

# Brighter future

## Recently introduced, an innovative processing technology promises a brighter future for women fish processors in fishing communities of the Ivory Coast

This article is based on an interview with **Micheline Dion Somplehi** (avepffa@yahoo.fr) by **Beatrice Gorez** (cffa.cape@gmail.com) in French. Translated from French by **Gildas** (digor-mor@orange.fr)

Smoked and dried fish is a vital source of food and income for many African coastal communities. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, about 20-30 per cent of the local catch in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, or Ivory Coast, is consumed as smoked fish.

A new technology, initiated by the FAO and supported by the Ivorian authorities, is now available for drying and smoking fish which reduces risks to health, enhances food safety as well as the quality of production, improves working conditions and incomes, and reduces post-capture losses.

The FAO-Thiaroye Processing Technique or the FTT system, developed by a Senegalese woman engineer, includes a furnace and a device made of vegetal sponge that filters out smoke and catches its toxic elements before it reaches the fish. There is also a fat-collecting tray.

Fish smoked and dried using this system is of high quality. It can be stored for several months and distributed over long distances. The system can be installed in a shed, allowing women to carry out processing in all seasons. Earlier, when conventional techniques were used, post-harvest losses during the rainy season could be as high as 50 per cent for some products.

Micheline Dion Somplehi, chairperson of a women fish processors cooperative and coordinator of the Women's Programme of the African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organizations (CAOPA), says: "In 2010, we established an association of women fishmongers and fish processors. In 2012, during the celebration of World Fisheries Day organized by CAOPA, we became more visible at the national level. This helped us to obtain some of the FAO pilot ovens, which have given us better working conditions and increased our production. It also takes less time to smoke the fish: this is really important because, in our communities, women are both engaged in household chores (taking care of the children, working in the kitchen) and carrying out fish processing activities."

Traditional fish smoking generates carcinogens that pose risks to the health of women processors and the young children accompanying them. The FTT technique alleviates their hard work as they are less exposed to heat, burns and smoke. "Smoking fish no longer threatens our eyes and respiratory system," comments Micheline.

Traditional techniques leave blackish residues on the processed fish, which alters taste and quality, and negatively affects sales. When women process the fish in this manner, drops of fat fall on the embers, fueling flames that burn the fish and produce toxic residues.

With the new FAO oven, the oil does not fall into the fire: it is collected on a metal tray, and can then be used as cooking oil or to produce soap for washing dishes.

The FTT oven has another significant advantage: it consumes much less firewood/charcoal. With traditional smoking, women processors need considerable amounts of firewood, which adds to the problem of deforestation, particularly in the mangrove areas.

The FTT oven uses much less fuel, and can accommodate up to five times more fish than traditional ovens. With less fuel needed per kilo of processed fish, women save on costs. This technique can also be operated with alternative and environment-friendly fuel sources including coconut husks or shells, corn cobs, millet or rice stalks.

Micheline further points out: "We must think about the future. We were able to obtain pilot ovens for some of our co-ops thanks to the FAO and government support. With the profits accruing, we have already constructed a shed in another co-op. It is now ready to house FTT ovens. We need more financing to acquire more ovens for our co-ops so that we can process more products during the high season and continue to sell during the low season. We should access more fish for processing during the low season. We are exploring the possibility of buying *faux thon* (tuna by catch) at a fair price from European tuna companies that unload at Abidjan under the EU-Ivory Coast fisheries agreement. Some positive talks have already taken place on the matter with the authorities on both sides and with the boat-owners. We also need to upgrade the landing sites with appropriate infrastructures that comply with quality and hygiene standards. Otherwise, our production will not be up to standards and we shall continue

to suffer, earning a paltry income, unable to offer a decent living to our families.”

Micheline also looks forward to a fully equipped landing site currently being built by Moroccan cooperation authorities at Locodjro, north of Abidjan. Covering 1.5 hectares, it is designed to accommodate up to 2400 fishers

and 1600 women fish processors. It will include spaces for cleaning, smoking, storing, two mechanical workshops, a cold room and an ice plant. In addition, there will be a medical unit, a nursery and sanitation facilities. These are essential services for improving the life of women processors and their families. ❏

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