

ON THE ISLANDS OF THE SOUTH-WEST INDIAN OCEAN

Robert Fleurot

There is a world of difference between the galawa (pirogue) of the Comoro Islands and the sonar-equipped fishing boat of Reunion, between the almost completely self-sufficient lifestyle of fishermen in Madagascar and the consumer society of those in the Seychelles. Nevertheless, these extremes delimit one and the same sector: artisanal fishing in the south-west Indian Ocean.

Resource and environmental management, improved fishing techniques, access to credit, middlemen, provisions, marketing and social coverage are so many problems facing artisanal fishermen. These problems-when they are not seen fatalistically and when fishermen confront them-are the starting point for a development process that seeks to raise the quality of life of fishermen and achieve technological and economical progress that leads to better production and marketing conditions. This will to confront the sector's major problems leads groups of fishermen to seek training and to act in different kinds of organizations, such as trade unions, associations, cooperatives.

The Comoro islands and Madagascar

Artisanal fishing in the Comoro Islands and Madagascar grew under the impetus of the economic crisis. These are the countries with the most fishermen. Statistics show that the Comoro Islands have 8000 and Madagascar 52000. Of the countries in the south-west Indian Ocean, only Madagascar has lake fishermen. Non-commercial fishing is widespread in both countries, with a practically self-sufficient lifestyle where money hardly circulates. Fishermen's organizations are almost non-existent in the Comoro Islands. In Madagascar, on the contrary, fishermen have been willing to organize for the last 15 years. There is a trade union in the rural highlands that has organized a certain number of fishermen, but its radius of action is geographically limited.

The development of fishermen's organizations on the coast has been linked to the development of the Apostolate of the Sea. The first association of ocean fishermen was launched in 1976 in Tamatave. It has

been active ever since and continues to organize a good number of Tamatave's fishermen. Its main objective is to protect and promote the interests of the fishermen and their families. This association has been active mostly in these spheres: improved fishing techniques, engines and motors, access to credit so that fishermen can own their work instruments, a small workshop to service and repair motors, a solidarity fund and a course on navigation. Their catch is marketed through an association of fishermen's wives, who, moreover, are also active in women's issues.

Tamatave's organizational experience serves as a stimulus and a beacon to extend this spirit to other ports. Thanks to contacts with members of the fishermen's association in Tamatave, an original project to develop artisanal fishing began in 1984 in Antalaha, a small fishing port on the north-east coast. Under the guidance of a supervisor, students from the upper grades of a secondary school organize a fishing pre-cooperative, with the help of four fishermen. For two years, 16 young Madagascans go to Mauritius to learn fishing and boat building techniques.

In 1988, with the help of the Apostolate of the Sea, an instructional boat was launched at Tamatave. This boat trains not only the fishermen of Tamatave and the surrounding area, but also those of the north-east coast.

Tamatave gave the initial impulse and today most associations of fishermen and their wives are found on the north-east coast, and also at Diego, Nossi-Be and Majunga.

The Seychelles

In the Seychelles, where per capita fish consumption is 80 kilograms a year and where a relatively high percentage of the population are fishermen (1100 out of 65000), artisanal fishermen are unorganized. They can, however, market their catch through the Seychelles Marketing Board, which has cold storage facilities, sells fish mostly to hotels and exports the surplus to markets in Europe, Reunion and Mauritius. After the restoration of a multi-party political system, the fishermen of the Seychelles may begin to organize in the not too distant future.

Reunion and Mauritius

The fishermen of Reunion organized the Association of Artisanal Fishermen of Reunion (APAR) in 1971, and those of Mauritius the Association of Professional Fishermen of Mauritius (APPIM) in 1968. The purpose of these two organizations is to defend and promote fishermen's interests.

In Reunion, an overseas department of France, high costs of social benefits have been one starting point for action and have helped the creation of APAR. These costs, considered too high by the fishermen, are constantly referred to, even though they recognize a clear improvement in this area. Indeed, subsidies from the State and local organizations have made it possible to considerably lower the costs to be paid by the fishermen.

Two other issues are among the most frequent demands of artisanal fishermen: unfair competition from sport fishermen and licenses to run motor boats- Sport fishermen, often retired persons or government workers, create a parallel market when they sell their catch, thus providing unfair competition. Several actions have been taken to correct this situation, but this kind of fraud continues.

