

## European Union/ The Netherlands

### **Bouncing back**

*Women in the fishing community of Wieringen have revived the local economy by creating a local fresh-fish market*

**By Wilma Koster, a member of *VinVis*, the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands**

Our fishing community of Wieringen, a former island at the top of the Netherlands, has a long history of fishing. In the past, sailing boats were used, but today we have mechanized boats. Our community uses primarily small-scale boats (below 300 hp), and the main commercial species we catch are shrimp, plaice, sole, shellfish and nephrops.

We sell our fish and shrimps through the auction, which is obligatory in our country, and every day, have to wait and watch for the price the commercial agent will bid. Most of the time, we do not receive a good or fair price for fish that is first-class and caught the day before. The reason is that it is sold in the same market alongside the catches of the big boats.

Since we are wives of fishermen, we know how important it is to get a good price for our fish. We raise our children, do a lot of work ashore for our fishing enterprise, and sometimes also have to join our husbands on fishing trips when they need an extra hand. It is, therefore, not very encouraging that despite so much hard work, the prices for our fish are low. This was one of the major reasons why the business in our community was dying and the fisheries was no longer an attractive proposition for the younger generation.

When our mayor called a meeting to discuss what could be done to revive our local economy, we seized the opportunity to talk about the need to create a local fish market where we could sell our best fresh fish. As this proposal was accepted, we took the challenge and set to work to see that it would be a success. It was very important that the whole community got involved. Through our involvement with *VinVis* (the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands), we particularly encouraged other women of our community to join us in this initiative.

A local working group was formed and its first task was to make a detailed study of the needs and the possibilities. Based on the outcome of this study, we made a plan. The aim of the fresh-fish market was to promote the consumption of fresh fish caught by our local fishing boats, and also to promote our local economy to make sure that the whole community would benefit. Since we were confident that our plan would work, the mayor gave us the investment money from Provincial and European Union (EU) funds to organize the market. This was a loan to the local working group.

In the summer of 2004, when the tourists came to our village—which is a very beautiful area in the north of the Netherlands—we launched the fresh-fish market, to be held every Saturday. In order not to violate government regulations, we obeyed the rules, and our fishermen took their fish first to the regulated auction. There, our group bought the fish, always bidding higher than the rest. In this way, our fisher husbands got more money than they usually would get in the auction. We then brought the fish to our market and sold it for a price that was acceptable for the consumer as well.

Besides selling fresh fish, we also informed the public about how and where the fish are caught. We also organized cooking demonstrations. Nowadays, consumers mostly buy fish in the big supermarkets, already processed into ready-to-eat products, which only have to be put in the microwave. If we want to make the consumer buy more of our local fresh fish, we must teach them how to clean and prepare the fish. We, therefore, held cooking demonstrations, let the people taste our seafood dishes, and distributed flyers with the recipes of the fish that we cooked that day. We also launched a website where we gave weekly updates about the catch of the day to be sold in the market, fish recipes, cultural programmes, and so on.

And, mind you, it worked wonderfully! The word spread and every Saturday we had many tourists, locals and buyers from restaurants coming to our village. People bought our fish, ate and enjoyed it. People visited our fishing boats and met with the fishermen. They listened to our songs and folk stories. They also visited our local shops and restaurants and some of those that were otherwise closing down, bounced back to life. The whole community benefited from the fresh-fish market.



In the first year, our work for the fresh-fish market had been voluntary. The extra money we earned was used to pay back our investment loan. Now that the market has proved its success and has come to stay, some of us will earn some money for the work in the market. We also plan to expand the market with other local products from our region, such as ecologically friendly farm products.

While we are very happy and proud of our achievement, we must say it has been hard but collective work. It brought us together in the community, and if things continue to go the way they do at present, then our children will also be proud to continue to fish, and, more than ever, our community will continue to survive.

But we also want to tell you that EU marketing regulations are not there to help small producers like us. They are there only to strangle us to death. The sanitary regulations that they impose upon us are unreal and even unnecessary. They make us feel guilty of poisoning the customer. Why should we, who live off the fishing, want to kill our customers? And why do customers believe that fish that comes in a packet from a big company is 'pure'? Such packaged fish is often cleaned by workers in Third World countries, who are paid really low wages. So it is 'pure' and cheap.

We think such marketing regulations are made only to benefit the big companies, which are interested only in maximizing profits, while our governments should actually be concerned about safeguarding the

livelihoods of the coastal fishers and small communities here at home.

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