

How we faced the COVID crisis

Miranda Bout, co-owner of a small fishery company in the Netherlands, shares her experiences of staying afloat during the Covid-19 crisis

By **Cornelie Quist** (cornelie.quist@gmail.com),
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Miranda and her husband Job Bout are co-owners of a small-scale fishery company, called 'Fish from Job', in the province of Zeeland in the south west of the Netherlands. One of their sons also engages in fishing with his father, just as his grandfather did. For four generations they have been fishing for mullet, seabass, and sprat, and now they also look for crabs. They fish according to the season, using sustainable swing and seine nets with large mesh size. They do not use fish-finding technologies, preferring to search out mullets with their eyes. Miranda enjoys joining them on fishing trips, but her main task is the marketing. She does this on her own, but in busy times, she gets help from her sister and daughter. Another son works in fisheries for a local fish wholesaler.

How has your business been affected by the COVID pandemic?

In the beginning it was a big shock. The fish prices in the local fish auction plummeted in a short while, in particular for the species we sold. Besides selling in the auction, we used to sell a part of our fresh fish directly to local restaurants. As these closed down, we lost this market as well. At the same time our fixed costs continued. The government had declared fisheries as an essential service, and so, in the beginning, there were no compensation measures for fisheries. At first, we had no other choice but to stop fishing, as we were dependent of the fresh fish market and had no storing facilities.

So how did you survive?

Fortunately we had some alternative income from Job's assignments of fish stock surveys, for which his traditional artisanal knowledge is highly appreciated.

We also used to sell a part of our fish to a fish retailer, who buys only from small-scale fishers and at a fair price. This retailer has a permanent group of regular customers who continued to buy our fish. But the quantities were small.

Before the COVID crisis, I had already started a small business of my own by selling our fish directly to customers and also by developing new fish products, in particular, mullet, which is a low valued fish, one can even say a 'forgotten' fish, for consumers. I felt the need to upgrade the image of this fish. I took the plunge by approaching a chef of a local high end restaurant,

who also has his own TV programme. I gave him a box of our mullet and asked him to try it out for his dishes. He was interested and the good taste and possibilities of the fish really took him by surprise. He successfully developed tasteful recipes with mullet and became a regular buyer and paid a good price. This is how also other local restaurants became interested in our mullet. On their menu cards, they gave it the name 'Fish from Job' with a picture of my husband, the fisher. I also taught myself how to make bottarga. Bottarga is a delicacy of salted, cured fish roe, typically of the grey mullet or the bluefin tuna and very popular in Mediterranean dishes. I studied how to make it finding instructions on the internet through trial and error. I succeeded in developing a small circle of regular customers mostly by word of mouth. Our province has a regional origin certification scheme which I succeeded in acquiring for the mullet and bottarga. This greatly helped in reaching a larger circle of customers interested in good quality artisanal products.

When the restaurants closed down because of the COVID pandemic, I felt I had to look for other marketing strategies. I saw how effectively other small producers used social media in product promotion and sales. I took the initiative to enter into a partnership with various local entrepreneurs, including colleagues who fish, from whom I would buy local products to sell, together with our own fish and fish products. Every week I would make a list of fresh fish and accompanying recipes and a variety of fish soups, fish salads or fish buns. I would also try to find all kinds of matching products, including handicraft gifts with fish images, to add to my list. I would publish the list on Facebook and other popular social media, sometimes together with a short video. I would make the videos myself, simply by using my mobile camera and often they would come out rather entertaining. I am amazed at how quickly they gained popularity. Perhaps it had to do with the lock down.

Customers place their orders and I deliver to their homes on Fridays and Saturdays on my scooter. I supply only in my local area. I now have a group of 20 regular customers, who feel more like my friends. But during Christmas time, I had as much as 80 customers.



Miranda Bout promoting her fish, Zeeland, The Netherlands. We need more support for the small-scale and artisanal producers, in particular those working in the fisheries sector

“I feel with this crisis that nature wants to tell us something. We have to listen well”

Did you get any support from the government?

When the government announced compensation measures for the fisheries sector, the small-scale sector was somehow excluded, as the measures were designed for the industrialised sector only. It was only through active lobbying that our national network of small-scale fishers succeeded in obtaining compensation. The compensation amount however was very low actually, and those who had already managed on their own to make up for the loss of income, like us, were not eligible for compensation.

You are also a member, actually the only woman member, of the board of the national network of small-scale fishers, Netviswerk. How did the organisation respond to the COVID crisis?


It was very hard at first, and still is. We could not meet physically and also, we were not used to meeting virtually through media like Zoom. We had to learn all that. Our first priority was to lobby for inclusion of our sector in the COVID compensation measures. We also prepared a list of all our members who sell fresh fish at home, which we promoted through the organization’s website and social media. However, we still have been unable to hold a general assembly and we actually do not have a very good picture of what problems our members might be facing.

Another problem is that our ministry’s attention has primarily gone towards the impact of the COVID crisis and then also to the impact of Brexit on the industrialised sector. Policy decisions harmful for the small-scale sector were sometimes made because we were not consulted.

What do you hope for the post-COVID time?

I am happy that I’m being able to manage my small business all on my own. I do not want to expand the business, because it may get difficult to manage and more stressful. I need time to spend with my family and for my activities with our fisher’s organization. The most important is that my business can provide for the daily needs of my family and I find satisfaction in my work.

Experience has taught me that connecting and engaging is of essential importance for survival. I hope the appreciation for locally produced and artisanal food will continue after the COVID pandemic is over. We need more support for the small-scale and artisanal producers, in particular those working in the fisheries sector. We have valuable knowledge, experience and practices to offer society. We are used to listening to and working with nature. I feel with this crisis that nature wants to tell us something. We have to listen well.

Please visit Miranda and Job Bout’s website to learn more about their work: <https://zeeuwsevis.nl/> 

Nurturing the eel

Inland fishers in The Netherlands participate in managing inland eel fisheries

By **Cornelie Quist**
(cornelie.quist@gmail.com), Member, ICSF

Aaltje is a young woman professional inland fisher in The Netherlands. Her name means ‘little eel’ in Dutch. “I was born to become an eel fisher,” she says. “Since I was a small kid I used to go fishing with my father and learnt the skill from him. When he stopped after 30 years of fishing, I took over.” She was 24 years old then. Her two brothers had preferred other professions.

