

European Union/ Spain

I collected oil from beaches...

An eyewitness account of the impact of the oil spill caused by the sinking of Prestige, on Galician coastal communities

Statement to the European Advisory Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture (ACFA) by Cristina López Rodríguez, ECODESARROLLO GAIA, on 16 December 2002

Good Afternoon.

I come from Galicia, where for the last month I have been travelling along the entire coast from the mouth of the river Fo to the mouth of the river Miño.

I collected oil from beaches as a volunteer. I witnessed the desperation of fishermen who were gathering the oil on the sea with their bare hands.

I saw women discovering with their rakes that under the layers of oil there was a layer of sand, and, lower still, another layer of oil.

I witnessed directly the black tide. I attended meetings, discussions, demonstrations, gatherings of silent protest, and actions to claim rights. The Galician people have not thrown in the towel, but they need help.

I met with women whose work ties them directly to the sea—the shellfish gatherers—and with women whose work is indirectly related to the sea—fishermen's wives, net makers, and women in general. I spoke with women in the ports, in their houses, on the beaches, in the street.

There is enormous gloom and mind-boggling uncertainty about the future. Disgust and fear are widespread. But it does not seem to me that this is causing people to give up. They must move on.

In areas where fishing is banned support is being provided. Where there is no ban, the situation is even more difficult because fish is difficult to sell.

It is all very well to talk about plans to rehabilitate the environment, and about regeneration to speed up biological processes (about cleaning up, plantations, seeding etc.) or about plans to promote Galician seafood or about compensation.

But there is no work for shellfish gatherers. Young people are having to look for work far from home. That the Galician fishery sector is facing a widespread crisis is not in doubt.

It is obvious that we have on our hands a major social crisis, impacting on the Galician population in general, and on women in particular. It is affecting women who are shellfish gatherers, women whose work depends on fishing, women in general from the fishing community and women who sustain the family structure in the Galician fishing communities

We must insist that the role of women in Galicia, now more than ever, is made plain to see. Now that they have to overcome a new obstacle. Now that they see the structure of their lives and the structure and cohesion that holds their families together, falling apart. We are facing a major social impact that must be dealt with.

What is needed now is an exhaustive study on the current situation in Galicia—a social report produced with a gender perspective. That makes visible the needs, proposals and opinions of women who live both directly and indirectly from the sea. That takes into account proposals to increase the measures provided to meet social needs.

Even if the environmental damage has already been done, now is the time to deal with the social problems that we are becoming aware of through the drama we are living in.

Now is the moment to recognize the role of women and to provide them with the support measures needed to mitigate these deplorable events.

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