

Trading away food security

A recent UNCTAD study poses critical questions on the benefits of poverty alleviation schemes in The Gambia

By **Nilanjana Biswas**
(nilanjanabiswas@
yahoo.com),
Independent
Researcher

The UNCTAD study of 2014, titled “The fisheries sector in The Gambia: trade, value and social inclusion, with a special focus on women”, is an important contribution to understanding the impact of government-supported development programmes for poverty reduction. This study was prepared by an UNCTAD team led by Simonetta Zarrilli, Chief of the Trade, Gender and Development Section at UNCTAD and Stefano Inama, Chief of UNCTAD’s Technical Co-operation and Enhanced Integrated Framework Section, along with Momodou Cham and Irene Musselli. The report extensively drew on information and material gathered in The Gambia from government officers, fisheries experts, representatives of women’s organizations and cooperative credit unions, fish exporters and many others.

The Gambia is one of the 49 countries that are officially recognized by the United Nations as Least Developed Countries (LDCs), based on economic vulnerability and human asset indicators. It has a population of about 1.36 million. 48.4 percent of the population lives below the poverty line of USD 1.25 per day.

Artisanal fisheries in The Gambia consists of relatively extensive, low-capital fishing practices.

In spite of the small-scale nature of its operation, the artisanal sector provides 90 percent of the total national fish consumption, and is the main source of raw material for the industrial sector. Artisanal fisheries also supply about 80 percent of throughput (the production) in the industrial fisheries processing plants.

The fisheries sector is an important source of revenue and foreign exchange for the country. At the same time, it is also an important contributor of food and livelihood security, particularly for the poor. Fisheries and related activities of processing and marketing provide income to the poor as fish-related activities represent the main source of income for coastal fishing communities, and are an important supplementary activity for rural, inland communities. The livelihoods of over 200,000 people in The Gambia are directly or indirectly dependent on fisheries and related activities. For women in particular, fish processing and marketing is an important occupation. An estimated 80 percent of fish processors and half the small fish traders in the country are women.

There are important differences in the operation of men and women as fish processors and traders. Women processors and traders predominantly operate in the domestic market. They are essentially small-scale operators, marketing with low profit margins. They typically buy small quantities of fresh fish on a daily basis from large-scale fish traders at fish landing sites, and transport them for retail to various nearby urban markets. Men, on the other hand, dominate large-scale fish processing and marketing, with higher profits. They also dominate the fish export market. Their products are sold in the inland and sub-regional markets where the profit margins are higher. Some large-scale specialist fish dealers export their fish to other countries like Ghana, Senegal and Guinea Conakry. Processing factories also procure fresh fish supplies from them for export to the European Union. This is the context in which the study critically examines the use of fish-export policies in The Gambia as a pro-poor strategy. It brings out for discussion critical gender dimensions that should be taken into account by development planners.

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Women fish processors in The Gambia. Eighty percent of fish processors and half the small fish traders in the country are women

The first issue of concern is that if the pro-poor strategy does not specifically address women's constraints to carry out trade and access new markets, it may actually end up negatively affecting women in the sector. The benefits of efficiency improvement would then be cornered by men, who are already into large-scale operations, and thereby further increase differences within the sector. Further, if the strategy has a specific export orientation, it would be likely to address issues for those in the sector already engaged in fish export. The promotion of an export-led development strategy in fishing could therefore potentially end up harming the traditional role of women in the sector.

Second, given that women operate primarily in the domestic markets, reduction in their operations could imply increased food insecurity. This is important, given that the sector is the third largest provider of food after agriculture and livestock. It plays a significant role from a nutritional standpoint, and is the main source of animal protein for most Gambians.

At the same time, the resultant growth of an export-oriented fish processing industry would generate additional employment for low-skilled women in downstream operations. However, while it would give women access to low-paying jobs in the export fish processing sector, it would further marginalise traditional women fish processors and traders.

The study therefore discusses how an export-led growth strategy that does not take into account the specific issues of women in traditional fishing could actually increase social and economic differences in the fishing society. It can lead to the selective upgrading and segregation of the export-oriented segment in fisheries. It can result in further disempowerment of women. It can therefore also lead to further impoverishment of families of women employed in traditional fishing. The strategy might thereby lead to further concentration of wealth, and a sharper focus on greater value-added exports, with progressive decline of access to fish among the poor domestic consumers.

The study therefore recommends that development planners should give specific focus to constraints of women in their planning process. The recommendations include keeping in mind the needs of women in the sector while implementing projects aimed

at expanding facilities at fisheries landing sites, and improving domestic fish markets. It suggests concrete measures including quotas for women in procurement and marketing of fish. It specifically recommends consideration for women by ensuring that investment is not geared to only promotion of exports, but also for the domestic markets where women can benefit from the improvements. It suggests, in the context, investment in domestic market-oriented facilities for ice plant and cold storage facilities; fish handling and processing equipment and improvement in fish packaging techniques in the domestic chain; and dedicated, well-equipped domestic fish markets.

The study further recommends parallel action to allow women favourable access to credit and support services of training, extension activities and marketing. On access to credit, the recommendations suggest affirmative action that could include a target percentage of credit to be disbursed to women, and dedicated lines of credit for women operators. It identifies training needs in three critical areas: (i) technical training in handling, processing and marketing of fish and fish products; (ii) training in use of market information and establishing business contracts; and (iii) record keeping and business planning.

The study finally underscores the importance of niche markets for high-value products that can generate income for women. One suggestion is to promote artisanal aquaculture involving shrimps and oysters. The study even suggests examining export markets for these products to be sourced exclusively from women fishers.

The study brings out the importance of a gender focus in development planning, and shows how, in particular contexts, poverty reduction schemes can actually result in increasing social and economic disparities in society while reducing food security of the poor. However, the recommendations of the study, which seek to further the integration of women in fish processing to niche and value-added markets, and even suggest developing export markets to women, can, while addressing, to some extent, the question of gender inequality, still result in increasing inequalities and harming food security. The study does not fundamentally question the logic of a market-led growth that strives to maximise profits. ❏

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