At first Aaltje’s father had not expected her to take over from him, because she was trained as a primary school teacher and loved to work with children. Aaltje says: “For me there was only one opportunity to become a professional fisher. If I did not take over from my father, our area of fishing would have to be returned to our Union of Inland Fishers to be divided among other inland fishers of our region. I did not like this idea, because my family had been fishing this water for several generations. That is why I decided to take over my father’s fishing enterprise.” Aaltje now hopes

to combine fishing with educational activities for children about inland fisheries and the aquatic ecology.

Eel (*Anguilla Anguilla*) is the most important species for inland fishers in The Netherlands, and also for Aaltje, because of both its commercial and cultural value. The eel is part of the identity of Dutch inland fishers, who call themselves eel-fishers even though they also fish other species. Aaltje

fishes alone and sometimes she is assisted by her father. She sells her eel to the auction, but her father also smokes a part of

the eel catch and sells it from home. She is a member of the Frisian Union of Inland Fishers and actively participates in a pilot project for decentralized eel management, to secure healthy eel stocks for the future.

When Aaltje’s father started fishing there were still 50 professional inland fishers in her region. Today she is one of only 14 left. This decline is a trend across the country. Inland waters constitute almost 20 per cent of the total surface of The Netherlands and the inland fishers are part of the landscape. Until the mid 20th century, professional inland fisheries had been a relatively large sector with a long history dating back to the early Middle Ages. Inland fisheries played an important role in the food supply of the big cities of The Netherlands as well as in the food security of the rural population. Unfortunately, there has been a rapid decline in the number of inland fishing enterprises in recent years—from around 2,300 in 1952 to just about 119 in 2015. The main causes were the reduction in eel stocks, and the many fishing restrictions for professional inland fishers. The emergence of recreational fisheries had also become a strong competition for professional fisheries.

The reasons for the decline in eel stocks are complex, and views differ widely. The European eel is found in habitats as diverse as the open ocean and sheltered coasts, large freshwater lakes and small ponds, main rivers and small streams. The eel constitutes the most widely distributed single fish stock in Europe, and is found also found across the continent and the Mediterranean parts of Africa and Asia. It is a mysterious species. It procreates in salt water and grows up in freshwater. The adult eels, also known as silver eels, swim thousands of kilometers from Europe to the Sargasso Sea (Bermuda triangle) to procreate and the baby eels, or glass eels, swim all the way back to the coast of Europe which takes about two years. (View https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBRnNk_uo9Y&feature=youtu.be to learn about the incredible life cycle of the European eel and their amazing migration.)

From the coast of Europe the baby eels try to reach freshwater systems where they can grow up. Many inland water sources in Europe have become unreachable for the eel because of the barriers created by large numbers of hydraulic engineering works such as dykes, weirs and pumping stations, constructed for coastal protection and reclamation of land. For many years, professional inland fishers

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“Since I was a small kid I used to go fishing with my father and learnt the skill from him. When he stopped after 30 years of fishing, I took over,” says Aaltje. Here she is seen emptying her fykes

practiced restocking of glass eel and elvers, and it is because of these traditional practices that the eel stocks were maintained in many inland waters. The fishers bought the glass eel from French or British glass eel fishers. However with the emergence of eel farming in Europe, and later also in South East Asia, mainly China, the price of glass eel and elvers in the world market increased significantly. This affected the capability of professional inland fishers to invest in restocking their fishing waters. Glass eel catches, however, appear set to recover in recent years.

Another problem is that many inland waters also have become unsuitable as habitat for the eel. The major causes are industrialization and urbanization. These resulted in a reduction of inland water due to land reclamation, and also high levels of water pollution. In April 2011, a ban on eel fishing in the large rivers of The Netherlands was imposed as a result of the European standards for dioxins and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). The fishing ban on the rivers forced several economically healthy enterprises, some that had existed for generations, to stop their fishing activities.

Fishing restrictions multiplied over the years as a result of regulations and directives coming from the European Union, in particular the Water Framework Directive, the Protection of Wildlife and Ecosystems Directive, and the Eel Management Regulation (2009). The latter also implied a ban on eel fishing in The Netherlands during the three most important eel fishing months when the adult eels start migrating. These restrictions also contributed to the decline of professional inland fisheries.

Finally, the emergence of recreational fisheries also contributed to the decline in professional fisheries. After World War II, angling became an important leisure activity, while professional inland fisheries lost economic importance. In The Netherlands, the number of recreational fishers increased from 60,000 in 1952 and to around a million in 2013-14. Through their organizations, they succeeded in accumulating fishing rights and expanding their fishing area at the cost of the professional inland fishers. Conflicts of interest between professional inland fishers and recreational fishers strongly influenced the Dutch government policy on inland fisheries, with priority given to recreational fisheries over the interests of professional inland fishers. Around 80 per cent of the country's inland waters is owned by the state, while the other 20 per cent is owned by provincial and local governments, who lease out

fishing rights for these waters to professional and recreational fishers. As a result of a shift in priorities, the Dutch government decided to split the fishing rights, allocating it for eel to professional fishers, while allocating fishing rights for other species to recreational fishers. The professional inland fishers therefore became practically fully dependent on the capture of eel, and with the reduction of eel fisheries their livelihood came under serious threat.

The existing leasehold system also resulted in a process of fragmentation of inland fishing waters with most holdings becoming too small to provide sufficient livelihood to a professional fisher's household. The system changed further with the introduction of a new definition of professional inland fishers in the Dutch Fishery Act in 2008. The Act only recognized those fishers with a fishing area of a minimum of 250 hectares and a minimum yearly gross income of Euro 8,500 (USD 9,515.1) from fishing. Fishers who could not prove these requirements lost their fishing rights, and their fishing area was redistributed to other professional fishers or recreational fisheries.

Aaltje's father was one of the lucky professional eel fishers in The Netherlands who had survived these changes. It is now up to Aaltje to continue the generations old fishing enterprise. The inland waters of her region, the province of Friesland in the north of The Netherlands, are still a healthy habitat for the eel. The fishers of her region are well organized and have managed the fish stocks for generations. Thanks to the effort of their Frisian Union of Inland Fishers, founded in 1891, they are participants in a pilot project for decentralized eel management. While eel fishers in the rest of the country are confronted with a ban on eel fishing during the best fishing season, the eel fishers who are part of the pilot project are allowed to fish the whole year round. They have a yearly quota for eel which is controlled by their Union. The total quota for the region is fixed on the basis of data provided by the fishers and in collaboration with scientists, and then divided among the Union members on commonly agreed principles.

