

One sector, two voices

The conflict between small-scale and corporate interests in Norway's coastal fisheries has polarised the fishers' unions

Since 1990, the Norwegian Fishermen's Association has been contested by a new organization, the Norwegian Coastal Fishermen's Union. The union was founded in 1990 by coastal fishermen who felt that their mother organization at that time, the Fishermen's Association, would not espouse their case.

The Norwegian Fishermen's Association was originally founded by small-scale fishermen in 1926. It grew to a powerful tool in the hands of the coastal fishermen, fighting for their rights to own vessels and to establish co-operatives to sell their products. Their struggle was crowned with success when, in 1938, they managed to get the Norwegian Parliament to pass the Raw Fish Act and, in 1951, the Act on Ownership of Fishing Vessels.

The Raw Fish Act gave the fishermen's co-operatives the exclusive right of first sale for their products, and the right to establish the price and conditions of such sale. The Act on Ownership of Fishing Vessels stated that only active fishermen could own fishing vessels, and banned external capitalized ownership of fishing vessels.

The counter-attack, in both cases, came from the bigger enterprises, which saw profits to be extracted from the fisheries sector. Among these was the multinational food giant, Nestle, which wanted to establish a fish processing plant close to the resource base in the Barents Sea, and claimed that it needed its own fleet of trawlers to collect the resources.

Money talks, and, in this case, it managed to talk the Norwegian government into changing the law. The Norwegian government licensed the establishment of a fleet of more than 100 cod and

bottom-fish trawlers owned and controlled by the fish processing industry.

Developments in the herring fisheries took another path. What had originally been a coastal fishery developed through the 1960s and 1970s into a highly capitalized fishery on the high seas, leading to overfishing and depletion of the herring stocks. After the breakdown, fisheries input regulations were introduced, and the herring fisheries were closed. Herring fisheries became a protected sector, giving rise to further capitalization. Today they are a totally industrialized and corporate-owned sector.

So, in spite of the Act on Ownership, the capitalized fisheries sector grew. To enhance their influence and bargaining power with the fisheries authorities, the players in this sector organized themselves into their own owners associations outside the Norwegian Fishermen's Association. So, for many years the organizational structure of the Norwegian fisheries featured, on the one hand, regional associations of coastal fishermen organized under the umbrella of the Norwegian Fishermen's Association, and, on the other hand, a corporate fisheries sector organized in its own owners' associations.

One man-one vote

However, in 1972, they all merged under the umbrella of the Norwegian Fishermen's Association. While the influence of the coastal fishermen was decided by their numbers, following the principle of one man-one vote, the representatives of the corporate sector were given influence according to their economic power. And so, money started talking from within the Fishermen's Association—and it did not talk in favour

of the type of small-scale fishermen that in 1926 had founded the organization. The corporate sector now accounts for 70 per cent of the income from harvesting of the Norwegian marine resources.

In the 1980s, following a resource crisis in the cod fisheries, the question of introducing ITQs (Individual Transferable Quotas) came up. This dragged the conflict between the corporate and coastal sectors out into the open. The majority of the coastal fishermen were against ITQs, and in Flakstad, one of the coastal fishermen's strongholds in the Lofoten islands, an initiative was taken by a local branch of the Fishermen's Association to form an opposition to the vessel owners' influence within the Association.

This kind of opposition was, however, soon deemed illegal, and its initiators were not welcomed any longer as members of the Association. Thus, the Coastal Fishermen's Union was formerly established in November 1990.

However, it soon became clear that even if the fishermen's Association did not see fit to have these spokespersons for the coastal fishermen as their members, they were not willing to let go of their membership fees. This was because the major part of the income of the Association came from charging a levy on the first sale of fish. It might seem

reasonable enough for the fishermen's sales organizations to take a levy for handling the sale of the fishermen's catch. But what not everybody was aware of was that, along with that levy, they also charged a fee to finance the Association—and that fee was charged no matter whether the fisherman considered himself a member of the Association or not.

On establishing their own organization, the members of the Coastal Fishermen's Union claimed that the levy charged from them should be payable to their Union, not to the competing Association which did not want them as members.

The sales organizations, the Ministry of Fisheries and the Fishermen's Association itself claimed that charging the levy was absolutely legal. The Ministry furthermore claimed that they preferred to see the Fishermen's Association as the prime spokesperson for the whole fishing industry, and thought it vital to safeguard their financial basis.

Old establishment

So, the Norwegian Coastal Fishermen's Union was, from the very start, up against a united front of the old establishment within the fisheries sector. To survive, they had no choice but to go to court. In January 1994, four members filed a case against the biggest and most prestigious of the sales organizations—and they

finally won, after having lost at the lower levels. On 6 July 1997, the High Court of Norway ruled completely in their favour, stating that the charging of a levy for financing the Norwegian Fishermen's Association was illegal. The practice was promptly stopped.

What has obviously been won in this struggle is the cause of the liberty to organize. Some will perhaps argue that for as long as Norway has been a democracy, the fisherfolk have enjoyed the freedom to organize, and that the court ruling was only about the charging of a levy—But when you are forced to pay your money to an organization which you feel is working against your own interest, the claim that you are free to organize wherever you want is hard to swallow.

