

Organizing for Change

Mauritanie 2000 works to improve working and living conditions of vulnerable groups in the artisanal fishing sector

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Women in Mauritania play a key role in the promotion and development of artisanal fisheries. This role is especially visible in the retailing and processing of fish, two lucrative activities that generate income, and without which fish would not arrive on the table. But as women represent a weak link in the chain, they remain marginalized. They still do not have much in the way of means of production or any recognized training in management. Women working in the artisanal fishing sector benefit neither from State support nor from professional fishing organizations, which regard the sector as a strictly male preserve.

To address the problems of women in the artisanal fisheries, a group of fifteen young graduates set up Mauritanie 2000 (M2000), a non-governmental organization (NGO) in 1993. Spurred by the desire to put their competence to work in helping their country's development, this group of young people has since then focused on women in artisanal fisheries, processors and petty traders helping them organize themselves as a Grouping of Economic Interest (GIE).

The organization has a pyramidal structure. At the base of the pyramid are the base-level GIEs, each consisting of around six women who want to work together. These are followed by hamlet-level GIEs, professional-level GIEs, department-level GIEs, and finally, the regional-level GIEs. March 2009 witnessed the creation of a national-level GIE of women in the fisheries, grouping and officially representing around 1,800 women at the level of the administration and government. In a sector until now considered a male domain, this is no mean achievement and has allowed these women to be recognized as undisputed actors in the sector.

M2000 has also established projects and training for fish vendors in several markets in the peripheral neighbourhoods of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. In this way, 600 women from peripheral neighbourhoods receive the benefits of training and a framework for women's activities in fisheries is assured. It also develops programmes to build up the commercial skills of Mauritanian women through different training courses and tries to build upon the knowledge and experiences of women in order to define a strategy for organization.

Recently, since 2003, the activities of the group have acquired greater breadth. These are now organized around the training of women for literacy, processing techniques, hygiene, commerce and management skills, organizing through the GIE network, providing productive investments in equipment as well as financial assistance. This year M2000 launched a production centre for processed fish, the first of its kind, in keeping with the hygiene norms established by the authorities in order to allow women to work under better conditions and to make their products more competitive on the Nouakchott market.

M2000 activities have succeeded in giving its beneficiaries a structured and profitable economic activity. The income of the 1,800 women, who are all illiterate and who are amongst our country's poorest, has greatly improved. External evaluations show that women members rapidly attain levels of income above poverty levels in our country, which allows them to invest in their activities. They are able to purchase, for example,

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Women processors drying *Yeeet* and *Tollo* in Mauritania

shops, equipment for their market stalls, vehicles for transport, and *pirogues* for the young fishers in their families. They are also able to improve their living standards, construct and furnish homes, send their children to school and improve household nutrition.

In 2008, M2000 changed not only its structure and governance policies but also redefined its strategic vision. The vision document describes the organization as a socio-economic development NGO, working towards “fighting poverty, and through engaging in the economic development of our country to increase food security and improve the working conditions of vulnerable groups

in the artisanal fishing sector by strengthening their organizational, technical and financial capacities”. This new, or rather, revised vision reflects the desire of M2000 to open itself to the entire artisanal fisheries sector and include fishers and actors from inland fisheries as well.

Several challenges continue, however, to trouble the artisanal fisheries. A key challenge comes from upstream in the sector in terms of the organization of fish supplies. The poorly-structured and technically- and financially-weak artisanal fisheries also face a continuing challenge from the anarchic development and destructive impact of industrial fisheries. ❏

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