After pulling her fykes out of the water, Aaltje makes an estimation of her total catch of the day: "About two kilos", she says and sends the information over mobile telephone to NatuurNetwerk (www.natuurnetwerk.nl), the organization that collects the data and oversees the quota. The data is used to monitor the impact of the eel management measures. Back home, Aaltje measures all the eels she has harvested and kept alive in a corf. She finds

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about half of them are shorter than 40 cm, and releases them back in the water, and also reports this to NatuurNetwerk. The bigger eels she keeps for sale. As Aaltje remarks, “The bigger ones fetch a better price, so why should I not give the small ones a chance to grow big, and also a chance to migrate to their spawning grounds?” Aaltje also practises restocking of eels in her area of water, by releasing baby eels which she buys through the Union. She adds, “I am responsible for my own area where I have exclusive fishing rights and that is why I feel encouraged to also invest in it. We only have eel fishing rights—the fishing rights for other species are allocated to the recreational fisher organizations. But because we collaborate with them in a fishery management plan, they allow us to keep some of the by-catch of commercial value, and this provides a welcome additional income. But it is sad that with the splitting of the fishing rights by the government, we have become dependent on the attitude of the leadership of the recreational fisheries organizations for a share of the fish stocks.”

The Frisian Union of Inland fishers actively participates in various eel management projects with the recreational fisher organizations, eel farmers, the Water Management Board, scientists and the provincial government. These projects engage in data collection and eel stock monitoring;

eel restocking in healthy habitats; an eel reserve; and a catch, transfer and release project for silver, or adult, eels to help them migrate to their spawning grounds. “Only by collaboration can we really achieve some real impact,” says Aaltje. “And in this way we also win respect from society. We inland fishers have become marginalized, and the people of our country hardly know of our existence and work. We have to defend ourselves against propaganda of environmentalists who portray fishers as the biggest culprits of declining fish stocks. This could be the case in some areas, but here in Friesland we have fished for many generations in a sustainable way. Our Union has played an important role in this. We have built good ecological knowledge which has proven to be useful in the monitoring and management of fish stocks. Now we also are in contact with organizations like Slow Food and they are very interested in our artisanal fish products and traditional practices. Hopefully they will help us in educating the consumers and also the restaurants. Restaurants still often buy cheap, imported fish or illegally caught fish because they do not want to pay us a fair price. People need to understand that without paying a fair price to us small-scale producers, we will not be able to survive and take care of the inland waters’ fish resources, and in particular of our eel.” ❖

A couple of champions!

In recognition of their dedication to the fisheries, Marja and Bert Bekendam receive the title ‘Professional Fisher of the Year’ in The Netherlands

By **Cornelie Quist** (cornelie.quist@gmail.com), member of ICSF and adviser to the Association of Inland and Inshore Fishers of The Netherlands

In 2007, the Association of Professional Inland and Inshore Fishers of The Netherlands (CvB) instituted the title ‘Professional Fisher of the Year’ to shine a spotlight on professional fishermen who play a vitally important role for the sustainable future of the fisheries sector and are an example for others. Then, as the important role of women in the sector became more visible. Some years back, the Association began to nominate for the title husband-and-wife couple, who were seen as the true champions of traditional inland fisheries in The Netherlands.

The Netherlands is a deltaic country where some of Europe’s largest rivers flow into the sea. It has a wide system of rivers, fresh water lakes, polders, channels, ditches and enclosed salt water inshore waters. The inland fishers are part of the landscape. Professional inland fisheries in The Netherlands are traditionally household-based enterprises where family members work together, usually husband and wife or father and son or daughter. It is an old

artisanal profession. Some families have been fishing for centuries in the same waters and have built up a fund of local ecological knowledge and sustainable management practices over generations. Many process their fish catch at home and sell directly to the consumer. Unfortunately, there has been a fast decline in the number of inland fishing enterprises—from around 3000 in 1945 to just about 150 today. Government policies have not protected the sector, which is struggling to survive.

This year, the title ‘Professional Fisher of the Year’ went to the couple Marja and Bert Bekendam, bringing much needed public attention the lives of professional inland fishers and the issues they face. It highlighted, as the association hoped it would, that good cooperation between husband and wife is of great importance for the future of the sector. Marja and Bert Bekendam received this title for being true ambassadors of the traditional inland fisheries, who continue to follow their profession despite being hit hard by dioxin pollution in their fishing waters as well as a government fishing ban that forced them to downsize considerably.

Bert Bekendam is a fourth generation professional inland fisher. He has been active in the local Fishery Management Council and actively participated in the making of a

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Bert and Marja Bekendam on a fishing trip.

regional fishing plan in collaboration with the region's recreational anglers. While he provides all the data on his own catches for the fishing plan, he also points the recreational anglers to their responsibilities. He welcomes anyone who wants an overview of his fishing practices, and willingly describes his fishing and fish stock management methods. Together with his wife Marja, Bert Bekendam has regularly received Members of the Parliament and representatives of the national organization of recreational fishers, patiently answering all their critical questions.

Marja Bekendam is a major driving force behind the couples' inland fishing enterprise. She collaborates well with the board of the Association of Professional Inland and Inshore Fishers of The Netherlands. She has been part of a delegation that met with the European Commission and members of the Fisheries Committee of the European

Parliament, bringing the issues of traditional inland fisheries to the attention of the European policy makers. She is a core member of the Associations' Working Group on the Promotion of Inland Fisheries and Freshwater Fish. Apart from this, Marja is also the president of AKTEA—the European Network of Women in Fisheries—and holds regular presentations for organizations throughout the country, particularly women's organizations, on the traditional inland fisheries of The Netherlands and on women's role in fisheries.

Says Marja: "Our struggle is never over but until now we have survived. Fishing is no longer what it used to be but we have confidence that it will become better again. And although my husband does not fish every day of the week any more, nor every week of the month, and indeed, not even every month of the year, he is still a fisherman and I am still a fisherman's wife!" ❧

VinVis: The women in fisheries network

This article charts the origins and significance of VinVis, the women in fisheries network of the Netherlands, consolidates its achievements and outlines the challenges it faces

By **Cornelie Quist**
(cornelie.quist@gmail.com), a supporter of VinVis and a member of ICSF

VinVis, the women in fisheries network of the Netherlands, is an autonomous women's organization. It consists of wives of fishermen from traditional fishing communities, who are concerned with a sustainable future for the fisheries and their communities and also feel that women's role in fisheries should be recognized and validated.

