

## European Union/ Netherlands

### Penalized for what?

*The shrimp fisher community of the Netherlands face problems in the initiatives they have undertaken for a better life and an environmentally sound fisheries*

**By Mariet Groen, wife of a shrimp fisherman and member of VinVis, the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands**

As I write this, we are facing a big crisis. The price for shrimp is crashing and, at the same time, there is a weekly destruction of thousands of kilograms of small-size shrimps, because of an oversupply in the market. Many of the shrimp fishing enterprises will not survive. My husband is now fishing seven days a week, but our earnings are so low that we hardly have money left for our daily needs. This morning, when I wanted to pay for my groceries, I discovered I had no money left. I felt so embarrassed. How could this happen in a wealthy country like the Netherlands?

Shrimp fishing is one of the traditional Dutch fishery sectors, accounting for about 20 per cent of the Dutch cutter fleet. In the north of our country, in particular, coastal villages depend on this fishery. The shrimp fishery is predominantly a small-scale sector activity and typically family-based, where women play an important role. Women are mostly responsible for bookkeeping, dealing with banks, and auctions. Some women also go fishing with their husbands.

Some years ago, we faced a similar situation as today. Due to the low prices for shrimp, fishers tried to catch as much as possible, in order to survive. A battle for the survival of the fittest was going on. The cold stores of the traders were completely filled and there was no option but to convert the shrimp harvest into fishmeal. This is one of the worst things that can happen to a fisherman, because a real fisherman fishes to feed the population. It was then that we concluded that this situation should not continue. Shrimp fishers from Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands organized into producers' organizations, and discussed voluntary regulation of the shrimp capture. They decided autonomously to reduce the number of fishing days and to cap the supply of shrimp. With this 'trilateral' agreement, they approached the two trading companies that dominated the European shrimp market and came

to a deal about the quantity of supply and a minimum price. The two trading companies would certainly benefit from the deal, because they were now guaranteed supply.

With the exception of one producer organization, all shrimp fishers complied with the agreement. The prices went up and the incomes of the fisher families improved. The fishermen could now come home over the weekends to spend time with their families. After years, my husband, the children and I could go together on a holiday again. Fishermen could now invest in the maintenance of their boats, and young fishermen were again eligible for bank loans to start on their own. Of course, there were still good and bad years, but, in general, we could make a good living from the shrimp fishery. Cold stores were no longer filled to the ceiling with shrimp, there were no bulk-purchase prices, nor destruction of shrimp harvest. Also, our initiatives were praised by environmental organizations.

Alas, all this came to an end. By mid-January this year, the anti-cartel Authority of the Netherlands decided to penalize the shrimp sector, because of our agreement and deal with the trading companies. They said that for years our practice had been putting the consumers at a disadvantage. The fines were exorbitant: Euro 4 mn for the fishermen and Euro 9.7 mn for the traders. We were totally surprised, because of all the approval we had been given until now. We had been working in line with the EU policy, which regards market supply regulation for the benefit of controlled fishing practices as one of the most important roles of the producer's organizations. We also felt it was unjust because small-scale fishermen were being treated like big telecom and oil companies.

The first response of our fishermen was to blockade the fishing port of Lauwersoog, which has the largest shrimp fishing fleet of Europe. The idea was to turn the attention of the government to our cause. Through our women in fisheries network, VinVis, a colleague fisherman's wife and I took the opportunity to hand over a letter to EU-Commissioner Fishler during the Women in Fisheries Conference last January. In this letter, we explained about our problem and asked for help. Fishler promised us a reply, which we received some weeks later. In his reply, Fishler said that the Commission would investigate the matter.

In the Netherlands, we women have worked in close co-operation with fishermen's leaders to approach

politicians and government officials to mobilize support for our cause. Many journalists visited our house too. We were ill at ease, because we had no experience with the media. Sometimes we felt misled when some journalist twisted our story, only looking for sensational news. Often we felt more miserable, because it was very depressing to recount our problems over and over again.

While we were busy with our advocacy campaign on the land, our husbands went to sea fishing. They had to, because of the huge loans that had to be repaid. As shrimp prices collapsed, our husbands had to go for longer fishing trips. We had no family life anymore. Some fishermen ended up with catches that were seven times larger than the quantity of the trilateral agreement. Within a short period, the cold stores of the traders were completely filled and they stopped buying shrimp from the open market, relying instead only on their contract fishers.

After some weeks, the smaller inshore fishers, including my husband, could not harvest anymore. We women went to the bank again and again to ask for new loans or for postponement of repayment. Our husbands were filled with negative energy and our community began to fall apart. Relationships among the fishermen became very tense, because of fierce competition for the resources, and there were acts of aggression against some of the fishermen who were not seen to be in solidarity.

I feel very privileged to live with my husband and children in our very beautiful old fishing village that has a very long historical bond with the sea. Everybody in our village and our region has, in one way or the other, some relationship with fisheries and the sea. That is why I hope that unity will return for the sake of preserving a future for our children and our community. Recently, I was elected as a board member of our local fishermen's organization. I regard my first mission as bringing back unity among the shrimp fisher community and finding support for our cause. I also want to have a family life again. I feel strengthened by the support of our women in fisheries network, VinVis. Also when I am down, I can always call on someone in the network to talk to.

We are now almost six months into the crisis. Thanks to our campaign and the support of the Dutch Fishermen's Organization, our case is being discussed in the national and European parliaments. Everyone now speaks about the importance of our shrimp fisheries for employment, and for historical and social reasons. We hope for a solution, but, for many of us, it may be too late. We try not to lose hope for better times.

*Mariet Groen can be contacted at [m\\_groen\\_01@hotmail.com](mailto:m_groen_01@hotmail.com)*