Today, both the Coastal Fishermen's Union and the Fishermen's Association charge their membership fees through the sales organizations. However, while the Union asks for a written statement of consent from each individual fisherman before levying a membership fee from his account with the sales organization, the Association just hands over its outdated membership list to the sales organizations, and asked them to charge all those who do not protest. This has, not unexpectedly, led to some complaints against the Association. Yet, at least now, the fishermen have a real choice. For the first time, they can choose to support one or the other of the organizations—or not to support any of them.

For the Fishermen's Association, losing the case meant losing more than half of its income overnight. Consequently, it had to cut down on costs, reduce staff, and, at the same time, raise membership fees considerably. This has led an increasing number of small-scale fishermen, who remained faithful to their old organization, to now reconsider their membership.

The corporate sector now pays over half the membership fees of the Association. Accordingly, they demand more influence. This has enhanced the immanent conflict between the coastal and the corporate sector within the Fishermen's Association, and the

corporations have more than once threatened to take back their money and leave the Association.

The last conflict was over the distribution of the mackerel resources this summer. The Norwegian quota grew by 23,900 tonnes between 1997 and 1998, and the corporate sector claimed that the total increase should be to their benefit, leaving them with 87 per cent of the Norwegian mackerel quota. The coastal lobby within the Association managed to put through a recommendation to the Ministry, granting the coastal fleet an increase of 5,000 tonnes.

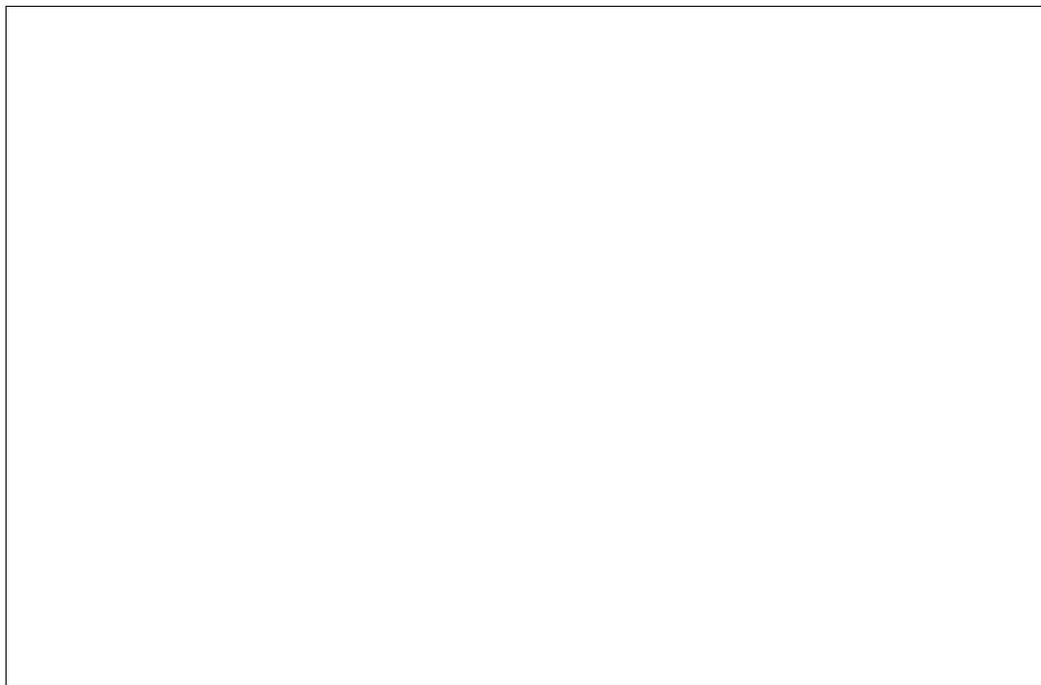
The Ministry of Fisheries, however, decided to follow the recommendations of the Coastal Fishermen's Union, granting the coastal sector an increase of 10,000 tonnes, from 20,000 tonnes to 30,000 tonnes, and leaving the corporate sector with 'only' 80 per cent of the resource. This immediately created an uproar among the corporate owners, and even led some of the owners of the bigger purse-seines to discontinue their membership in the Association.

The Coastal Fishermen's Union, on its part, has always been poor, and still is. Having chosen the hard and difficult way of building the organization on personal membership fees from the very start, the Union is now, for the first time, able to compete with the Fishermen's Association on equal terms. The common problem they face, though, when it comes to organizing coastal fishermen, is that a great majority of them seem indifferent to the benefits of being organized.

What has been lost during this struggle is equally clear—the unity among coastal fishermen. But that was lost not through court rulings. Rather, it was lost when the coastal fishermen forgot who they were, and, consequently, chose to ally with the corporate sector.

Decreasing numbers

Although the coastal fisheries is still an important sector, and accounts for 10-30 per cent of the employment figures in many coastal communities along the coast of western and northern Norway, the number of fishermen has decreased considerably during the last decades.