The origins of VinVis are rooted in a symposium held in April 2000 on the needs and aspirations of wives of fishermen in the Netherlands. Presented in the symposium were the results of a pioneering research study, commissioned by the Dutch Directorate of Fisheries, on the role of fishermen's wives.



The study revealed that in addition to domestic work and child care, the wives of boat-owner fishermen were largely involved in activities related to the family fishing enterprise. However, these activities were not registered in the accounts, and though officially invisible, were valued at an estimated one million Euro annually. The majority of the women were also engaged in voluntary community service. The study found that even though the majority of the women indicated they were interested in fishery policies, very few actually participated in meetings called by fishermen's organizations.

In the symposium, well-attended by wives of fishermen, the reasons for low participation were

discussed. Why hadn't the wives of fishermen followed the example of women farmers in the country and formed a professional organization of their own? The younger women were less accepting of their present conditions than were their older counterparts. Towards the end of the symposium, a group of women, most in their late twenties, volunteered to start an informal network to explore new spaces for women's roles in fishing communities. On the 22nd of June 2000, these women met again at the fish auction at Urk, an important fishing village. And so VinVis, the women in fisheries network, was born.

Problems afflicting the Dutch fishing industry aided the network's launch. The cod crisis of 2001 (precipitated by the EU decision to ban fishing in certain areas of the North Sea in order to combat stock shrinkage) and the shrimp crisis of 2003 (which followed the termination of production regulations by the Dutch anti-cartel authorities), brought a sense of mission to the network.

In the words of a wife of a shrimp fisherman-boat owner: "While we were busy with our advocacy campaign on the land, our husbands went to sea, fishing. They had to, because of the high investments loans, which had to be repaid. The prices collapsed and our husbands had to go for longer fishing trips. We had no family life anymore...Our husbands were filled with negative energy and our community began to fall apart...Everybody in our village and our region has, in one way or the other, some relationship with fisheries and the sea. That is why I hope that unity will return for the sake of preserving a future for our children and our community... I regard my first mission as bringing back unity among the shrimp fisher community and finding support for our cause. I also want to have a family life again. I feel supported by our women in fisheries network, VinVis."

VinVis members began to participate in local fishermen's organizations. They also pioneered innovative initiatives at the local level such as the Sea-Fresh Fish Market of Wieringen. Their efforts succeeded in gradually enhancing the fishing community's image.

In the beginning, the men regarded the women's effort with some ambiguity. The women quickly realized that they had to develop business expertise, for even a single mistake could invite critical reactions. They began preparing themselves to participate meaningfully in discussions. Supporting each other, women began to feel less inhibited

about raising even 'controversial' issues, such as unsustainable fishing practices, crew concerns and internal divisions. In course of time, women's participation won them respect. Nevertheless, men still find it difficult to accept women in leadership roles. Until now, only one woman of the VinVis network has been elected to the board of a local fishermen's organization.

The VinVis network became an active participant in various public discussions. The women studied important documents, such as the Green Paper, to review the EU Common Fishery Policy (2001-2002) and formulated their own response. They met Ministry officials, researchers of fishery institutes, representatives of the fishery industry, environmental activists, and other stakeholders of coastal resources. At every meeting, VinVis highlighted the importance of the wellbeing of the family and community in the discourse on fisheries. They often reported their experiences in the widely-read Dutch national fisheries paper *Visserijnieuws*.

Although the VinVis network was not a formal representative organization, it won the recognition of the Fisheries Ministry and was invited to consultations for the Netherlands National Strategic and Operational Plan for the European Fisheries Fund. However, despite the fact that VinVis presented a position paper and intervened in consultation rounds, the administrators failed to adequately incorporate the perspective of women of fishing communities.

In January 2003, an EU Conference on the role of women in fisheries gave an important impetus to the network helping VinVis in building relationships with other women-in-fisheries organizations throughout Europe. Between 2003 and 2005, VinVis became active in the participatory research of the FEMMES Thematic Network, aimed at promoting women's role in fisheries and aquaculture, and in networking with other European women's associations. In 2006, VinVis became one of the founding members of the AKTEA Network of Women in Fisheries and Aquaculture in Europe with a VinVis member elected as its vice-chairperson. Exposure to the wider problems of fishing communities all over Europe and opportunities to share experiences and strategies with other women's associations were of great value and inspiration.

VinVis started as an informal and open network. However, this informality, particularly in the early years with women joining and leaving all the time, hampered the emergence of a collective long-term programme.

The women of the network had diverse backgrounds and interests. They came from different communities; some were from ship-owners' families and others from crew members' families; sometimes they came from rival

fishermen's associations. They had to deal with cynical and paternalistic reactions from their communities. They frequently faced a conflict between traditional expectations and modern aspirations. There was also the problem of inadequate organizational skills as well as a lack of resources such as time, funds and childcare facilities.

On the other hand, the informal and open structure had many advantages. It allowed women to make their own decisions, to share experiences and knowledge, to respect differences and offer advice and support. The active use of email communication added to this process, although face-to-face meetings remained most important. The network also welcomed the present author to play the role of facilitator, adviser and supporter.

By 2004, the VinVis network had evolved a stable core of about ten women who carried out the network's mission with great enthusiasm, often using their personal resources to do so.

The activities of the VinVis network have not gone unnoticed by the Dutch Fishery Administration and professional fishermen's organizations. This has led to a growing awareness about the potential role women can play, particularly on issues concerning the quality of life within fishing communities. Nevertheless, the enhancement of women's roles and status fails to receive priority and is reflected neither in the agenda of fishermen's organizations nor in the fisheries policy.

Inadequate support from the government and professional fishermen's organizations prevented the further growth of the network. The only aid received was a one-time grant of Euro 1000 from the Dutch Fishermen's Union (*Nederlandse Vissersbond*). However, the husbands of VinVis members belonged to different fishermen's organizations. Since none followed its example, the Dutch Fishermen's Union, although appreciative of VinVis' work, was reluctant to extend further financial support.

One of the active core members of the VinVis network says: "The women who are in our network at present feel that they can only participate because of the support of their husbands. Although our work is appreciated by our fishermen's organizations and some of its leaders, the women of VinVis still face patronizing attitudes. Generally speaking, Dutch fisher communities are still very conservative in their perceptions about the role and position of women. As a result, women feel reluctant to join the VinVis network, even though they approve of our mission."

