

North Sea fishery

Enough is enough!

The closure of an extensive part of the North Sea led to a blockade of Rotterdam, the world's biggest seaport, by angry Dutch fishermen

"This is an undemocratic decision, and we ask ourselves, for how long can the Dutch fisher community persist under these policies? Or are we soon only to see fishermen in museums?"

These words of indignation and despair were uttered at a meeting after the emergency decision of the Fishery Commission of the European Union to close an extensive part of the North Sea for fishing, from mid-February until the first of May. A big part of the closed area is exactly along the coast of the Netherlands and forms the most important fishing ground for the Dutch. For the Dutch fisher community, it was an enormous blow in the face, as they recently also had to accept a large reduction of their quota of plaice and sole, the most important target species for the Dutch fishermen. Furthermore, they are still recovering from the oil price crisis. As a fisher-woman said, "All together, it means that we will see our yearly income reduced by more than 25 per cent, and this is very hard for us women, who are responsible for the management of the household. We have not been given any chance to prepare for such an income reduction, even as our fixed expenses continue."

The emergency decision of the EU-Fishery Commission was due to the depletion of stocks of codfish, which have reached alarmingly low levels. Biologists, fishermen and policymakers all agree that something has to be done urgently to help the codfish rehabilitate. Therefore, consultations had already taken place between the Commission and policymakers and representatives of fisher organizations of the European member States, about the measures needed. This was not an easy process, because several interests were at stake,

and there were different ideas about regulations. Another factor was the fishery agreement of the EU with Norway, with whom the EU shares the codfish stocks. So, the decision was primarily based on political grounds, and the Dutch fisher community now feels victimized.

As their first objection, the Dutch fishers say that the emergency decision will not have the expected results of rehabilitating codfish stocks, as the area, which is designated for closure, is not a typical codfish ground (a hypothesis supported by biologists). Secondly, there are only a few cod fishers left in the Netherlands, and the Dutch primarily fish flatfishes (plaice and sole) and shrimp.

The Netherlands has only been allocated 10 per cent of the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of codfish, of which only 5 per cent is caught by cod fishers, while the other 5 per cent is bycatch by the flatfish fishers. The Dutch fishers fail to see why they should be the ones to be affected most by this measure. They are also angry by the fact that the Danish fishmeal fishery is allowed in the closed areas, although this type of fishery is generally considered very destructive. Finally, they also warn of unwanted side effects of the measure, which will lead to increased pressure on the fishing grounds outside the closed areas, resulting in overfishing, resource conflicts between fishermen, and other damages.

Sudden decision

Due to the sudden decision of the Fishery Commission, the two Dutch national fisher organizations were not able to organize any other form of protest than to meet the State Minister of Fisheries to urge her to plead with the Fishery Commission for an alternative proposal. This alternative proposal was to impose a

fishing ban during the spawning time of the cod for the whole of the North Sea, which would be more effective and fair, as far as sharing the costs is concerned.

In support, the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands immediately wrote a letter to the State Minister, supporting the alternative proposal, but also telling her about the problems the fisher families face these days: "We want to fight for the position of our families. If the present situation continues, we will be forced to leave the fishery and choose jobs on the shore. This thought makes us unhappy, and we think this can not be the intention of policymakers."

Women of the Network also wrote letters to members of parliament and the media, which contributed to the mobilization of a broad support. The State Minister of Fisheries was sent to meet the EU Fishery Commission to plead for the alternative proposal of the Dutch fisher-community, but, unfortunately, without success.

To find support for their alternative proposal, the Dutch fisher organizations contacted other fisher organizations in Europe. But, again, they did not succeed. Unfortunately, there is very little solidarity within the fisher community of Europe. Every one tries to settle deals through their own fishery ministers, without considering the interests of the

other communities. So it happened that the EU member States that do not fish in the North Sea supported the decision of the EU Fishery Commission. That act will greatly affect the future of the North Sea fisher community.