The fishermen of Reunion have problems in passing the test to run motor boats. Many of them are practically illiterate and fail the written test. One solution offered has been to exempt from the obligation to have a license those with experience and who have passed the practical tests. Not all young fishermen accept this solution.

Besides APAR, five other associations seek to defend fishermen: the Association of Wives of Ocean Fishermen, begun in 1979; the Professional Association of Fishermen of Reunion, begun in 1980; the Trade Union of Ocean Fishermen of the Democratic French Confederation of Labour, in 1981; the Trade Union of Fishermen of Reunion, 1982, and the Association for Mutual Aid and Solidarity of Ocean Fishermen of the West, 1983-

In the past, there was very little communication between these organizations. Over the years, several of them have become relatively inactive and never assemble their members. Only two are still fairly active. Even though they are recognized and consulted by the State and local organizations, they have problems in mobilizing their membership. One of these associations now has ageing leadership, most of them retired fishermen. All their attempts to organize, be it for supplies or marketing, end up as failures.

In Reunion, the State and local organizations invest massively in boats and new equipment, providing between 50% and 65% of total investment. Fishermen get tax-free gasoline. Despite all the benefits granted

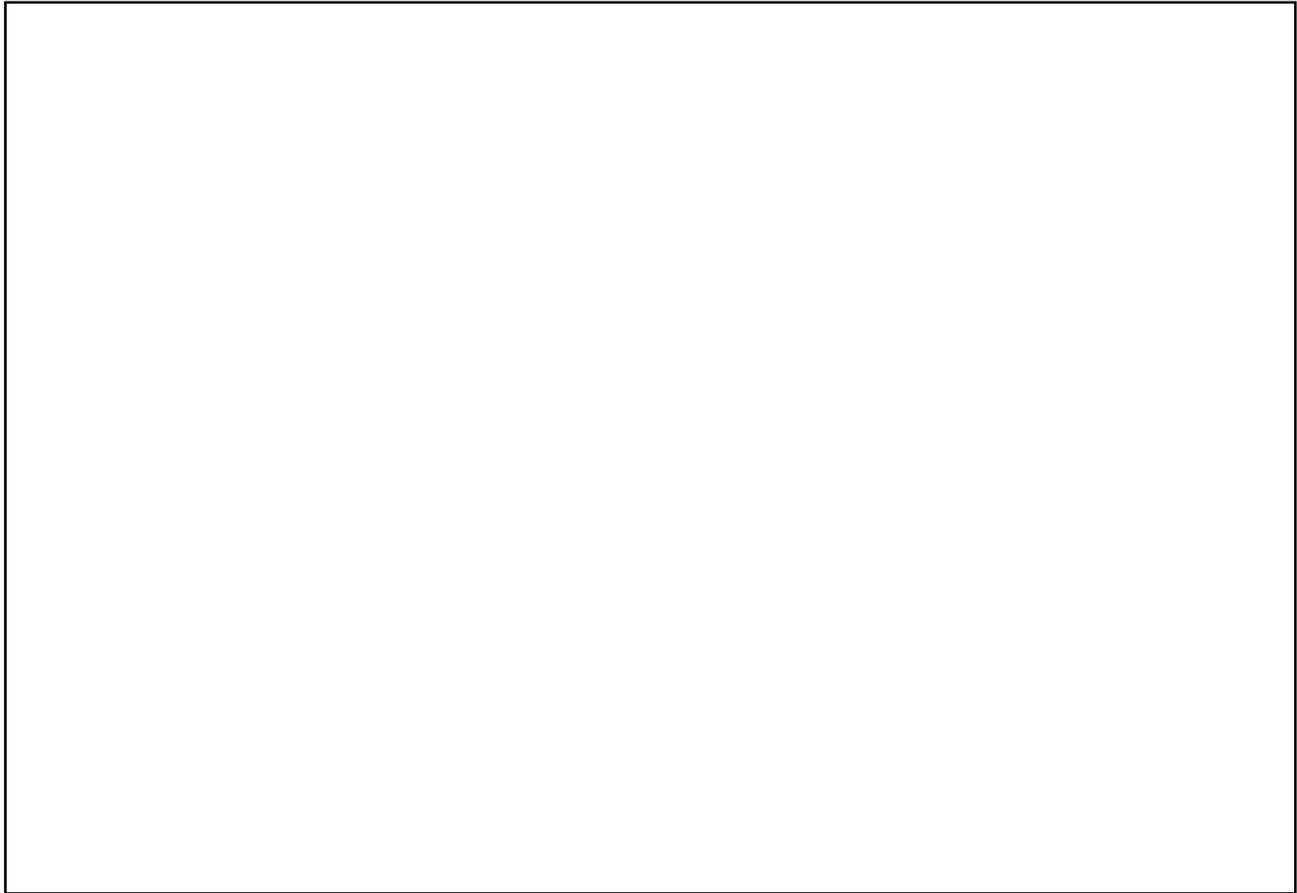
and the interest displayed by the authorities, artisanal fishing is in crisis. This can be seen in the fact that the number of boats has gone from 314 in 1980 to 241 in 1990, and the number of registered fishermen from 487 in 1980- to 404 in 1990. Fishing is difficult, owing to rough seas and an inhospitable coast, small fishing areas and a lack of a diversity of fishing methods, artisanal fishing is condemned to remain marginal.