VinVis brought a community perspective into the fisheries debate and raised significant issues concerning the quality of life within fishing communities. Sadly however, the lack of adequate support has put the very future of the network at stake. ❏

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European Union/ Netherlands**Fisherwomen for fisherwomen**

Women of fishing communities in the Netherlands have been raising funds in solidarity with women of tsunami-affected fishing communities

By Cornelia Quist, a member of Vinvis and a member of ICSF

Immediately after the tsunami hit the coast of several regions in Asia, the women of VinVis, the women-in-fisheries network of the Netherlands, contacted one another to discuss what action to take. The traditional fishing communities were obviously affected most by the tsunami and being fisherwomen themselves, the VinVis women felt deep sympathy with the victims. On 31 December 2004 they registered a new organization called "Fisherwomen for Fisherwomen in Asia", and began to raise funds in their local communities. They distributed self-made posters and information flyers through the local shops, schools, fish market and auction. They approached schools to mobilize the children in support of their campaign. They sent press releases to the local, regional and even national media. The response was good and their action also caught attention at the national level. All funds raised by VinVis are meant for reconstruction activities in fisheries, in particular activities that benefit fisherwomen and their families.

Fundraising actions in support of the tsunami victims have been massive in the Netherlands and also in Europe. There is a severe competition between various private initiatives, all wanting to help from their own perspective. In particular, the affected tourist belts in Sri Lanka and Thailand are very popular targets for fundraising, and many villages and fishing families in these areas are "adopted" by various private initiatives started by people who had visited as tourists. But also from the fisheries sector there are many private initiatives that raise funds to help affected fishing communities with new boats and gear. Many of these initiatives, though well-intentioned, carry the risk of causing all kinds of new disruptions.

To help the tsunami-affected fishing communities in Asia in an appropriate way is a complex thing and, therefore, VinVis is very glad to have contacts with fisher(wo)men's organizations that represent the interest of the affected fishing communities in Asia. Through these contacts, VinVis has immediate and genuine information channels to learn about the real problems and needs. VinVis wants to be assured that

the rehabilitation projects they support are planned in consultation with the affected fisherwomen and are of real benefit to them.

VinVis, therefore, feels it is not only her responsibility to raise funds to help the victims, but also to raise awareness and to warn against all forms of help that could create ill-effects for local circumstances and environment and cause social disparity and conflict among the fishing community. That is why VinVis campaigns against the transfer of fishing boats and gear from Europe, but also warns against the indiscriminate distribution of locally made boats and gear. VinVis also advocates that aid should focus not only on the rehabilitation of fish capture activities, but also pay attention to the post-harvest activities, which provide an important source of livelihood for women of fishing communities, and to a community-based management of the resources.

VinVis tries hard to encourage co-ordination and co-operation where it concerns aid from private initiatives in the Netherlands to the affected fishing communities in Asia. VinVis also strongly promotes the foremost necessity of consulting fisher(wo)men's organizations from the affected areas. VinVis realizes that reconstruction is a long-term process and, therefore, needs solidarity, partnership and commitment. Do you feel the same?

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European Union/ The Netherlands

Bouncing back

Women in the fishing community of Wieringen have revived the local economy by creating a local fresh-fish market

By Wilma Koster, a member of *VinVis*, the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands

Our fishing community of Wieringen, a former island at the top of the Netherlands, has a long history of fishing. In the past, sailing boats were used, but today we have mechanized boats. Our community uses primarily small-scale boats (below 300 hp), and the main commercial species we catch are shrimp, plaice, sole, shellfish and nephrops.

We sell our fish and shrimps through the auction, which is obligatory in our country, and every day, have to wait and watch for the price the commercial agent will bid. Most of the time, we do not receive a good or fair price for fish that is first-class and caught the day before. The reason is that it is sold in the same market alongside the catches of the big boats.

Since we are wives of fishermen, we know how important it is to get a good price for our fish. We raise our children, do a lot of work ashore for our fishing enterprise, and sometimes also have to join our husbands on fishing trips when they need an extra hand. It is, therefore, not very encouraging that despite so much hard work, the prices for our fish are low. This was one of the major reasons why the business in our community was dying and the fisheries was no longer an attractive proposition for the younger generation.

When our mayor called a meeting to discuss what could be done to revive our local economy, we seized the opportunity to talk about the need to create a local fish market where we could sell our best fresh fish. As this proposal was accepted, we took the challenge and set to work to see that it would be a success. It was very important that the whole community got involved. Through our involvement with *VinVis* (the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands), we particularly encouraged other women of our community to join us in this initiative.

A local working group was formed and its first task was to make a detailed study of the needs and the possibilities. Based on the outcome of this study, we made a plan. The aim of the fresh-fish market was to promote the consumption of fresh fish caught by our local fishing boats, and also to promote our local economy to make sure that the whole community would benefit. Since we were confident that our plan would work, the mayor gave us the investment money from Provincial and European Union (EU) funds to organize the market. This was a loan to the local working group.

In the summer of 2004, when the tourists came to our village—which is a very beautiful area in the north of the Netherlands—we launched the fresh-fish market, to be held every Saturday. In order not to violate government regulations, we obeyed the rules, and our fishermen took their fish first to the regulated auction. There, our group bought the fish, always bidding higher than the rest. In this way, our fisher husbands got more money than they usually would get in the auction. We then brought the fish to our market and sold it for a price that was acceptable for the consumer as well.

Besides selling fresh fish, we also informed the public about how and where the fish are caught. We also organized cooking demonstrations. Nowadays, consumers mostly buy fish in the big supermarkets, already processed into ready-to-eat products, which only have to be put in the microwave. If we want to make the consumer buy more of our local fresh fish, we must teach them how to clean and prepare the fish. We, therefore, held cooking demonstrations, let the people taste our seafood dishes, and distributed flyers with the recipes of the fish that we cooked that day. We also launched a website where we gave weekly updates about the catch of the day to be sold in the market, fish recipes, cultural programmes, and so on.

And, mind you, it worked wonderfully! The word spread and every Saturday we had many tourists, locals and buyers from restaurants coming to our village. People bought our fish, ate and enjoyed it. People visited our fishing boats and met with the fishermen. They listened to our songs and folk stories. They also visited our local shops and restaurants and some of those that were otherwise closing down, bounced back to life. The whole community benefited from the fresh-fish market.



