

Getting its Akt together!

AKTEA, the European network of women's organizations in fisheries, grapples with several complex issues and decides to broaden its linkages with women in other sectors, in its annual general meeting

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In 2005, European fisherwomen established AKTEA, a European network of women's organizations engaged in the fishing sector. AKTEA has representative organizations from 11 European member states. AKTEA has the following main objectives: to recognize women's contribution in fisheries and aquaculture; to integrate women in decisionmaking related to fisheries and aquaculture; and to promote fisheries and aquaculture communities.

The network organizes an annual European meeting where women representatives from different countries exchange ideas and experiences. It also co-ordinates campaigns and actions at the European level. The last AKTEA general annual meeting was held in June 2008 at Arcachon in France.



At the annual general meeting, discussions centred on the participation of women in the Regional Advisory Councils (RAC). RACs are stakeholder-led bodies set up within the framework of the 2002 reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) of the European Commission. Their main task is to advise the Commission and member states on matters of fisheries management with respect to certain sea areas or fishing zones. RAC members include direct representatives from organizations of

fishermen. They also include interest groups, comprising scientists and administrators, and NGOs representing environmental groups, consumer groups and other stakeholders. Some fisherwomen organizations are members of the respective regional RACs. These include: the North Sea Women's Network (NSWN), a member of the RAC of North Sea; Estrela do Mar of Portugal, a member of the South Atlantic RAC; the Scandinavian Network of the Baltic Sea RAC; and Mna na Mara of Ireland, a member of the North West Atlantic RAC. The NSWN chairs the socioeconomic commission of its RAC, while the Portuguese network is a member of Commission in charge of traditional or small-scale fisheries.

The discussion raised two main issues: first, the lack of experience of fisherwomen's organizations in fisheries management, and hence the difficulty to participate in such debates; and second, the lack of finances, making it difficult for women's organizations to afford membership fees fixed by the RAC and meet travel costs to attend meetings. It was decided to raise funds to meet training costs for delegates from fisherwomen's organizations. The meeting also recognized the fact that men's organizations representing small-scale fisheries face the same constraint of finances.

The assembly decided to write to the DG MARE of the European Commission and claim representation for women's organization to the RAC, not on the seat of fishers' representation, but as interest groups on NGO seats. This compromise was in order to avoid conflict with fishermen's organizations represented on the RAC.

Issues related to the recognition of women's contribution in fisheries and aquaculture by all EU member states; and the communication within and between women's organizations were also discussed. AKTEA decided to establish linkages with other women's groups representing sectoral interests, as for example, women in farming.

Karen Sere, chairwoman of European farmers' women within the Committee of European Agriculture Professional Organizations was invited to participate at the AKTEA meeting. Karen explained the actions undertaken by farmer's women to modify existing French law recognizing women's contribution. In France, fisherwomen and women in farming have a legal status of "collaborative spouse". This status allows the spouse to claim benefits, including

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retirement pension. Initially the status was allowed to only legally married spouses, and required the authorization of the husband. However, in 2006, the farming community got the legal status modified to allow women living in couple relations outside marriage to access the same “collaborative spouse” rights. The modification also did away with the requirement of authorization by the husband, and allowed a woman to apply directly for the status. This modification has not been extended to the fishing community.

The right for spouses or partners to access “collaborative spouse” status is based on the European Council directive 86/613 voted in 1986. This directive does not apply in all EU member states. The meeting decided to work with women’s organizations in farming to push for common demands like the “collaborative spouse” status.

Communication was the last issue discussed at the meeting. All members of AKTEA

faced difficulties in maintaining a regular communication link. The internet allows speedy and low cost communication. But there are several negative aspects. Women do not often check their emails; some women do not have access to computers; others do not know how to use this technology.

Various possibilities to improve communication between members were discussed. Some women’s organizations in Greece, Portugal, and France had organized training in use of email. The Acores association, UMAR, holds monthly video conferences through Skype and facilitates the direct communication with members. At the European level, it was felt that communication could be facilitated with the designation within each organization of a contact person having charge of communication with AKTEA members. AKTEA could also publish a newsletter with information from organizations. ❏