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ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES

From the Editor

Many regions of the world, particularly Africa and Asia, have a long history of vibrant cross-border trade in food fish and fish products originating from artisanal and small-scale fisheries, (see article in this issue on Cambodia-Thailand cross-border trade). Many of the traders are women, and trading activities are characterized by dynamism, vibrancy and of course, competition.

Such cross-border trade in fish and fish products is often vital both in terms of sustaining fishery-based livelihoods and incomes for poor rural producers and for meeting food security needs of low-income consumers in remote regions. Given the nature of this trade, however, there are no clear estimates of the numbers of people engaged with it. It is likely though that the numbers run into tens of thousands. Possibly because of this lack of information about cross-border trade and its importance, little systematic effort has been made to understand and address the problems of those engaged with it.

There is a need to listen to the stories of women engaged in cross-border fish trade. In June 2001, during a workshop on "Problems and Prospects for Developing Artisanal Fish Trade in West Africa", organized by ICSF in collaboration with organizations in Senegal, women participants identified the major obstacles they faced. These included the large number of customs and other checkpoints, and the associated harassment; the high cost of transportation of products; the lack of information on market prices; lack of infrastructure for processing and storage; and the problems in obtaining credit.

Clearly, issues of cross-border trade between neighbouring countries, being bilateral or multilateral in nature, are complex, and the solutions are not always straightforward. However, given the importance of such trade for livelihoods, food security and income, efforts must be made to deepen understanding about the nature of the trade, the volume and value of fish and fish products traded, and the numbers of people engaged in such trade as well as the problems they face. There is need to analyze the links between imports and locally caught fish—the extent to which imported fish impacts on prices of locally processed and marketed fish. There is need to explore options to facilitate legitimate low-volume trade in fish and fish products of artisanal and small-scale fisheries that contributes to local economies and food security in exporting and importing countries.

In Africa, commitments to facilitate intra-regional trade of artisanally-processed fish products have been made by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a regional group of fifteen countries, and by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), an inter-governmental organization set up to further socio-economic co-operation and integration as well as political and security co-operation among 15 southern African states. Problems of implementation, however, remain, affecting particularly low-volume traders.

Addressing the problems faced by hundreds and thousands of people engaged in low-volume cross-border food fish trade in Asia and Africa can be beneficial from various perspectives. It is high time that these problems are recognized and steps taken to address them. ■

Cambodia	2
Chile.....	3
Profile	6
Brazil.....	7
Milestones.....	8
Q & A.....	11
Yemaya Mama.....	11
Yemaya Recommends.....	12

