

A new role for fisheries

The Namibian economy is moving away from its traditional mainstay, as it discovers the growing importance of fisheries

As Namibia revels in its hard-earned independence, its new vigour is fast being tempered by some hard economic realities.

The traditional backbones of its economy—mining and farming—are crumbling, with recession throwing thousands out of jobs. But the bright side of the picture is the growing shift to fisheries as the focus of economic growth and more jobs.

According to the South African Journal **Shipping News and Fishing Industry Review**, fish stocks off the Namibia coast have more than doubled since independence. This is due to the SWAPO government's improved management of access to the nation's fishing zones.

Previously, foreign trawlers—mainly Russian, East European and Spanish—had a virtually free run of Namibia's seas. They poached fish, froze them on board and transported the catch home for processing. Namibians benefitted little from all this activity.

Now, however, things are changing. Growth in the fisheries sector is impressive. In 1990 it contributed three per cent to the country's GDP, or R450 million, up 200 percent over 1989. In 1991 the share of GDP rose to six per cent and almost doubled the next year.

Estimates for the long term place the annual fish yields at nearly a million tonnes. This will fetch a revenue between R 0.8 billion and R 1.2 billion. Analysts expect a rise in the stocks of high-value hake and pilchard, while those of horse mackerel will decline.

Despite this cheery prognosis, the Namibian fisheries sector is hampered by

poor production and marketing facilities. This could upset the country's hopes for greater export earnings.

The SWAPO government hopes to tackle these issues. It would like to see more of the catch processed on shore. It is also negotiating a Fisheries Agreement with the European Community (EC). This might not only create more jobs for Namibians but also bring in new joint ventures with European fish and food companies.

As things stand now, European fisheries policies threaten the fisheries and fish workers of coastal African countries like Namibia. This was spotlighted recently at the 'Battle for Fish' Conference organized in Brussels by the Coalition for Fair Fisheries Agreements (CFA).

George Gavanga, branch secretary of the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union (NAFAU), pointed to the need for joint venture enterprises to guarantee that Namibians are not restricted to manual labour aboard fishing vessels. They should instead receive secure contracts of employment, with scope for training and promotion.

But, unfortunately, inequity persists at home too. The Namibian Marine Law bans strikes at sea. It thus gives the fishing vessel's skipper the right to hire and fire fishworkers at will.

Often no link

Further, there is often no link between those working aboard the vessels and those in the factories on land, although they are employed by the same company.

There are other specific problems. In Walvis Bay, for instance, some employers seek shelter behind South Africa's claim

over the enclave and insist on the use of South African laws. In order to win higher wages and better working conditions for Namibian fishworkers, NAFAU has been negotiating with most fishing companies in Walvis Bay.

Though the union was formed in September 1987, it has been able to negotiate only since November 1992. Before that it was neither recognised nor registered in South Africa as a workers' representative.

Meanwhile, even as these obstacles persist, more and more Namibians are discovering the economic fruits of fisheries. The small seaside resort town of Henties Bay, for instance, recently saw the birth of the Indileni Community Enterprise.

This is a fishing co-operative project which controls and regulates the fishing activities of its members. A member is allowed to catch 30 fish or 30 kg of fish per day, or 60 fish or 60kg per vehicle.

The fact that black Namibians can now share in the earnings from fishing is a great and lasting encouragement. No one misses the old days when their participation was confined to passively helping out visiting South African anglers. Today Namibians are themselves fishing for a brighter future.

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