

GUE/NGL conference: defence and protection of small-scale, artisanal and coastal fishing

A conference on the “defence and protection of small-scale, artisanal and coastal fishing” took place at the European Parliament on the 7th and 8th of September hosted by GUE/NGL. Chaired and moderated by MEPs **João Ferreira, Lídia Senra and Liadh Ní Riada**, the event brought together members of fishing communities and associations in Portugal, Ireland, Galicia, Mauritius and Guinea-Bissau with the aim of exploring policy approaches for the imperilled sector vis-à-vis the impact of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and Fisheries Partnerships Agreements (FPAs).

Highlighting the importance of listening directly to the sector and affected communities, German MEP and GUE/NGL President Gabi Zimmer welcomed the initiative as a step towards the development of a group position on the protection of the fragile sector. Sustainability should be the goal of policy, both the protection of small fisheries and the preservation of the environment. This means that EU investment and subsidies must be properly managed and structured to serve this purpose. GUE/NGL has been advocating for better conditions for fishers, pushing for ratification of the ILO Work in Fishing Convention, which so far has been ratified by only two member states. It is crucial also to understand the impact of fishing vessels operating in countries with agreements with the EU, as this conference sought to do.

The CFP prioritises centralisation over local prosperity

Portuguese MEP **João Ferreira**, the group’s coordinator in the Fisheries committee (PECH), delivered the opening remarks with an analysis of the CFP and the push towards centralisation, making communities less relevant, especially since the Lisbon Treaty, which determined fisheries to be the exclusive competence of the EU. A sustainable and fair fisheries policy must take into account the specificities of each country and the needs of communities whose economy depend on the sector. Similarly FPAs are having a profound impact on the fishing sector of the countries with agreements with the EU but these issues have so far been ignored and are rather invisible.

GUE/NGL advocates for a decentralisation of fisheries policy and defends positive discrimination in favour of small-scale, artisanal and coastal fishing, which have been the hardest hit by the current one-size-fits-all CFP. Successive reforms of the CFP have pushed for market deregulation under a cloak of environment conservation, ignoring the rights of fishing communities, their work conditions and the future of the trade.

Speaking in the first panel on “the impacts of the international fisheries partnership agreements of the EU on small-scale fishing” were Antonia Adama Djalo, Vice-President of the African Confederation of Artisanal Fisheries Professional Organisations (CAOPA), Patrick Fortuno from Fisher Apostolate of the Sea in Mauritius and Pavel Klinckhamers, campaigner at Greenpeace.

CAOPA was established in 2010 with 20 national organisations from West Africa with a mission to defend common interests and advance joint work. Ms Djalo praised the transparency of the FPAs signed with the EU whose texts are publicly available for scrutiny and contrasted them with similar agreements with China, Korea or Russia, countries with large fleets in the West African coast, which do not enjoy a similar level of public scrutiny as their texts are not known.

FPA funds not benefiting coastal communities in Africa

Local fishermen have observed large trawlers from several of these countries fishing on their coast and little is known about whether they are operating legally or abiding by quotas or even whether they are using flags of convenience to maximise profits. The FPAs the EU has signed can nevertheless still be improved. Djalo explained that the sector has felt excluded from the process of negotiation and during implementation. There are questions lingering on where the money paid by the EU goes since communities do not see its benefits. African countries continue suffering from lack of infrastructure such as adequate landing ports. EU-financed projects should address this reality with focus on food security, standards of living and the prosperity of the sector. The EU can also help control overfishing and help clampdown on illegal vessels operating in African waters by strengthening monitoring and enforcement.

Despite its small size, Mauritius has an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as big as that of France. Tuna is the most prized catch for the 2000 fishers in the country. Fortuno, who followed Djalo in the panel, explained that fishermen in his country are struggling to survive; they work under poor conditions and their food security is threatened. Likewise overseas trawlers are contributing to the depletion of marine resources as they operate with the logic of greed. It is expected that if species disappear from the coast of Mauritius the economy of the island will be severely affected. Even when abuses are reported no action is taken by the authorities who lack the means. Profits from large multinationals are not re-invested in the island. European vessels don't even employ the local workforce. Fortuno claimed that only 20 percent of the money the EU pays to Mauritius as part of the FPA is being spent for the betterment of the sector. Communities feel that the agreement with the EU, due to expire in 2017 and possibly to be renewed, must be drafted in consultation with them so that the issues stated are addressed for long-term sustainability and legitimacy. Mauritians are eager to participate in the economic prosperity of the country but they need to be supported, well-equipped and have access to the needed resources.