There are now approximately 10,000 fishermen working on board coastal fishing vessels in Norway. It is evident that having two organizations competing with each other is not the cleverest solution, and it can hardly be seen as a lasting one.

So what does the future hold for Norwegian coastal fishermen? Evidently, the only organization that can uphold their case, at the moment, is the Coastal Fishermen's Union. It is, however, still a small organization, in terms of numbers, but it is building on a sound foundation, both ideologically and organizationally. It is also gaining influence.

Since it was founded, the Union has been advocating the view that marine resources should be considered a common property, and harvested in a sustainable manner. On fisheries regulations, the emphasis should be on technical regulations to secure a selective fishery on the basis of both species and maturity, rather than quotas. Quota regulation, if needed, should preferably be restricted to non-selective fishing gear, like trawl and seine-nets, and should be based on the number of fishermen on board the vessel, rather than on registered tonnage or vessel length.

When it comes to organizational democracy, all decisions are made on the

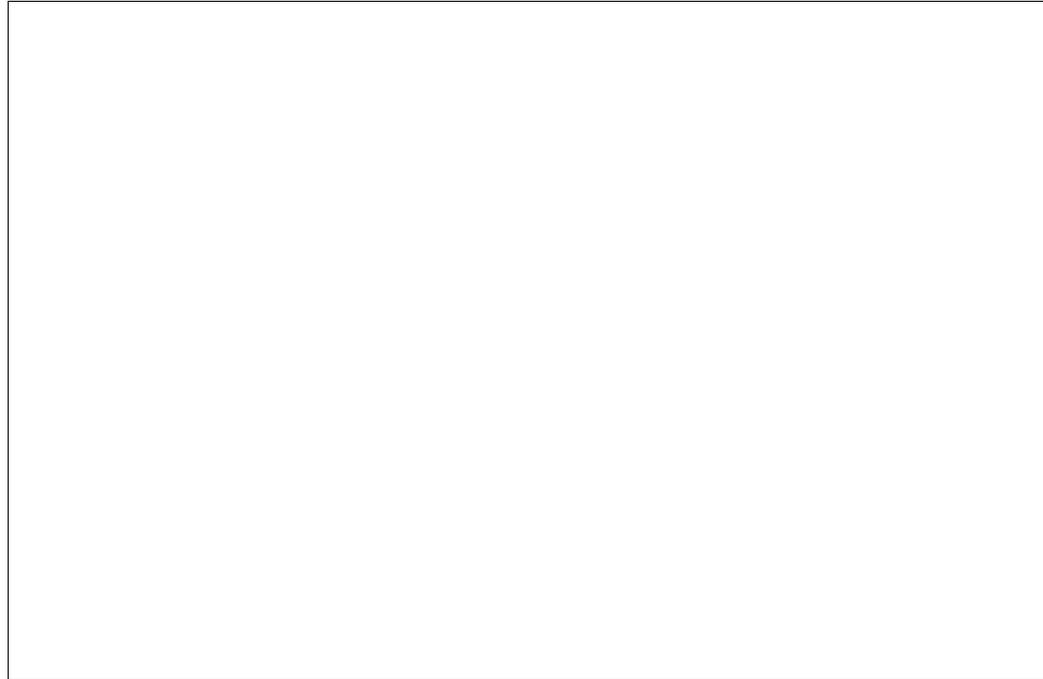
principle of one man-one vote. The membership base, although still smaller than that of the Fisherman's Association is as solid as a rock.

The fishermen's Association, having a glorious history to look back on as the champion of Norway's fisherfolk, is so troubled by internal conflicts that it has severe problems being credible spokespersons for anybody. This, of course, also affects its relationship with the public as well as with the fisheries administration. While earlier its representatives could be found sitting on every other chair around the table when matters of interest to the fisheries sector were discussed, there is now a growing frustration among the top-level representatives that their opinion is less valued than before.

Riddled by internal conflicts, a central objective of the Association's leaders has been to hold it together. In pursuit of that interest, they have gone a long way in not only accepting, but also applauding, the privatization of huge portions of the Norwegian marine resources in the hands of the corporate sector.

Conflict of interests

But, as these conflicts arise from basic and immanent collisions of interest between the coastal and the corporate fisheries sectors, the only way for the Association to rid itself of these conflicts is to throw the



corporate sector out. If the coastal fishermen left within the Association put in all their resources, they may still be able to do so. It is, however, more likely that the corporate owners will pull out, for the more pragmatic reason that they can put to better use their membership fees if these were all invested in their own owners association.

In any event, splitting the Association would not solve any of the basic conflicts between coastal and corporate fisheries in Norway. But it would bring the conflicts out in the open, where battles of opinion and interest, and questions of how national marine resources should be managed and distributed, rightfully belong. For the coastal fishermen who still retain their membership in the Association, it would mean that they need no longer see their views corrupted and hidden away as false compromises. And it would clear the path for once more building a united front among the coastal fishermen of Norway. ♣

This article was written by Eirik Falch from the Coastal Fishermen's Union of Norway