

Media

Building a dialogue

Fishing professionals and journalists from four west African countries met recently to discuss the sustainable development of artisanal fishing

Nouadhibou is the fish capital of Mauritania. Artisanal fishing is particularly dynamic there—the town has an artisanal port where, towards the end of the afternoon, tired crews arrive to unload their cargoes of octopus or enormous croakers. A large part of the catch goes to the nearby processing factories, from where it is exported to Japan or Europe. In the port, women can be seen haggling with the fishermen over a few kilos of fish.

It was at the Nouadhibou Maritime and Fisheries Training School that, from 4-7 September, around 50 people met. They represented artisanal fisheries and the media in Senegal, Guinea, Mauritania and Benin, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations. The objective: to establish a dialogue to raise awareness on issues of responsible fishing.

The initiative for the meeting came from professional artisanal fishing organizations in Guinea (UNPAG, the Guinean National Artisanal Fishing Union), Senegal (CONIPAS, the Senegalese National Intersectoral Artisanal Fishing Council), and Mauritania (FNP, the National Fishing Federation Artisanal Section). The meeting was supported by Jade of Senegal and Proximités of Benin, two press agency members of the Syfia International network (www.syfia.info), and the Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements (CFFA).

It all started when these organizations realized that the media coverage of fisheries issues does not reflect the views of west African coastal communities. Moreover, relations between coastal communities and the media, although generally positive, are far too sporadic and rare. In addition, these same

communities are poorly informed, both by their organizations and the media, about their own role in the development of sustainable fisheries.

The four days of discussions and exchanges focused on three topics: how the media are perceived by artisanal fishing communities; how these communities are perceived by the media; and the role that west African journalists can play in informing the different actors concerned about establishing responsible fisheries. The nature and scope of how professional organizations communicate internally and with the outside world were also discussed. The debates were fed by a series of communications, which included a presentation on the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Several films were shown: on marine pollution, on the devastation caused by monofilament nets, and on pirate fishing in Guinea. Also noteworthy was the intervention made by the Mauritanian association campaigning against HIV/AIDS, reminding participants that the health of coastal communities is also an issue for sustainable fisheries.

On how the media is perceived by fishing communities, men and women from the artisanal fishing sectors generally expressed positive views. For example, when the communities have a problem that the administration ignores, the media can help get their views across to the administration.

Main reproach

Fishermen and women processors had one major reproach: sometimes the media speak or write without any knowledge. The media needs to be more professional in understanding the specific nature of the fisheries sector. The condescending

Demands and Commitments

Participants at the “Workshop for West African Media and Artisanal Sector Professionals to Raise Awareness About Responsible Management of Fisheries Resources”, held in Nouadhibou, Mauritania, from 4 to 7 September 2006, recommended that:

Regarding the conservation of resources, States should:

- ensure that responsible fishing practices are respected, in accordance with the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, and ban trawling, dredging and the use of monofilament nets in the coastal zone;
- take all necessary measures to safeguard the environment and the coastal marine ecosystem;
- implement all provisions necessary for transparency, monitoring and control of illegal fishing activities; and
- Make public, through the media, information about illegal fishing practices (details of vessels, crew, flag, fine imposed, ship owner, etc.) as well as the results of the penalties imposed

The Sub-regional Fisheries Committee (SRFC/CSRP) should:

- associate and directly involve artisanal fishing professional organizations in its activities, in the decision-making process and in monitoring its programmes. *(It is worth noting that soon after the*

workshop, the professional organizations that initiated it were invited, for the first time, to participate in a meeting of the SRFC to discuss artisanal fisheries management.)

Professional artisanal fishing organizations should:

- consolidate internal democracy and ensure transparency and good governance in their activities;
- strengthen the participation of women in their decision-making processes; and
- provide facilities for communication (fishermen's centres, etc.), awareness raising, education, information, and training of artisanal fishing communities.

A communications strategy should be put in place for all activities undertaken in the fisheries sector, including:

- the creation of community radio programmes to inform the general public about fishing activities;
- publication of a regional paper devoted to all aspects of fishing;
- the organization of specialized training courses for the media on fisheries issues; and
- popularization of fisheries research results carried out by oceanographic and fisheries-related research institutions.

attitude of some journalists towards fishing communities was also denounced by some, as was the attitude of intellectuals towards those who work with their hands, particularly women fish processors, who are often illiterate.

The lack of communication between professional organizations and their members was also directly referred to as an obstacle in artisanal fishing communities being well informed.

Several factors should be taken into account to explain the media's lack of interest in the sector. Artisanal fishing communities tend to be traditional

societies, with little in the way of novelty value that could attract media attention. The journalists commented that often, fishing professionals did not want to talk with them and there is a certain lack of trust.

The professionals explained that they are often afraid to speak, particularly on sensitive subjects, behind which are hidden important political and economic issues, such as the devastating impacts of illegal fishing in the coastal zone. “Everyone is fishing, the army is fishing, functionaries are fishing, ministers are fishing,” said one professional from the artisanal sector.

The media representatives emphasized that their profession lacked structure: there is no networking amongst journalists, and insufficient means, above all for the private media, which is partly responsible for the lack of training and specialization on fisheries issues. The need for the media to be profitable and to cover their costs was also raised. The artisanal fishing communities are often unable to pay for journalists to come visit their villages. Solutions must be found to this problem, either within the communities or outside. Nevertheless, to talk about artisanal fishing remains, as one participant noted, “a blast for democracy, because it provides a voice for those who have none”.


The question was raised about who should approach who. Should the professionals approach the media or vice versa? If the media have to go to the field, it is also important that the communities respond to their interests. In this regard, the artisanal fishing sector must show how its future is of concern to the society as a whole, particularly to consumers.

This was highlighted in the conclusions of the meeting: “In five years time, in 10 years time, whether alone or together, we would like to continue to eat these same fish that were served up during our stay in Nouadhibou, without being told that the price has increased because there is a scarcity, without being told that the species no longer exist...The issue of sustainable fishery resource exploitation is not the concern of artisanal fishing communities alone. It is a question of survival and sovereignty for all.”

On the role of the media in raising awareness on responsible fisheries, several avenues were explored, like the need to use language appropriate for interactions with coastal communities (using local languages, and greater use of the radio to disseminate messages, especially to people who are illiterate).

Several basic issues were put forward for the media to take up, like the duality within the artisanal fishery, and especially the need to balance exports with resource management and environmental conservation. The media

can play a role in influencing community behaviour, and promoting practices that are compatible with sustainable fisheries. The media should also highlight the importance of artisanal fishing in employment creation for deprived social classes with no training or expertise, or in the capitalization and popularization of experiences, good practices and innovations. For complex technical issues, like the agreement on hygiene or sanitary standards, journalists have a role to play in helping the professionals understand the issues that underpin technical questions. Finally, a strong plea was made to tailor the collection and dissemination of information to the interests of young people and children, as the future of the sector lies in their hands.

At the end of the four-day meet, the participants created a West African network of journalists for sustainable and responsible fisheries. 

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