

A Desperate Search

Women fish processors in Côte d'Ivoire in Western Africa face a bleak future, with fewer fish and declining incomes

In Côte d'Ivoire, the low fishing season lasts eight months of the year. For women fish processors, this translates into a relative abundance of raw material between mid-July and mid-November, when they are supplied directly by the fleet of local artisanal vessels. During the low fishing season, there is almost nothing—four months of fish to process, too short a time to make a decent living. Women have, therefore, to turn to imported fish, but this market is in the hands of greedy intermediaries. Micheline Dion Somplehi, President of the Côte d'Ivoire National Union of Women in Fisheries Societies, provides ideas on how this can change, including

from the artisanal sector but also from intermediaries who sell small pelagics species caught by industrial trawlers in Mauritania, frozen and boxed on board. Some years ago, 60 per cent of the supply of women fish processors would come from small-scale fisheries and 40 per cent consisted of frozen fish imports.

But the situation has changed. On the one hand, in the last decade, maritime artisanal fisheries landings have constantly gone down. Artisanal fishermen face many difficulties. Fishermen stories about trawlers, mostly Korean and Chinese, fishing illegally in the coastal zone and destroying their nets, are multiplying. Unsustainable fishing methods by industrial boats, such as pair trawling, have added to the problems. But it is not just the unsustainable and illegal fishing by vessels of foreign origin that is a cause for concern.

As Micheline Dion Somplehi explains: "The area reserved for artisanal fishing is reduced, and lately, it is even more reduced because of offshore oil development. The richest fishing areas are where the oil wells are located, so fishermen have difficulties to gain access, and with the maritime traffic that this generates, many have already lost their fishing equipment, carried away by passing ships, without compensation".

Small pelagics

For women fish processors, one would think that imported small pelagic species may provide an alternative source of raw material. That is not the case. The trade of imported small pelagics, landed frozen at the port of Abidjan, is in the hands of a few intermediaries, whose main objective is to make the highest profit, not

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through new regional fish-supply channels as well as through the tuna fisheries agreement between Côte d'Ivoire and the European Union (EU).

Like most of West African countries, fish is the main source of animal protein for the Côte d'Ivoire population. A narrow continental shelf limits marine artisanal fisheries activities. However, almost three-quarters of the total production of the national maritime fisheries come from this artisanal sector. But, as in other countries such as Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire fish supply depends largely on imports. Over three-quarters of the fish consumed in Côte d'Ivoire are imported.

Côte d'Ivoire women fish processors source their raw material

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to supply women fish processors. Moreover, overall, the quantities of small pelagics landed in Abidjan have decreased and, therefore, inevitably, prices have increased. Indeed, in recent years, in West Africa, a combination of factors has affected the supply of small pelagics by industrial vessels to markets such as Côte d'Ivoire. In Mauritania, for conservation reasons and to avoid competition with artisanal fishermen, the fishing zone for European pelagic trawlers was pushed out further from the coast in the last fishing agreement. And this new zoning was applied to Russian vessels as well. There is also an increasing fishmeal industry developing in the region, fuelled by attractive world prices for fishmeal. In Mauritania, where the majority of the small pelagics destined for the region's markets are caught, the government gave approval for the construction of about 40 fishmeal plants. In 2015, 24 of these plants were already in operation, swallowing vast quantities of the small pelagics caught in Mauritanian waters, including by artisanal fishermen. These factors negatively affect the

availability of affordable, good-quality small pelagics for Côte d'Ivoire women fish processors.

Micheline Dion believes things have to change: "I think we have to develop an alternative supply chain based on artisanal fisheries. We should think about setting up a trade route between areas where small pelagics are found in abundance, and where small-scale fishing can develop its capacity to catch them and conserve their quality, such as in Mauritania, and see the possibility to organize transport by container, by sea, to our country where the demand is. With the support of GIZ (German Development Co-operation Agency), our Mauritanian fishermen's colleagues have a project to develop a small fleet of artisanal seiners to develop such a supply chain".

The future may look brighter, but nowadays, with a declining supply from artisanal fishing limited to four months of the year, and with greater difficulties to afford diminishing quantities of imported small pelagics, women are left with no fish and no income.

MICHELINE DION SOMPLEHI / CMAPHA



Faux thon trade in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Today, this *faux thon* is landed in Abidjan by the tuna boats' crew, and sold without control to local intermediaries, who then sell it to the women

A source of supply which could help the women fish processors in their quest for raw material, is the *faux thon* landed by European vessels in Abidjan under the European Union—Côte d'Ivoire fisheries partnership agreement. In the Gulf of Guinea, Abidjan is the most important port for the landing of tropical tuna. Three canneries—Scodi, Pêche et Froid and Castelli—deal

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mainly with yellowfin, skipjack and bigeye tuna. Damaged, undersized tuna and by-catches which are not used by the canneries constitute the *faux thon*. Today, this *faux thon* is landed in Abidjan by the tuna boats' crew, and sold without control to local intermediaries, who then sell it to the women. The quantities of this *faux thon* are estimated at between 5,000 and 8,000 tonnes a year. In recent years, European purse-seiners land on average 48 tonnes of *faux thon* per landing. This fish could constitute an interesting alternative to small pelagics for supplying the Abidjan women fish processors when there's nothing else to process.

But things are far from simple. At a hearing at the European Parliament on the role of women in fisheries in May 2016, Micheline Dion explained: "At the port of Abidjan, women fish processors currently buy the *faux thon* from Lebanese and Burkinabe intermediaries. They pay around 1,000 CFA per kilo (2 euros). During the processing—drying, smoking—the *faux thon* loses a third of its weight. It is necessary therefore to buy 1.5 kg, spending 1500 CFA (around 3 euros), to get a kilo of processed product. The woman must also pay for transport and firewood. Ultimately, the kilo of processed *faux thon* is sold at 2800 CFA per kilo (4 euros). With the price of the raw material,

a woman works hard to earn almost nothing. Worse yet, as often the intermediary makes her an advance to buy this overpriced raw material, she is obliged to continue to work at a loss to repay her loan and ends ultimately in debt and in greater poverty."

That is why, on behalf of the Côte d'Ivoire women fish processors, Micheline Dion asked the European Parliament to support, under the partnership agreement between the EU and Côte d'Ivoire, a formalized landing of *faux thon* and its direct sale to women through their national organization, in order to ensure the quality of the fish landed, and fair prices by escaping the intermediaries. The European Commission—the administration that negotiates and manages the EU fishing agreements—has accepted to put the topic on the table at the next EU-Côte d'Ivoire fishing agreement committee, to meet in December 2016.

While such proposals are being considered, it is vital for decisionmakers to appreciate the role of Côte d'Ivoire women, not only in terms of the local economy and food security, but for the whole artisanal sector. As in many African countries, it is the women who often pre-finance fishing trips in the artisanal sector. The way in which both artisanal fishing is protected, and the trade in imported fish is regulated to benefit women traders is, therefore, critical. Without urgent reforms, women fish processors are facing a bleak future, with fewer fish and declining incomes. 

For more

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Women Fish Processors in Ivory Coast: Desperately Seeking Fish