In the first year, our work for the fresh-fish market had been voluntary. The extra money we earned was used to pay back our investment loan. Now that the market has proved its success and has come to stay, some of us will earn some money for the work in the market. We also plan to expand the market with other local products from our region, such as ecologically friendly farm products.

While we are very happy and proud of our achievement, we must say it has been hard but collective work. It brought us together in the community, and if things continue to go the way they do at present, then our children will also be proud to continue to fish, and, more than ever, our community will continue to survive.

But we also want to tell you that EU marketing regulations are not there to help small producers like us. They are there only to strangle us to death. The sanitary regulations that they impose upon us are unreal and even unnecessary. They make us feel guilty of poisoning the customer. Why should we, who live off the fishing, want to kill our customers? And why do customers believe that fish that comes in a packet from a big company is 'pure'? Such packaged fish is often cleaned by workers in Third World countries, who are paid really low wages. So it is 'pure' and cheap.

We think such marketing regulations are made only to benefit the big companies, which are interested only in maximizing profits, while our governments should actually be concerned about safeguarding the

livelihoods of the coastal fishers and small communities here at home.

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European Union/ Netherlands

True partnership

A story about the struggle of a wife and husband against the threats facing inland fishermen in the Netherlands

By Marja Bekendam, wife of an inland fisherman and a member of *VinVis*, the women in fisheries network of the Netherlands.

Fifteen years ago my husband took over the fishing enterprise of his grandfather, which until then had been managed by his uncles, the brothers of his mother. His grandfather used to fish with a sailing boat in the largest bay of the Netherlands, which is also the delta of two rivers. In 1932, a dike was built to close the bay, and the water slowly changed into freshwater from its erstwhile salted state, and thereby became a lake. That change also had an impact on the species of fish caught in those days.

Between 1940 and 1965, land was reclaimed from the lake and two polders made. This also decreased the area available for fishing, which, again, had an impact on the fishery. Besides, pollution from the rivers affected the fish and caused eel to get tumours, reducing their appeal for human consumption. As a result, the fishery no longer provided enough income, and my husband's uncles decided to work in a local factory for two days a week.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the rivers became cleaner and the fish stocks recovered. The eel became healthy again. Also, uncommon species of fish began to be seen more and more. So when my husband took over the enterprise in 1989, he was able to earn a good living from fishing again. He caught eel in fykes from April up to November, bream with trawl nets from December to March, and, in the early spring, he sometimes caught smelt.

After some years, my husband could afford to modernize his fishing enterprise. He bought new fykes and even a secondhand boat. The modernization helped him reduce fishing time and invest in another business outside fisheries. The past experiences of his grandfather and uncles had taught him that inland fishing was very vulnerable to the impact of various unpredictables.

It turned out that he had made a wise decision. In the mid-1990s, the government decided that it was

necessary to remove the polluted sediment from the bottom of the lake. Even though it was known that a clean layer of mud covered the polluted sediment, it was feared that the underlying polluted sediment might affect the groundwater and thus perhaps also the drinking water. Plans were made to clean the bottom of the lake by dredging. A huge storage depot was built in the middle of the lake into which the polluted mud was dumped to make an artificial island. Besides that, many more little islands were made at the delta of the river for birds to breed. The area for fishing got reduced again and, in a way, history repeated itself. Grandpa had lost many acres of fishing ground when the polders were made, and we too had to give up fishing ground for all the artificial islands. A lot of meetings with the fishermen were held those days. The government promised us compensation and, in the beginning, we believed them.

At first, I was not very interested in the problems my husband was facing as a fisherman because I felt that it was his business. My husband left home every day at the same time and always returned in the evening, although I could never be certain at what time. I was kept busy at home looking after three young children and so I could not help my husband with the accounts and other administrative work. I only helped him write letters—but he had to tell me what to write. My husband always gave me reports of the meetings he attended. After a hard day's work, we would sit around the table until late into the night, discussing the conflict between the inland fishermen and the government. The more I heard, the more I learned, and the more I



became involved.

To get compensation from government, we had to deal with professional experts and legal advisers. But we were just simple folk and though my husband worked hard, he wasn't a professional expert either and so we had to get help from one of the fishermen's organizations. We hired a lawyer who knew everything about procedures and laws, but nothing about fishing. So we had to tell him what to do. My husband and I had a hard time those days. But it also felt good to fight together. We found out that we were complementary to each other. He taught me a lot about fisheries and my office experience helped me write letters and do the budgeting and accounting.

We finally did receive a small compensation from the government, but far less than we expected. Our struggle is not over yet, but we survived so far. We were able to survive and continue because of the alternative business my husband started in the good days. And although my husband no longer fishes every day of the week, nor every week of the month, nor every month of the year, he is still a fisherman and I am still a fisherman's wife.

Because of my involvement in the struggle of the inland fishermen, someone drew my attention to *VinVis*, the women in fisheries network of the Netherlands. After visiting one of their meetings, I decided to join the network. So far I am the only inland fisherman's wife in *VinVis*. But it surprises me how much I have in common with the other women who are wives of seagoing fishermen. We have to deal with the same kind of problems, and it feels good to share experiences and knowledge. It is unfortunate that there are practically no women participating in the existing fishermen's organizations. But I hope one day our network will no longer be needed. That will be the day that women are fully accepted as true partners in fisheries.

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European Union/ Netherlands

Penalized for what?

The shrimp fisher community of the Netherlands face problems in the initiatives they have undertaken for a better life and an environmentally sound fisheries

By Mariet Groen, wife of a shrimp fisherman and member of VinVis, the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands

As I write this, we are facing a big crisis. The price for shrimp is crashing and, at the same time, there is a weekly destruction of thousands of kilograms of small-size shrimps, because of an oversupply in the market. Many of the shrimp fishing enterprises will not survive. My husband is now fishing seven days a week, but our earnings are so low that we hardly have money left for our daily needs. This morning, when I wanted to pay for my groceries, I discovered I had no money left. I felt so embarrassed. How could this happen in a wealthy country like the Netherlands?

Shrimp fishing is one of the traditional Dutch fishery sectors, accounting for about 20 per cent of the Dutch cutter fleet. In the north of our country, in particular, coastal villages depend on this fishery. The shrimp fishery is predominantly a small-scale sector activity and typically family-based, where women play an important role. Women are mostly responsible for bookkeeping, dealing with banks, and auctions. Some women also go fishing with their husbands.

