

How we faced the COVID crisis

Miranda Bout, co-owner of a small fishery company in the Netherlands, shares her experiences of staying afloat during the Covid-19 crisis

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Miranda and her husband Job Bout are co-owners of a small-scale fishery company, called 'Fish from Job', in the province of Zeeland in the south west of the Netherlands. One of their sons also engages in fishing with his father, just as his grandfather did. For four generations they have been fishing for mullet, seabass, and sprat, and now they also look for crabs. They fish according to the season, using sustainable swing and seine nets with large mesh size. They do not use fish-finding technologies, preferring to search out mullets with their eyes. Miranda enjoys joining them on fishing trips, but her main task is the marketing. She does this on her own, but in busy times, she gets help from her sister and daughter. Another son works in fisheries for a local fish wholesaler.

How has your business been affected by the COVID pandemic?

In the beginning it was a big shock. The fish prices in the local fish auction plummeted in a short while, in particular for the species we sold. Besides selling in the auction, we used to sell a part of our fresh fish directly to local restaurants. As these closed down, we lost this market as well. At the same time our fixed costs continued. The government had declared fisheries as an essential service, and so, in the beginning, there were no compensation measures for fisheries. At first, we had no other choice but to stop fishing, as we were dependent of the fresh fish market and had no storing facilities.

So how did you survive?

Fortunately we had some alternative income from Job's assignments of fish stock surveys, for which his traditional artisanal knowledge is highly appreciated.

We also used to sell a part of our fish to a fish retailer, who buys only from small-scale fishers and at a fair price. This retailer has a permanent group of regular customers who continued to buy our fish. But the quantities were small.

Before the COVID crisis, I had already started a small business of my own by selling our fish directly to customers and also by developing new fish products, in particular, mullet, which is a low valued fish, one can even say a 'forgotten' fish, for consumers. I felt the need to upgrade the image of this fish. I took the plunge by approaching a chef of a local high end restaurant,

who also has his own TV programme. I gave him a box of our mullet and asked him to try it out for his dishes. He was interested and the good taste and possibilities of the fish really took him by surprise. He successfully developed tasteful recipes with mullet and became a regular buyer and paid a good price. This is how also other local restaurants became interested in our mullet. On their menu cards, they gave it the name 'Fish from Job' with a picture of my husband, the fisher. I also taught myself how to make bottarga. Bottarga is a delicacy of salted, cured fish roe, typically of the grey mullet or the bluefin tuna and very popular in Mediterranean dishes. I studied how to make it finding instructions on the internet through trial and error. I succeeded in developing a small circle of regular customers mostly by word of mouth. Our province has a regional origin certification scheme which I succeeded in acquiring for the mullet and bottarga. This greatly helped in reaching a larger circle of customers interested in good quality artisanal products.

When the restaurants closed down because of the COVID pandemic, I felt I had to look for other marketing strategies. I saw how effectively other small producers used social media in product promotion and sales. I took the initiative to enter into a partnership with various local entrepreneurs, including colleagues who fish, from whom I would buy local products to sell, together with our own fish and fish products. Every week I would make a list of fresh fish and accompanying recipes and a variety of fish soups, fish salads or fish buns. I would also try to find all kinds of matching products, including handicraft gifts with fish images, to add to my list. I would publish the list on Facebook and other popular social media, sometimes together with a short video. I would make the videos myself, simply by using my mobile camera and often they would come out rather entertaining. I am amazed at how quickly they gained popularity. Perhaps it had to do with the lock down.

Customers place their orders and I deliver to their homes on Fridays and Saturdays on my scooter. I supply only in my local area. I now have a group of 20 regular customers, who feel more like my friends. But during Christmas time, I had as much as 80 customers.



Miranda Bout promoting her fish, Zeeland, The Netherlands. We need more support for the small-scale and artisanal producers, in particular those working in the fisheries sector

“I feel with this crisis that nature wants to tell us something. We have to listen well”

Did you get any support from the government?

When the government announced compensation measures for the fisheries sector, the small-scale sector was somehow excluded, as the measures were designed for the industrialised sector only. It was only through active lobbying that our national network of small-scale fishers succeeded in obtaining compensation. The compensation amount however was very low actually, and those who had already managed on their own to make up for the loss of income, like us, were not eligible for compensation.

You are also a member, actually the only woman member, of the board of the national network of small-scale fishers, Netviswerk. How did the organisation respond to the COVID crisis?

It was very hard at first, and still is. We could not meet physically and also, we were not used to meeting virtually through media like Zoom. We had to learn all that. Our first priority was to lobby for inclusion of our sector in the COVID compensation measures. We also prepared a list of all our members who sell fresh fish at home, which we promoted through the organization's website and social media. However, we still have been unable to hold a general assembly and we actually do not have a very good picture of what problems our members might be facing.

Another problem is that our ministry's attention has primarily gone towards the impact of the COVID crisis and then also to the impact of Brexit on the industrialised sector. Policy decisions harmful for the small-scale sector were sometimes made because we were not consulted.

What do you hope for the post-COVID time?

I am happy that I'm being able to manage my small business all on my own. I do not want to expand the business, because it may get difficult to manage and more stressful. I need time to spend with my family and for my activities with our fisher's organization. The most important is that my business can provide for the daily needs of my family and I find satisfaction in my work.

Experience has taught me that connecting and engaging is of essential importance for survival. I hope the appreciation for locally produced and artisanal food will continue after the COVID pandemic is over. We need more support for the small-scale and artisanal producers, in particular those working in the fisheries sector. We have valuable knowledge, experience and practices to offer society. We are used to listening to and working with nature. I feel with this crisis that nature wants to tell us something. We have to listen well.

Please visit Miranda and Job Bout's website to learn more about their work: <https://zeeuwsevis.nl/> 