

Life is the goal, not fishing

The marginalization of women and small-scale fishermen will not help solve resource conflicts in Norway

Norway is known for its well-regulated fishery based on scientific measures. Biologists have mainly provided the premises for fisheries management, while economists have influenced fisheries authorities only in the past 5 to 10 years.

In contrast to many artisanal fishing communities of the South, the small-scale fishing industry in Norway is not ruled by the rude violence of capital-intensive fishing vessels or by development projects favouring large-scale technologies.

Norway seems to show how it is possible to ensure the more sustainable part of the fishing industry through laws and regulations.

In 1974, the first regulatory law for the fishery was enforced, based on resource considerations. Since then, licences have been regulating large-scale fishing and fishing with active gears like trawls and purse-seines, thus limiting the number of vessels that had access to resources in Norway.

The open access that prevailed in the coastal zone for small-scale fishworkers using passive gears like hook-and-line and longlines was suddenly closed in 1989. This was due to the assessment of very low stocks of the most important Norwegian fish stock, the Arctic cod, and also due to the intensified role in fisheries management of science, including economics.

All fishworkers appeared concerned about the resource depletion, not least the small-scale fishworkers. But the sudden prohibition on coastal fishing for cod in the middle of the peak season, when the cod was coming to the coast to feed, was a shock to men, women and children in the

many scattered coastal communities. They felt they had been asked to foot the bill for the costs of overexploitation by distant-water trawlers.

Small-scale coastal fishing in Norway depends on highly mechanized boats, usually in the range of 4 to 12 m, most equipped with modern electronic technology. Many loans for vessels or equipment are secured against the collateral of family houses. Bankruptcy and forced sales of family homes and vessels swept through the coast, leaving the unfortunate shameful and apathetic, while those who somehow managed through the first crisis remained in fear of the future.

Fisherwomen in Norway have always been concerned with issues of social welfare. They have played an important role in putting these on the agenda of the national fishworkers' association, which is heavily male-dominated.

At the height of the economic, social and human crises striking the coastal fisheries, fisherwomen spontaneously formed coastal women's action groups. They raised their voices before the media and the prime minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, herself a woman.

Right to livelihood

The fisherwomen claimed their right to a livelihood and they wanted their dignity restored by granting their husbands the opportunity to fish and fulfill their economic obligations. Coastal fishing could not be looked at merely from the perspective of economic efficiency and competition, they argued.

Their demands were aimed at rescuing a way of life, where people were woven into intimate relationships with their social

and natural surroundings. Coastal fishing, not distant-water fishing, maintained the coastal cultural heritage and the many small fishing communities. This was by giving several people opportunities for a meaningful life, not merely assuring prosperity for a few.

Women in Norwegian fishing communities have always been the strings that kept the weaving together. While men are away at seasonal fisheries, these women keep the family and the community going, socially, culturally and materially. They have been the providers of daily food through subsistence husbandry (some sheep and a cow) and of woollen clothing for use at home as well as at sea.

This domestic production suffered in the 1950s and the 1960s. In today's fishing households, due to modernization and specialization, women's inputs, along with their housework, are service tasks which supplement the income from fishing and wage-work.

As fishing opportunities decline, such supplementary income is becoming ever more important.

Norwegian women are also increasingly entering fisheries politics, voicing their concerns for a decent, dignified and just treatment of fishworkers. And among themselves, they discuss increases in wife-battering, family conflicts and divorces prompted by inactivated and frustrated husbands.

The political action by fisherwomen led to some subsidies to lessen the immediate economic burden imposed by the closure of the coastal cod fishery. But the questions of future access to resources and their distribution were settled by the authorities and the national fishworkers' association.

The solution to the resource crisis was the introduction of boat quotas. With that, the open access for coastal fishworkers became history. Limits to fishing efforts were reached by quotas to large-scale as well as small-scale vessels. But in coastal fishing not everyone got a boat quota. Those who had caught the smallest amounts of codfish in the previous three

years were excluded. For the large group of small boats which were excluded by this system, a small amount of the total permissible annual catch was set aside. Those without quotas can compete in fishing for this amount each being limited by a maximum quantity of catch.

Newcomers cannot enter coastal fisheries, except by buying a vessel with a quota. The closed access thus functions as a privatization of what was previously a common property resource. Almost all boatowners are male.