Some years ago, we faced a similar situation as today. Due to the low prices for shrimp, fishers tried to catch as much as possible, in order to survive. A battle for the survival of the fittest was going on. The cold stores of the traders were completely filled and there was no option but to convert the shrimp harvest into fishmeal. This is one of the worst things that can happen to a fisherman, because a real fisherman fishes to feed the population. It was then that we concluded that this situation should not continue. Shrimp fishers from Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands organized into producers' organizations, and discussed voluntary regulation of the shrimp capture. They decided autonomously to reduce the number of fishing days and to cap the supply of shrimp. With this 'trilateral' agreement, they approached the two trading companies that dominated the European shrimp market and came

to a deal about the quantity of supply and a minimum price. The two trading companies would certainly benefit from the deal, because they were now guaranteed supply.

With the exception of one producer organization, all shrimp fishers complied with the agreement. The prices went up and the incomes of the fisher families improved. The fishermen could now come home over the weekends to spend time with their families. After years, my husband, the children and I could go together on a holiday again. Fishermen could now invest in the maintenance of their boats, and young fishermen were again eligible for bank loans to start on their own. Of course, there were still good and bad years, but, in general, we could make a good living from the shrimp fishery. Cold stores were no longer filled to the ceiling with shrimp, there were no bulk-purchase prices, nor destruction of shrimp harvest. Also, our initiatives were praised by environmental organizations.

Alas, all this came to an end. By mid-January this year, the anti-cartel Authority of the Netherlands decided to penalize the shrimp sector, because of our agreement and deal with the trading companies. They said that for years our practice had been putting the consumers at a disadvantage. The fines were exorbitant: Euro 4 mn for the fishermen and Euro 9.7 mn for the traders. We were totally surprised, because of all the approval we had been given until now. We had been working in line with the EU policy, which regards market supply regulation for the benefit of controlled fishing practices as one of the most important roles of the producer's organizations. We also felt it was unjust because small-scale fishermen were being treated like big telecom and oil companies.

The first response of our fishermen was to blockade the fishing port of Lauwersoog, which has the largest shrimp fishing fleet of Europe. The idea was to turn the attention of the government to our cause. Through our women in fisheries network, VinVis, a colleague fisherman's wife and I took the opportunity to hand over a letter to EU-Commissioner Fishler during the Women in Fisheries Conference last January. In this letter, we explained about our problem and asked for help. Fishler promised us a reply, which we received some weeks later. In his reply, Fishler said that the Commission would investigate the matter.

In the Netherlands, we women have worked in close co-operation with fishermen's leaders to approach

politicians and government officials to mobilize support for our cause. Many journalists visited our house too. We were ill at ease, because we had no experience with the media. Sometimes we felt misled when some journalist twisted our story, only looking for sensational news. Often we felt more miserable, because it was very depressing to recount our problems over and over again.

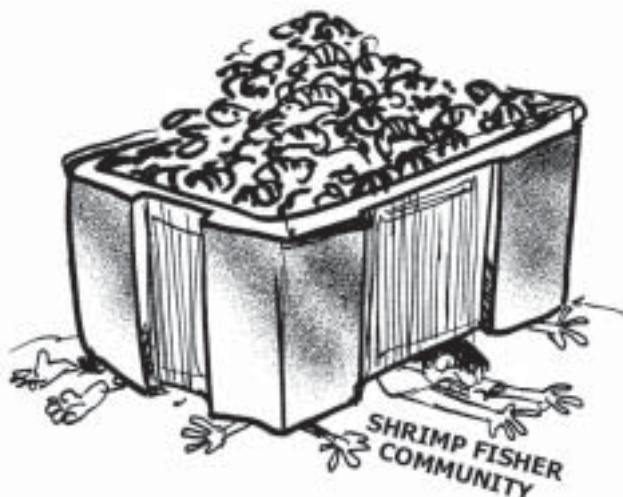
While we were busy with our advocacy campaign on the land, our husbands went to sea fishing. They had to, because of the huge loans that had to be repaid. As shrimp prices collapsed, our husbands had to go for longer fishing trips. We had no family life anymore. Some fishermen ended up with catches that were seven times larger than the quantity of the trilateral agreement. Within a short period, the cold stores of the traders were completely filled and they stopped buying shrimp from the open market, relying instead only on their contract fishers.

After some weeks, the smaller inshore fishers, including my husband, could not harvest anymore. We women went to the bank again and again to ask for new loans or for postponement of repayment. Our husbands were filled with negative energy and our community began to fall apart. Relationships among the fishermen became very tense, because of fierce competition for the resources, and there were acts of aggression against some of the fishermen who were not seen to be in solidarity.

I feel very privileged to live with my husband and children in our very beautiful old fishing village that has a very long historical bond with the sea. Everybody in our village and our region has, in one way or the other, some relationship with fisheries and the sea. That is why I hope that unity will return for the sake of preserving a future for our children and our community. Recently, I was elected as a board member of our local fishermen's organization. I regard my first mission as bringing back unity among the shrimp fisher community and finding support for our cause. I also want to have a family life again. I feel strengthened by the support of our women in fisheries network, VinVis. Also when I am down, I can always call on someone in the network to talk to.

We are now almost six months into the crisis. Thanks to our campaign and the support of the Dutch Fishermen's Organization, our case is being discussed in the national and European parliaments. Everyone now speaks about the importance of our shrimp fisheries for employment, and for historical and social reasons. We hope for a solution, but, for many of us, it may be too late. We try not to lose hope for better times.

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European Union/ The Netherlands

Their voices heard

Women from VinVis found the meeting on women in fisheries very interesting, if overwhelming

By Cornelia Quist, a member of ICSF and contact person for VinVis.

Six wives of fishermen from *VinVis*, the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands, attended the EU conference on women's roles in fisheries.

It was their first time to participate in an event like this and they were rather overwhelmed by the formal and massive character of the conference. But all of them said that it had been a very important experience for them.

They found it very interesting and encouraging to hear about the experiences of other fisherwomen in Europe and about the importance of woman's roles in fisheries everywhere. They also learned a lot about EU programmes, although they felt inundated with information.

They also said that, earlier, the EU always had been something very abstract and far away. However, their direct interaction during the conference with high officials of the Commission, was an encouragement for both sides to promote women's role in fisheries.

