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COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES

SUB-COMMITTEE ON FISH TRADE

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Agenda Item 12

FISH TRADE AND FOOD SECURITY, INCLUDING REPORT ON FINDINGS OF EXPERT CONSULTATION

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INTRODUCTION

1. The impact of international fish trade on food security has been discussed in COFI Sub-Committee on Fish Trade (COFI:FT) Seventh and Eighth Sessions. In January 2003, FAO organized an Expert Consultation on Fish Trade and Food Security; the main findings are summarized in COFI:FT/IX/2004/Inf.8. As a follow-up of the recommendation from the Eighth Session of COFI:FT/VIII/2002¹ that the issue of “fish trade and food security” should be subject of further work, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs granted US\$ 120 000 to FAO, to conduct a study on “the impact of international trade in fishery products on food security”.

2. This study analyses the growing international trade in fishery products. Such trade does not have a standardized pattern. It is marked by diversity – in products, countries and people involved – and in end consumption patterns. Thus, assessing the impact of this trade requires studying a variety of identifiable “representative” cases from the global context. This study looked primarily at developing countries from the Asia-Pacific region, Africa and Latin America that have a significant involvement in exporting and importing fishery products, focussing on the Low Income Food Deficit Countries (LIFDCs) among them². The study assessed both the direct (fish as food) and the indirect (fish as a source of employment and income) aspects of food security. Accessibility, Affordability and Absorption of food are the three important aspects of food security.

FOCUS OF ANALYSIS

3. The study examined several of the opinions and propositions prevalent about the impact of fish trade on the direct and indirect aspects of food security. Among the most important ones are:

- Promoting fishery exports from developing countries will endanger the nutritional status of poor fish consumers because domestic supplies will decline.
- Increasing fish exports create more jobs in the fish producing and processing activities, particularly of women, usually from poorer sections of society. This raises their incomes and thus increases the spending on food.
- Developing countries earn considerable amounts of foreign exchange from fish exports which can be used to buy less expensive, nutritious food to supply to vulnerable populations to maintain or raise levels of food security.
- Fishing for exportable species of fish results in competition between different sub-sectors of fish producers causing disruptions that have a negative effect on employment, income and hence on food security.
- Large imports of fish can lower the price of locally produced fish in importing countries, which has an adverse impact on their earnings and consequently their food security status.
- Large fish imports can provide numerous jobs in the fish processing and distribution activities in importing countries, raising the employment and incomes of many fish workers, particularly women, and thus enhancing food security.
- In a context of poor fishery resource management in developing countries, increased fish exports and imports can prompt fish producers in both exporting and importing countries to exploit fishery resources indiscriminately – the former for gaining more

¹ COFI:FT 8th report. Para. 51

² Case studies were carried out in Nicaragua, Brazil, Chile, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Namibia, Fiji, Samoa, Thailand, Philippines and Sri Lanka.

income and the latter for compensating for its loss. This will have adverse impacts on the aquatic environment and fishery resources of both exporting and importing countries causing a threat to long-term food security.

- Any trade that impinges on the issue of food security raises the related question of the right to food as a basic human right, which must be addressed as an integral part of any such analysis.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

4. Many developing countries and the LIFDCs among them have raised their fish production level significantly over the last quarter century at rates significantly higher than global performance. Taking LIFDCs as a whole, their fish exports have increased faster than fish imports over the last quarter century. Both contribute directly or indirectly to food security of the countries. There is no clear case for the argument that fish exports *necessarily* affect the physical availability of fish to domestic fish consumers in LIFDCs. It is enhanced national fish production, rather than imports, that warrants attention in order to ensure stability for direct food security in LIFDCs.

5. Increase in fish production of LIFDCs provided the basis for their increased exports, and despite a fall in fish imports, the per capita food fish availability in LIFDCs has not decreased.

6. The impact of fishery exports from LIFDCs on their food security is not a matter that can be understood merely in terms of the possible, direct loss of fish for local consumers, particularly the poor. There are significant, indirect positive food security gains in the form of enhanced income and employment generated through fish exports which also accrue to large numbers of less-well off fish producers and fishworkers, especially women among the latter.

7. Food fish imports by LIFDCs are not as large as the need for nutrition in these countries would warrant despite the availability of fishery resources worldwide to cater for the same. Current food fish imports by developing countries are also consciously utilized to enhance both direct and indirect food security through imports for re-export. On both counts, it is the LIFDCs of the West African region that use fish imports accordingly. It is also in this region that fish imports are likely to form a critical food input to enhance direct food security.

8. Over time, most developing countries and LIFDCs have become net foreign exchange earners from trade in fishery products. Such earnings often contribute to a significant share of the nation's debt repayments. Their earmarked contribution and use for import of food for the needy and vulnerable populations in the country is however, not common.

9. Fishery resources depletion and aquatic ecosystem degradation in many LIFDCs are closely linked to species that are highly traded in the international market. Exporting developing countries need to reassert their commitment to immediate resource rejuvenation and long-term conservation and management.

10. With the expansion of international trade in fishery products it is generally expected that the share of women's paid employment also rises due to the specific demand for female labour in organised modern fish processing activity. This may be favourable to some women and unfavourable to others such as female artisanal fish processors who could be deprived of raw material for their activities. But it may be safe to conclude that where growing international trade shifts the distribution of money income towards women, the developmental and food security impact of these revenues from trade can be significant. The converse is therefore also likely to be true.

SUGGESTED ACTION BY THE SUB-COMMITTEE

11. The Sub-Committee is invited to report on national experience and policy with respect to fish trade and food security. The Sub-Committee might also wish to give indications to FAO and donors on whether and how to continue this work and provide guidance on relevant future policies.