

# Tracing the Fish

**A recent Seafood Summit in Barcelona discussed the challenges and responses from West Africa to the issue of traceability of fish**

**T**his is unacceptable”, exclaimed Gaoussou Gueye, a Senegalese fish trader and Vice President of the CONIPAS (Interprofessional Organization of the Senegalese Artisanal Fishing Sector), in front of a stall in Barcelona’s iconic fish market, *la Boqueria*, where juvenile fish—octopus, cuttlefish, etc.—some coming from West Africa, were on sale.

Gaoussou Gueye and his colleagues from West African artisanal fishing organizations—Sid’ahmed Ould Abeid, President of the Mauritanian artisanal fishermen’s organization, and El Hadj Issiaga Daffe, President of the Guinean artisanal fishermen’s organization—were in Barcelona, towards the frosty end of January, to participate in the Seafood Summit, whose theme this year was “Global Challenges, Local So-

Fishermen and their organizations were not conspicuous participants in the discussions. As one expert noted during a plenary session, “Fishermen communities are expected to move in response to market pressures”—implying that there is no need to afford them much say in how they would like to respond; it is for international markets to decide that.

But Sid’ahmed Ould Abeid, El Hadj Issiaga Daffe, Gaoussou Gueye and their organizations think otherwise, and expressed their views and proposals in a panel, organized by the Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements (CFFA), on the theme “Quality and Traceability: Issues for West African Artisanal Fish Products”.

For them, improving quality and traceability should not be envisaged as a matter of responding to the conditions imposed on them by foreign markets, but rather as an intrinsic part of the solution the artisanal sector can provide to the overexploitation of West African fish resources. Decreasing resources and swelling populations, as a result of internal migration generated by desertification, political unrest, etc., mean that if coastal communities are to continue making a living from fishing, each fisherman must fish less, but earn more by improving the quality and adding value to his product, taking due account of the fact that women from the fishing communities are key in these value-adding operations.

## Traceability

West African artisanal fishing organizations see traceability as a means to gain recognition for the quality of their products, with the objective of making visible the contribution of the

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lutions”. Seeing these juveniles on the market, highly prized by the Spanish consumers, at a time more demands are being made on West African artisanal fishermen to fish responsibly, epitomizes the conundrum of applying ‘local solutions’ to address ‘global challenges’.

The 2008 Seafood Summit, organized by the Seafood Choices Alliance, brought together about 350 representatives from the industry, and conservation and scientific organizations. Most of the fishing industry representatives were from the processing and marketing sectors or aquaculture.

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artisanal fishing sector to the sustainable exploitation of coastal resources. This means that traceability systems must be adapted to the realities of West African artisanal fishing and not, as is often the case, be imposed by the requirements of international markets.

However, in an exclusively export-oriented artisanal fishery, as in the case of octopus in Mauritania, answering international markets requirements in terms of quality and traceability has become a priority for Sid'ahmed Ould Abeid and the Mauritanian artisanal fishermen he represents.

In Mauritania, each artisanal pirogue works for a particular processing and exporting plant, and each plant has a list of the pirogues working for it. Each plant also keeps a register of which pirogues go fishing on which day, and how much octopus, of which size, is caught. When a problem arises, it is easy enough to go back to the processing plant and find out which group of pirogues was fishing on a particular day. Sid'ahmed Ould Abeid also insists that traceability requirements

can promote good fisheries management. Traceability needs to start at sea: thanks to the global positioning system (GPS), artisanal fishermen are nowadays able to locate and determine their fishing zones with precision. The localization of the pirogue is important to help determine the legality of the

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catches. In Mauritania, a cost-effective, simple system has been put in place to help the controllers determine the legality of the fishing operation in each fishing zone: the colour of the pirogues is determined by the particular area in which it fishes. Thus, a pirogue with a fishing permit for the Nouadhibou zone is painted green, while for Nouakchott, the colour is yellow.

Modern technologies, like mobile phones, are also very useful for the

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El Hadj Issiaga Daffe, Gaossou Gueye, Sid'ahmed Ould Abeid and Beatrice Gorez at the panel discussion organized by CFFA

Mauritanian artisanal fishing sector. The ability to communicate with the processing/exporting plant as soon as the pirogue begins its homeward trip enables the transmission of information on the quantity and quality of the catches. This means that the plant can prepare adequately for the reception of the catches, and be ready for their arrival. This minimizes the risks of the catches spoiling.