"We fishermen, from north to south, have been talking a lot to each other these days through the radio. All of us are surprised and sad that the decision to close parts of the North Sea is pushed through, and that alternative and better solutions are not taken into consideration. We will now surely see a big reduction in our incomes. Our costs will even increase because we are forced to leave our fishing grounds and go farther. Our last hope now is to receive financial compensation. If not, we will no longer refrain from action." This quote from a Dutch fisherman, faxed to the national fishery paper, is a good summary of how the fisher community felt at that moment.

Emergency meets

The Dutch fisher organizations called their members for emergency meetings all over the country, to sound them out on what further action to take. For several fishermen, particularly the younger ones, this emergency decision of the EU was the limit, and they called for "hard actions." These days, the younger fishermen go through very hard times, because investment costs have increased enormously, while the value of their boats

The cutter fleet

In the Netherlands, the cutter fleet is the largest 'traditional' Dutch fishing fleet. In 1999, the Dutch cutter fishing fleet composed 399 boats, of which 56 per cent were small-scale boats (under 300 hp) and 44 per cent were medium-scale ones (301-2000 hp). The large majority of the boats (80 per cent) are more than 10 years old.

Most (84 per cent) of the fishing enterprises of the cutter fleet generally own one boat only. The enterprises are primarily family-owned, and are passed on from generation to generation. The official employment figure of the fleet is 1.815 fishermen, but, generally, family members lend a helping hand in the work. The remuneration of the crew is based on a share system, which means that no real employer-employee relationship exists. The Dutch cutter fleet is concentrated in the north and southwest parts of the Netherlands. The largest fishing village, Urk, is, strangely, situated in the centre of the country. This is because this village was once an island in the sea (Zuiderzee), but after the sea was closed by a dike and land reclamation began, Urk became part of the mainland. The community of Urk is still 80 per cent dependent on fisheries, including trade and processing.

The primary technology used by the cutter fleet is the trawl net (with beam and otter-board), and the major commercial species caught are flatfish (sole and plaice) and shrimp. Codfish

also used to be a target species, but, at present, there are hardly any cod fishers left in the Netherlands. The fish harvest is for human consumption only, mostly for southern European consumers.

Since the introduction of the EU's Common Fishery Policy and the TAC quota system, the Dutch fleet has faced overcapacity. To control and reduce the Dutch cutter fleet, the following management regulations were installed: (a) quota system (Individual Transferable Quotas, pooled in eight management groups); (b) obligatory auctioning; (c) licences (for boats and the 12-miles zone); (d) gear regulations (for engine capacity and mesh size); (e) limits on the number of days at sea (177); and (f) a decommissioning scheme for boats.

Fish prices in the Netherlands are still good, and the sector, as such, is economically 'healthy' at present. Yet, obviously, due to the yearly increase in operation costs and the reduction of quotas, more and more fishing enterprises of the cutter fleet fail to break even, and decide to go in for decommissioning.

This has led to a reduction of the number of fishing boats by 45 per cent since 1987, and a reduction by 40 per cent of the number of employed fishermen. In the last two weeks, another 12 Dutch cutters have reported for decommissioning, among them the last full-time cod fishers.

and quotas is decreasing. Some of them said that they would lose 60 to 70 per cent of their income because of the closure of their fishing ground. The fishermen criticized the EU fishery policy in these words: "The EU fishery management only means rules and restrictions, new ones every day. A fisherman has to go to university these days to understand the enormous amount of regulations. And what has been the result? The number of fishermen has declined, and the income of fishermen has declined, but the fish stocks have not significantly improved. These quota reductions have only caused an expansion of the black market of fish and all kind of other unwanted practices."

Soon, emotions were running high. The leadership, however, felt that they should be cautious not to lose the sympathy of the

public. In the past, the fisher community had often met with negative publicity in the media, partly because of the bad image spread by environmental organizations, which have a broad support with the public, and partly also because of their own attitude and weak public relations.