In Mauritius, at the time when APPIM was just coming into existence, the dragging of the corral bottom of the lagoon for lime, spread of dynamite fishing, abuse of illegal seine-nets, development of underwater fishing and the exploitation of middlemen were some of the factors that led Dr. A. Morel, an international expert who came to study the fishing sector of Mauritius, to say that "fishermen were just below beggars".

APPIM's first actions led the government to review laws concerning basket and seine-net fishing and to promulgate stricter laws to more effectively counteract fraud, thereby allowing fishing resources to replenish themselves. Another series of actions (1975-1978) led at first to a rise in the price of fish set by the government, and later to a liberalization of prices.

Over the years, the will to struggle for rights and the degree of combativeness faded as self-help service organizations came to the fore. To confront on the one hand the problems experienced by fishermen in obtaining credit to buy and renew their work instruments, and on the other hand the exploitation by middlemen, APPIM, with the help of the Institute for Development and Progress launched in 1976 projects that made it possible to free fishermen from that exploitation and maintain their independence. Afterwards, APPIM set up a mutual aid society to help families meet the funeral costs of their members (1978), a saving plan to purchase work instruments (1981) and a small service to provide supplies (1988). Despite all its work, only 10% to 15% of the professional fishermen of Mauritius belong to APPIM.

Around 1976 and 1977, cooperatives began to become popular among artisanal fishermen. Two "Maisons de Pecheurs" were constructed -centers for fishermen, each with a meeting hall, cold storage facilities and a small workshop for maintenance of motors. Six twelve-meter boats were also launched. Refrigerated trucks made it possible to market the catch according to modern standards. Towards the 1980s, an instructional boat was available to update the training of fishermen. Today, fishermen have little interest in cooperatives. The boats were sold to individuals; the "maisons de pecheur" are practically unused, the instructional boat has little activity. The cooperatives can survive with difficulty, owing to the monopoly that allows them to buy a certain quota of the pelagic fish offloaded by the foreign boats who dock in Port Louis and then sell them.



Recently, in 1990, the government of Mauritius began a program to aid and support fishermen. It offers all fishermen tax breaks on the purchase of motors, nets and life-jackets, benefits during periods of bad weather, introduction of new fishing techniques, like the apparatus to concentrate fish, life insurance, credit facilities, scholarships for their children, a pension plan and a development fund for artisanal fishing projects. A standing committee, composed of officials from different ministries, members of APPIM and cooperatives and representatives of the Development Bank, has been established to oversee the carrying out of a variety of

measures taken to ensure follow-up. The plan goes beyond the demands expressed in different memoranda submitted to the Ministry of Fisheries.

The context which gave birth to the trade unions, fishermen's associations and cooperatives in the islands of the south-west Indian Ocean has changed considerably, and the will to organize has weakened. One thing is certain: artisanal fishing will never develop unless fishermen actively participate in organizations. A second wind, adapted to the new situation, is urgently needed. "For new wine, new wineskins". □