The introduction of boat quotas has thereby formalized fish resources as an all-male property. Although fishing is heavily male-dominated, women have always been fishing—when necessary. They have taken part in the seasonal herring and cod-, fish fishery, where many hands were needed. They have joined their brothers, fathers or husbands at sea, when there was a lack of crew.

They have taken part in subsistence fishing in the home fjord, in between the cooking, washing of clothes and tending animals. If widowed, they have had to fish to provide for their children. Now, however, access is closed and it is not needs but rights that guide the distribution of fish resources.

Ironically, the historical access of women to fish resources, based on needs, never led to any rights. The Norwegian example of exclusion of small-scale fishworkers, when resource considerations call for limited access, is not exceptional. All industrialized fisheries are facing recurrent resource crises and are imposing different limiting management systems in their, own waters.

Closure of the commons

Although it is evident that the general overexploitation results from heavy investments in crude horsepower and ever more efficient fishing technology, this development is not halted. What governments and those fishworkers who gain most from the closure of the commons can easily agree upon is to exclude the marginal groups.

This has happened in Denmark too, in the early 1980s, where part-time small-scale

fishworkers were suddenly defined as spare-time fishers and excluded as intruders. Since then, these fishworkers, who have combined fishing with other sorts of petty industrial or wage-work when available, have gradually lost all rights to fish commercially.

The logic in the management system favours the resource-intensive fisheries, instead of supporting the fisheries that have little impact on fish stocks and which spread the profit across many hands. Small-scale fishing may not be competitive when export revenue is regarded as the only value that counts.

But in small-scale fishing, many fish-workers can live off small quantities of resources. This way of life is dependent on women's management in all kinds of household and community resources, always economizing and doing both the visible and invisible tasks necessary for the production of daily life. In large-scale trawling, only a few fishworkers live off the huge quantities of resources. Yet the more sustainable way of life through small-scale fishing is not respected either by the authorities or the national association of fishworkers.

The agreement between the Norwegian state and the association included the 'trawl ladder'. As the stock of Arctic cod grows and quotas can be augmented, the relative distribution between trawlers and

the coastal fishing vessels can change in favour of the trawlers.

This means that the marginalization of those who took the least codfish is permanent. Even when resources get more plentiful, fishing is not going to be opened for all small-scale fishworkers, women, children or men.

When a vessel is withdrawn from fishing and the owner does not transfer the quota to a new boat, the quota is returned to the state. Newcomers or those who were excluded from the quota system can apply for this very limited number of boat quotas. The rules for redistribution of quotas prohibit any vessel under eight m. in length.

Over-Industrialization

The logic of the 'trawl ladder' and the permanent marginalization of small-scale vessels favour a production pattern that has proved to be unsustainable ecologically as well as socially. Over-Industrialization, not just in fisheries, leads to the marginalization of millions of people throughout Europe.

Fisheries authorities seek support among fisheries economists when they claim that the numbers of fishworkers have to be reduced to reach a sustainable fishing effort. But, in effect, the abolishment of open access works to marginalize women and small-scale fishworkers.


In the debate on fisheries development, Norwegian fisherwomen introduced a different line of argument. The importance of coastal fishing as a means for a livelihood for many small communities and for a socially and culturally meaningful and dignified life is now stressed by two organizations fighting the injustices in current fisheries policies.

The Norwegian Association of Coastal Fishworkers demands that coastal fish-workers get open access to use passive fishing gears responsibly and under municipal control. To be a full member, one still has to be on the official register of fishworkers, which is not open to everyone. But a member has to pay a fee to the competing National Association of Fishworkers. This fee is taken from the amount of the sale of catch. Due to heavy protests, over the past years, this fee has been reduced from one per cent to 0.4 per cent of the catch value.

The second association, the Open Fisheries Commons, which permits everyone living in Norway to be a full member, filed a case against the state, claiming that the historical common right could not be given to an exclusive group of fishworkers at the expense of others. Though the association lost the case in the City Court, it is now taking it up to the High Court.

The resistance to attacks on the more sustainable fishery is alive. The issue of resource depletion also gets support from groups in the environmental movement in Norway. But women's voices are continuously needed in the debate to keep intact a wider perspective, including the social and cultural aspects of fishing.

Future directions

Women in Norway know that life is the goal, not fishing. The present conflict is more than a fight between interest groups. It concerns the direction of the development of the fisheries of industrialized countries—are they going to support socially and ecologically sustainable ways of life or not? 

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