

Smoking fish efficiently

The *ahotor* oven represents an improvement on the widely used *chorkor* smoker, and is an energy- and time-efficient fish smoking technology

By Naana Nkansah Agyekum (nagyekum@oxfam.org.uk), Media and Communications Officer, Oxfam, Ghana

My recent tours in some coastal communities in the Central, Western and Volta Regions of Ghana exposed me to a daily reality of fishmongers in the region. As part of a fisheries sustainable project being implemented by Oxfam and its partners, such visits to fishing communities are quite frequent.

During one such trip, interactions with some fishmongers resulted in my visiting a fish processing shed, and that was when I got a taste of the struggle that they have been going through all these years. Within the few minutes I spent there, my eyes reddened, and I found myself gasping for breath. I walked out feeling sorry for the women who are subjected to this torturous experience on a daily basis to ensure we get the smoked fish that we love so much.

But this daily hardship of the women could be lessened with the use of a new technology for smoking fish called the *ahotor* oven. The *ahotor* oven was developed by SNV Ghana under Sustainable Fisheries Management

Project (SFMP) to improve on the quality and competitiveness of smoked fish through the use of a clean smoking technology. The *ahotor* oven is designed as an improvement over the existing *chorkor* smoker.

The *ahotor* oven is energy efficient and helps women fish processors reduce the quantity of firewood in smoking fish. It also improves the quality of smoked fish and reduces the content of the Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbon (PaH) contamination level, usually found in smoked fish. The combustion chamber in the oven ensures efficient combustion or burning of wood.

In contrast, the *chorkor* smoker, which is quite popular with most of the fishmongers because of its low cost of construction, poses a health risk to fish processors as they have to endure the high rate of combustion that it involves.

“We need special training on the hygienic handling of fish as well as support in the construction of the improved *ahotor* ovens for smoking our fish,” says Madam Emelia Abaka, a fishmonger in Axim. She adds, “The old *chorkor* smokers are not good for smoking as the fish absorbs a lot of smoke in the process.”

“The assistance of the government and the private sector is needed to subsidise the cost of construction of the *ahotor* oven to make it affordable for most women,” explains Emelia.

According to the Ghana Standard Authority, fish smoked with the *ahotor* oven also passes the standardization test and makes them acceptable to the other formal markets like the supermarkets. Quality fish that meets the standardization mark is not only healthy but increases the profit margins for the fishmongers.

Oxfam and partners conducted a research on Gender Enterprise Marketing (GEM) within the fisheries value chain and recommended the need for standardization of smoked fish.

According to the OXFAM GEM report, “The women need support in the area of training and capacity building in order to establish profits and ultimately improve their livelihoods. Support for the women is mostly from NGOs but this is not extensive and so accessibility is low. Government institutions like the National Board for Small-scale Industry can provide the needed assistance for the rural women.”

EMELIA ABAKA EDU



The *ahotor* oven is energy efficient and helps women fish processors reduce the quantity of firewood in smoking fish. It also improves quality of smoked fish



Fishmongers using the chorkor smoker, which is quite popular because of its low cost of construction, but which poses a health risk to fish processors as they have to endure its higher rate of combustion

Rubby Adukpoh is an Assembly Member of the Dzelukope Electoral Area of the Keta Municipality in Ghana. She is also the Leader for the National Fish Processors Traders Association. Rubby explained to me that in her municipality, most women – about 80 per cent – still use the chorkor smokers.

“They don’t have the money to construct the new ahotor oven which was introduced to them. As a leader, I’m trying to encourage them to use the new ones because I have observed the differences in using both,” says Rubby.

“With the chorkor smokers, the water that drains from the fish gets back to the fire but the ahotor oven has a chamber that drains the water separately,” Rubby explains. “The ahotor oven offers that extra time while processing your fish to do other things but you don’t have that flexibility when using the chorkor smoker as your fish can easily burn,” she adds.

Rubby Adukpoh is not only encouraging the women to use the new oven but also dialoguing with NGOs and the local district authority to garner support for the women for complete migration to the ahotor oven.

The cost for constructing the ahotor oven ranges from GHS 1600 to GHS 1800 (USD 274 to USD 308) but the chorkor smoker costs just GHS 200 to GHS 400 (USD 34 to USD 68).

According to the Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture Development, 500 ahotor ovens have been distributed to fish mongers across the country, with 80 more under construction, to complement the initial supply.

Some fisheries projects in the past have subsidised the construction of the new oven for fishmongers. But like *Oliver Twist*, the women are asking for “more” as the support was far from enough to cover all the women within the coastal communities.

Rubby Adukpoh cannot overstate the importance of this. “I am appealing to all stakeholders within the fisheries sector to come on board to fully support the migration to the ahotor oven,” she says

She also wants government ministries and the agencies in charge of Ghana’s fisheries to pay frequent visits to coastal communities. She believes this will give them the opportunity to witness the socio-economic status of women in the sector first-hand so as to craft better and more effective policy decisions. ❏

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