Joint governance of marine resources not yet a reality in West Africa

Klinckhamers wrapped up the panel with an analysis of the situation in West Africa, one of the most fertile sea regions in the world. As explained by the previous two speakers, the area is target of large fishing vessels from China, Russia and Europe with barely any oversight. A quarter of the Chinese fleet come to fish in West Africa for example. Despite the overall growth in global fish consumption, figures are dropping in West Africa highlighting how difficulties in the sector are impacting access to this staple food for coastal communities. The lack of regional management systems in the area, the only sea region in the world without collective fish stocks management, has exacerbated the problem. The Greenpeace campaigner highlighted that the concept of fishing surplus fish looks good on paper in the EU agreements but these cannot be credibly implemented without the adequate data to help define what "surplus" means. Sustainable fisheries management would enable the sharing of data and estimations on surplus.

In the second panel, speakers from European coastal communities talked about the troubles they are facing and the strategies employed to keep business afloat. Javier Castro of Galicia's Association of Fishermen of Ferrol and Inshore Shipowners denounced the quota system of the CFP and excessive taxation that lead to the loss of jobs and the weakening of small fishing communities and their economies. The largest chunk of EU quotas end up being used by large companies while coastal fishermen are left with crumbs. In 1986 30 thousand people were employed in the trade with the number falling by as much as 59 percent by 2012. The decline has been steeper in the recent years. Between 2004 and 2015 there has been a 20.3 percent decline in fishing vessels in Galicia, yet the Spanish government is paying fishermen to scrap vessels, with ten ships being scrapped every

month, 42 percent of them in Galicia. There is an attempt to give the seas to large multinationals and kill off small community-based fishing businesses.

Devastating impact of quota system in local fisheries

John O'Brian, from the Irish Islands Marine Resources Organisation, complained about the closure of fisheries that has devastated island communities. In 2006 the Irish government closed the Atlantic salmon fishery arguing this was an EU requirement and that salmon fishing should be limited to 6 miles from the coast and to rivers only. Islanders however do not have access to rivers and this measure was disastrous for them. O'Brian argued for an exception to be made in the quotas for islanders. A compensation scheme for lost income was made available with the condition that fishers do not apply for commercial licenses again but this scheme was largely boycotted by them as this was seen as compromising the future of the sector for small fishermen. Instead of helping fishermen, these state subsidies often mean the demise of the sector. The decaying of the sector has spurred younger people to abandon a trade that has its roots from several generations back. Young people have had to move out of small towns to look for jobs because of quota limitations. The EU and national governments are ignoring the impact of the quota system and how the closure of large areas from fishing affect communities dependent on them.

Frederico Pereira from Portugal's Federation of Fishing Sector Trade Union called for an EU policy that takes into account the needs and specificities of each country. Despite Portugal having the largest EEZ in Europe and having among the largest fish consumption per capita in the world, its fisheries sector is dying off with only 14 thousand fishers left compared to 41 thousand in 1985. The same applies to the number of fishing vessels, with only 8 thousand boats left, compared to 18 thousand in 1985, right before Portugal joined the EU. Then national catch used to cover 85 percent of the country's consumption but now it only covers 25 percent. This decline is not organic and has been imposed on the Portuguese fisheries sector through quotas and excessive regulation. Thousands of direct and indirect jobs have been lost as a result. The CFP has not made the sector more sustainable, as it is supposedly intended, on the contrary, it has accelerated its decline. Action must be taken to protect small-scale, artisanal and coastal fishing through greater decentralisation of policy application and support for small fishers.

EU policy has not responded to women's needs in the sector

A session dedicated to the role of women in fisheries honoured their leadership in the profession. Lia Ní hAodha, researcher at Manchester Metropolitan University, said that the rules of the game have already been set and that due to power discrepancies the weaker part loses out, in many cases women are the losers. Women play a central role in small-scale fisheries but data is not disaggregated to estimate the exact proportion of women participating in the sector. Even though about 50 percent of global fisheries workforce is made up of women, lack of disaggregated data feeds into an erroneous perception that their role is diminished. Policy, as a result, either ignores them or does not respond to women's needs. If you are unseen or unrecognised it is unlikely that you will be heard and if you are not heard policies may not recognise your needs, said hAodha. There is a need for a holistic approach to fisheries policy accounting for gender relations and inequality, power hierarchies and the impact of policy on women's rights.