Sid'ahmed Ould Abeid ended with a spirited call for the octopus 'caught artisanally' by Mauritanian fishermen

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to be recognized as a product coming from sustainable fisheries. Mauritanian fishermen use pots to catch octopus, a highly selective fishing gear, and this fishery is a source of livelihood for thousands of Mauritanian families. "We hope the efforts and investments we made to ensure the traceability of our products will be rewarded by the recognition of its social and environmentally friendly value", he concluded.

In Senegal, where the artisanal fishing sector includes some 60,000 fishermen and provides an equal number of jobs for women fish processors, fish-

mongers, etc, quality is of paramount importance at each stage of the long fish-handling chain. Here, an issue of concern to many fishermen is the replacement of wooden canoes by fibreglass boats. Many feel this replacement can be positive in a context of deforestation, where, to build a big wooden pirogue, two big trees have to be felled. The wooden pirogues also cost a lot in maintenance – every six months, a fisherman needs to visit the boatbuilder. Fibreglass boats are lighter and cleaner, and use less fuel. But the price of the fibreglass pirogue is prohibitive. Appropriate support should be put in place, in a way that does not put pressure on the fishermen to catch more fish so to be able to repay the loan taken for buying the fibreglass boats.

But replacing wooden pirogues with fibreglass ones is not going to solve the problems of quality and hygiene, if, at the same time, attitudes and habits do not change concerning the way fish is handled. Fishermen handling the fish on the pirogue, women fish sellers and fish processors are not well informed about what better hygiene implies in terms of their own behaviour.

Some changes are already noticeable in Senegal: there is an increasing specialization and professionalism in jobs like cleaning the fish boxes, unloading and transporting the fish, etc. This creates new job opportunities in the communities and, in some cases, like for those who unload the fish boxes from the pirogues to the shore, the result has been a small increase in income.

Efforts are now needed to improve the working conditions of those engaged in the artisanal processing of fish, that are sold in the sub-region. Problems are numerous, ranging from lack of cleanliness and hygiene at the processing sites (which requires efforts from the local authorities as well in, for instance, regularly collecting and disposing of the fish waste), and access to potable water, to problems with how the fish is wrapped.

### **Irresponsible tourism**

Finally, Gaoussou Gueye highlighted a problem linked to irresponsible tourism. Tourists visiting Senegal want nice, clean fish, but often they do not

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Nancy Gitonga former Director of Fisheries, Kenya, speaking at the "Feed the World Session of the Seafood Summit 2008"

care whether it is legally caught or not. They will want a fish of 300 gm on their plate, when the Senegalese fisheries code sets the minimum catching size at 400 gm, for conservation reasons. In the face of such irresponsible demands, fishermen will adopt equally irresponsible practices and do their best to fish juveniles, even if it means tampering with the law. Most of the hotels in Senegal try to cater to such demand, and ask for juveniles of *dorades*, *thioff*, etc. Gaoussou Gueye feels there is a need to educate tourists about issues related to responsible fisheries.

The need to address illegal fishing issues was echoed by El hadj Issiaga Daffe, who painted a bleak picture of the situation of artisanal fishing in Guinea, where trawlers come to fish illegally in the artisanal fishing zone at night, destroying nets, and sometimes harming or even killing fishermen. Guinean fishing communities look to better traceability as a means to stop the trade of such illegally caught fish, closing down markets and thereby shutting off the forces driving illegal, dangerous and destructive fishing practices. ❧



A variety of seafood on display at La Boqueria market Barcelona

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#### For more



<https://programs.regweb.com/resourceone/seafoodsummit08/register/>  
**Website of Seafood Summit 2008**

<http://ec.europa.eu/research/quality-of-life/ka1/volume1/qlk1-2000-00164.htm>  
**Tracefish: EU website on traceability of fish products**

<http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/MEETING/004/Y3015E.HTM>  
**Sub-committee on Fish Trade, Traceability of products from fisheries and Aquaculture**