Meanwhile, the fishermen were provoked by the deployment of a large number of coast guard boats, helicopters and airplanes to control the closed areas. It looked like the State was preparing for a war with the fishermen, who read it as a sign of mistrust. One boat that violated the boundary of the closed areas was fined an exorbitant amount of 30,000 English pounds. When the Netherlands State Minister of Fisheries also refused to discuss any form of compensation or any alternative, the leaders of the fisher

organizations could no longer keep their members under control.

On the first of March, fishermen spontaneously started to blockade the major harbours of the Netherlands. Soon, practically all fishermen had joined in. The leadership of the fisher organizations could no longer maintain a reserved attitude. The action was effective, particularly because the fishermen succeeded in blocking access to Rotterdam, the world's biggest seaport. At night, the leaders of the two fisher organizations succeeded in reaching an agreement with the State Minister about a compensation. The blockade was immediately called off.

Compensation is, of course, not a solution. However, the good news is that the generally divided fisher community underwent the experience of being united. For a long time, both fisher organizations pitched in together with their strengths. Also very positive were the discussions and exchanges within the fisher community at meetings and also via radio communication at sea. For the fishermen, it became clear that it is now time to become more proactive about the fishery management of the North Sea, in order to survive as self-employed fisher families. A group of young fishermen decided to form a working group to prepare, together with the two fisher organizations, proposals for a fish rehabilitation plan for

the North Sea, and promote these proposals to the government. The proposals should aim to protect the marine environment in such a way that fishermen would still be able to run healthy fishing enterprises. Dutch fishermen are entrepreneurs, but, at the same time, fishing is a way of life for them, where they directly interact with nature.

Another good news is that the Dutch fisher community succeeded in winning the attention of the public. But now they have to work hard to maintain this attention in a positive way. Generally speaking, there exists some 'communication gap' between the fisher community and the rest of Dutch society. One reason may be that our fisher community has shrunk enormously during the last century and what is left are small pockets of well-organized, but also rather closed, communities. The latter facet is a strength, as these communities could retain a relative autonomy; yet, it is also a weakness, as they need the support of other sections of society to survive. It is also tragic that such a relatively small fisher community as exists in the Netherlands needs two national organizations to represent them.

Different interests

To be sure, the EU should learn to deal with the different interests within its domain in such a way that Europe's diversity is respected and her citizens are left their

The last of the Dutch cod fishers

Jaap Tuip, leader of the roundfish (cod) fishers, and vice-president of the Dutch Fishermen's Union, does not see a future anymore for his cutter boat, the *VD 19*, circa 1971, the last full-time roundfish fishing boat, along with the *UK 7*, the twin of the *VD 19*. (In the Netherlands cod fishing is traditionally done in pairs.) Both boats have reported for decommissioning. The closure by the EU of the fishing ground in the North Sea was the major reason for this decision. "Normally," says Tuip, "we make nice trips this time of the year to the inside of the Brown Bench and, thereafter, in the direction of the German Bight, but these areas are closed now. Going to farther areas is beyond the scope of the small boats."

Another problem is the reduction of the quota for cod by 50 per cent this year; renting of extra quota is too expensive. Though there is whiting, another roundfish, the cod fishers have no quota for this species. 1998 and 1999 were very good years for the *VD 19* and *UK 7* pair. "But, today", says Tuip, "you won't make a penny out of it anymore." Tuip himself will stop fishing, but fisherman van de Berg of the *UK 7* wants to look around for a new fishing boat. "We are looking for a multi-functional boat, because, these days, you need to be able to switch between gears easily," he says.

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dignity. Until now, fishermen are often seen as a nuisance, instead of partners in the management of European fisheries, which has a counterproductive impact. However, the attitudes of the EU fisher communities have to change too. There is still a lot of shortsightedness and inward looking tendencies within the communities. Hopefully, the leaders of the fisher organizations will put in more effort in meeting one another at the European level, and working together for the preservation of both the marine resources and the communities who depend on them. 3

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