More than 3800 families depend on the fishing sector in Pontevedra in Galicia, 82 percent of them are women, explained Angela Garcia Torres, president of the shell-fishermen group in the Association of Fishermen of San Telmo in Pontevedra. There have been important advances in the women's struggle as shown in their increased representation in the professional associations of the sector. Women not only make up the workforce in shellfish

harvesting but they also are represented in the processing industry. The average age of working women is 52. There isn't however any programme to support skills training for the new generation joining the trade. The salary received, which averages at 800 euros a month, is dependent on the number of hours worked, and this work can be seasonal which means irregular income. Women earn 4 euros an hour and work around nine hours a day. This year has been one of the worst for work regularity with three months of closure registered. In general working conditions have improved but specific aspects relevant to women are still lacking. Women suffer from work diseases like hernias, tendinitis, arthritis, back pain, rheumatism but the pension and social security system does not acknowledge harsh work conditions. Garcia Torres urged for changes to be made to acknowledge these specific circumstances, for greater support in training a new generation of women workers, better work conditions and a guaranteed basic income.

Martin Ferris, spokesperson on Fisheries and the Marine for Sinn Féin, and João Almeida, coordinator of the Trade Union of Northern Fishing workers, spoke in the concluding panel on workers' rights and safety at sea. The room paid homage to a fisherman, Pat Kelly, who had lost his life at sea in Ireland the day before with a minute's silence in his honour and for all those who have lost their lives in similar situations. This case shows the importance of safety conditions but as Ferris remarked governments and the EU have still a long way to go. There isn't enough money to meet the myriad of EU regulations and there is little support from the government to support their implementation. Conditions on board vessels have improved and often cumbersome regulations are ignored for their high cost leading to a consequent loss of lives.

Irish fishing communities are concentrated in small villages and they are the drivers of the local economy. When Ireland joined the EU in 1972, the government traded off the Irish fishing sector for a better deal in agriculture. Young people are now leaving traditional fishing towns and the sector is struggling to keep up. Migrant workers from outside the EU are being brought in to replace them. The Irish government recently set up a task force to improve the conditions of these workers and regulate their work.

Revision of the CFP and FPAs a timely priority

The EU quota system is unfair with 23 boats in Ireland owning 90 percent of the quota in detriment of the remaining 815 boats. The Sinn Féin spokesperson called for the quota system to be revised and positive discrimination to be applied in favour of communities. The next speaker, João Almeida from Portugal, agreed with the criticism of the quota system adding that collective bargaining is needed in the sector so that small fishermen have a louder voice on this issue. Almeida argued that salaries are low and fishermen are struggling, with profit concentrated in the intermediaries. There is a high price differential between the cost of fish at source and the price paid by the consumer. The EU should adopt a fair pricing policy and establish a price cap for intermediaries. Minimum income is particularly important for fishermen because of down periods and seasonal catch that prevent fishing at all times. Families are suffering untold difficulties due to lack of support in such cases. Subsidies are available but they are not applied across the board; sardine fishers for example do not have access to subsidies. It is shameful that EU member states have not ratified the ILO convention on minimum work conditions, which shows that this is not a priority.

Delivering the concluding remarks, Galician MEP **Lidia Senra Rodriguez** made a commitment to pursue the concerns and proposals raised in the conference through her work at the European Parliament. She stressed that Galicia was a big loser in the CFP with the Spanish state using the region as a bargaining chip. The EU and national governments have been seen to protect the interests of big industrial trawlers at the expense of small-

scale, artisanal and coastal fishing. The conference brought to the fore serious issues with the current quota system and the unfair application of tax, the trend of concentration of big companies, poor income for fishermen, high operation costs, pollution and the need to prioritise artisanal fishing in policy making. The situation of women and recognition of their work is also urgently needed. GUE/NGL will work to turn these proposals into a coherent proposal.

Having the final word, Irish MEP **Liadh Ní Riada** called for unity and for more active lobbying as the issues raised are common in all countries. Good practical proposals were presented that could be carried through at the European Parliament. The compensation system for fishers is not working well and funds can be requested from the EMFF. The quota system is deeply flawed and applied data unreliable. There needs to be closer collaboration between fishermen and research bodies so that sustainability can be achieved in an informed way, the balance between conservation and employment rights. Two policies the group will carry forward are the issue of single boat payment and flexibility of quotas to account for local contexts. There are still questions that need to be asked to the Commission such as what measures are being applied to prevent tax evasion by big fish trawlers since small fishermen appear to have a much higher level of scrutiny. The impact of Brexit on the sector is yet to be known but it presents an opportunity to revisit the CFP. The Irish MEP praised an effort in Ireland to develop a charter of rights for fishers saying that this effort could form the basis for a charter of rights for European fisheries.