading to the School of Fisheries, near the landing wharf.

Can you describe your work environment?

At our site, various processing techniques are used. Sardinella and ethmalosa are mainly braised. Species like machoiron, capitaine, and barracuda are fermented and dried to obtain a product named *guedj*. We also process the mollusc Cymbium.

Our site employs 218 persons in processing. Out of these, 117 women are members of Pencum and 54 women take part in certain preliminary stages of processing. There are also 45 men who help us in more physically laborious tasks.

At the processing site, we use traditional equipment: tables, drying racks, boxes for handling the fish, fermentation vats, buckets and basins, carts, scales, knives, and so on. The drying racks are made of wood but we use cement vats, which unfortunately are not conducive to improving the hygiene and quality standards of our products. At Pencum, we have 250 fermentation vats, with only a few made of plastic. These are more suitable because it is easier to keep them clean. Most of them were given to us by our partners, Coopérative Solidarité avec les Paysans pour l'Épargne et le Crédit de Citiboke (COSPEC) and The West African Association for the Development of Artisanal Fisheries (ADEPA).

It is essential to be properly equipped. We have received some training on hygiene and quality of food. But that alone is not enough; we need appropriate equipment. Our objective is to export our products successfully and to develop our activities. To that end, the facilities available on the processing sites would have to meet required standards.

What challenges do you face?

Most of the goods that reach markets in the sub-region usually travel informally, packed

in suitcases or brought in by women. For example, when someone has an opportunity to participate in a trade fair, she might carry our products along. But only a minority can do that, and we have very few trade outlets abroad.

There are a number of women traders' groups engaged in cross-border activities, and we have contacts among them. On some occasions, we have travelled ourselves in the sub-region, looking for potential customers. Twice we attempted to organize a caravan to reach our products to places like Mali, Burkina and Togo. But on the way, we always faced harassment by the Customs authorities. We were constantly challenged, and each time it proved to be a waste of time. To move on, we had to make gifts to the police, left and right. This harms our revenue and is really disheartening!

Sometimes, we don't accompany our goods; we simply send the load to the destination country. This is a rather risky procedure, unless you have a reliable and trustworthy person at the other end. The buyer might tell you that the fish delivered was damaged, and you wouldn't know what the truth was! Therefore, many women choose to trade close to home in the usual way.

Senegal is part of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which, at least theoretically, has a protocol allowing the free movement of goods and persons! I am asking our authorities to have a closer look at all that, especially during the official meetings of ECOWAS. It could be decided, for example, to have customs controls only at one or two checkpoints. Otherwise, selling our products abroad will remain a daunting experience.

What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on the sector?

Over the last few months, our sector has been deeply disturbed by the COVID-19 pandemic and also by the measures taken by the government to combat the disease. A state of emergency and curfew were put in place. Travelling was prohibited. As you know, in order to sell processed fish, one has to move from one region to another. Now, with borders closed and travelling restricted, how can we sell all our production?

Accessing adequate supplies of raw material is equally difficult. Usually, fishermen start

unloading at 5 am, continuing until nightfall. With a state of emergency in place, unloading is allowed only between 6 am and 1 pm. On top of that, there are days when fishermen are not permitted to land any fish at all. So, we process less and less fish, and also have a hard time selling this reduced production. We have all noted a decline in turnover, with consequent impacts on the family's daily life. It should be remembered that 56 percent of the women processors are heads of their households. The little money they earn goes towards meeting necessary expenses – family needs, school fees, and so on. Well, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, children did miss school for three months and we have saved a bit on that count, but still, daily life remains very difficult.

The measures put in place to combat the pandemic have deeply affected sub-regional trade in processed fish as well. If we want to send our products to places within Senegal, we can somehow cope. We manage to identify the few vehicles heading for inland towns like Touba, for instance. But it is just impossible to send our goods to other countries of the sub-region – carriers no longer operate on these routes because borders are closed. A major part of the production meant for sale in these areas has been damaged. A sizable amount of goods intended for the domestic market has also been spoiled due to lack of transportation.

We traditionally import fish for processing from other countries of the sub-region. These are mostly large size species, such as barracuda, capitaine and grouper. These species are no longer found in our home waters. If we chance upon some, they are too expensive for our operations.

Lockdown restrictions have added to the problems of the sector already struggling to cope with overexploitation of fish resources. Sardinella usually is a species that undergoes the process of braising. Our supply has gone down drastically due to the imposed unloading hours. Fishing operations have a shorter duration, landings have therefore declined. And even when boats arrive with big catches, they are not allowed to unload if this happens outside the fixed hourly limits.

Of course, these hourly or daily limits are not the sole factor negatively impacting the availability of Sardinella. It is also a matter of overexploitation. During the meeting held by the profession regarding the use of Sardinella to supply the fishmeal units, the Centre for Oceanographic Research of Dakar-Thiaroye (CRODT) made it clear to us that small pelagics are overexploited. If we fail to take appropriate measures to preserve the stocks, Sardinella, which is the most popular fish in Senegal, may soon disappear. The thing is that some pirogues



We must develop our processing activities and head towards semi-industrial activities instead of relying solely on traditional artisanal processing, says Mme Diaba Diop, general secretary of Pencum Sénégal

with big catches sell their production to fishmeal units because they fail to find other outlets.

When the pandemic reached our shores, we had an abundant stock of processed fish. Generally, when a woman processor sees some fish, she buys and prepares it; then she waits for customers. But that fish has a limited shelf life; and with everything being disrupted by the spread of COVID-19, a lot of the production deteriorated. We could not sell it to our regular customers. As the product is unfit for human consumption, to reduce our losses we can only sell it at a very low price as poultry feed.

What support does the sector require?

When the crisis is over, we would like our ministry in charge to rehabilitate the processing sites. We are also asking for guidance and field training to master new techniques. The Présidente, Madam Mbathio Niang, keeps saying that we should not spent all our time begging for funds, because it is just a matter of time before the source dries up. My view is that women should be self-reliant. To that end, we must develop our processing activities and head towards semi-industrial activities instead of relying solely on traditional artisanal processing. ■