The Dutch women also used the opportunity to approach Commissioner Fischler in person and to hand over to him a letter with issues concerning the women in fisheries of the Netherlands. And they were very happy that the Commissioner took time to speak with them, showing his interest in their situation. The women attached great importance to the fact that their voices were being heard. They feel encouraged in their struggle for recognition.

The women felt, however, that the conference had given too little opportunity for women in fisheries to exchange among themselves. To be able to achieve something at the national level, they felt that strengthening women's organizations and networking was of first priority. They hoped that the commitment expressed by the Commission towards this would not remain empty words.

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Europe / Netherlands

Challenging stereotypes

VinVis, the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands, has been in existence for two years now. Time again to report on the process of finding a common orientation...

By Cornelia Quist, a member of ICSF and contact person for *VinVis*.

Last year I reported how some of us, who had met during a symposium on the needs and aspirations of wives of fishermen, had formed a women in fisheries network of the Netherlands. We had called it *VinVis* (see *Yemaya* No.4, August 2000 and *Yemaya* No.8, December 2001). In the first year of our existence we had been struggling to find a common orientation and, at the same time, to fight responses of cynicism, paternalism, or just ignorance from the fisher community itself.

Last June *VinVis* completed its second year of existence. We feel it has been a very good year, a year of stabilizing and gaining recognition. And a year of exploring our role in fisheries. At present we welcome new women to our network at every meeting.

One important event that helped the *VinVis* network find its orientation and direction, was the role women of the network played during the cod crisis in early 2001. At that time the Dutch fishing community was disproportionately affected by the decision of the European Union to close large parts of the fishing grounds in the North Sea to protect the codfish from depletion (see *Samudra* No.28, April 2001). Government and public opinion was strongly influenced by the environmental lobby and there was little sympathy for the plight of the Dutch fishermen. The women of *VinVis* felt that their first priority was to protect the future of the Dutch fisher community that suffered from internal divisions, a poor public image and a lack of perspective about the future.

Another event that facilitated this process of orientation was the launching of the so-called Green Paper by the European Union to review its Common Fisheries Policy. All stakeholders were invited to respond to this. The women of *VinVis* studied and discussed the Green Paper together and were the first from the Dutch fisher community to come up with a response. This act

encouraged a group of young fishermen, among them the husbands of the *VinVis* women, also to respond. Both these responses were later adopted by the national Dutch Fishermen's Union and found broad support among the Dutch fisher community.

In November 2001, a symposium was organized by the Dutch fishermen's organization with the title "What is your opinion about the future of the Dutch cutter-fishery?". Normally only fishermen would participate in such meetings, but, at the request of *VinVis*, the wives of fishermen were also invited. Many, both men and women, responded to the invitation. It was clear that there was a broadly felt need in the community to reflect about the future. Discussions were very constructive and both men and women expressed great concern about social and environmental issues and their willingness to work for a fishery with a future. After a long time the 'community feeling' was back again. And, for the first time, wives of fishermen were accepted as partners in a fisheries discussion.

This new visibility gained by the wives of fishermen was the reason why *VinVis* was approached by the media. We knew that we had to be very careful. We first gave an interview to the national fisheries paper. An article in this paper, which is found on the table of every fisher household, was seen as an opportunity to explain our mission to the community. When we asked to see the draft article, we were alarmed to read the typical woman-stereotype jargon in the article. Fortunately, the journalist was cooperative and after about three or four revisions (!), we finally felt it could be published.

When other media persons approached *VinVis*, we discovered that whilst the journalist of the fisheries paper had seen women of fisher households as plain housewives, the other journalists were only interested in hearing about women who go fishing out at sea. This meeting with the media led to an animated discussion amongst us about the kind of role/ image of women of fisher households we wanted to show to the public. This again facilitated a reflection and awareness process among the women of *VinVis*.

In exploring women's roles in fisheries, the women of *VinVis* became more aware of the value of their contribution, and of their potential. The women

continued to approach the Dutch fishermen's organizations, expressing their sincere interest and concern about the future of the Dutch fisher community. As a result, they were invited frequently for meetings and given information. *VinVis* also got a special niche on the website of the national fishermen's organizations and in the national fisheries paper. Women of *VinVis* regularly write the column "Diary of a fisherman's wife". It looks as if women have finally got into the world of the fishermen. Wives of fishermen are more and more mentioned in reports and documents as a group that deserves to be heard. And more and more women speak up.



The women of *VinVis* took up a role, which was new for the community. They began participating in public meetings on issues that affect the future of Dutch fisheries. In these meetings they met with officials of various Ministries, with environmental activists, with other stakeholders using coastal resources. They were confronted with different ideas and perspectives. Quite often, the women of *VinVis* were the only spokespersons of their community at these meetings. As long as they went as a group, they felt encouraged. In this way, opportunities were created for issues

important to their community to become part of the socio-political dialogue and for women to broaden their own perspective.

Through the ICSF *VinVis* was introduced to other fisherwomen's organizations in Europe. They learned about fisheries and, in particular, about the role of fisherwomen in other European countries. On 20 November 2001, they collectively presented a list with issues of concern to women in European fisheries to the European parliament (see *Yemaya*, No 8). This was a unique event.

The recognition that the women of *VinVis* have received in their role as advocates of the fisher community and the appreciation they receive for this from the community, has strengthened their self-confidence. They do not, any more, hide their ambition to gain knowledge and skills and even a more equal partnership in the fishing enterprise. They feel less inhibited now to raise issues in the community, that are controversial but need to be addressed for the sake of the future of the community, such as the relationship between boat-owners and crew, (un)sustainable fishing practices and internal divisions within the community. They also feel less reluctant now to publicly confront men of their community who tend to stereotype women, and they can even expect the support of other men in this. The *VinVis* network has proved to be an important base on which women of fisher communities have been given the opportunity to develop skills, knowledge and insights. Crucial for its existence has been the finding of a common orientation and the opportunity to set its own agenda and priorities.

Those who want to get in touch with us, please send an email to cornelie.quist@wolmail.nl

Europe / Netherlands

Our First Steps

The Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands has now been in existence for one year. How did it go? What were the highlights? And what were the limitations?

By Cornelia Quist, a member of ICSF and contact person for VinVis (the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands)

Last June the women in fisheries network of the Netherlands completed one year. It has not been an easy process, but we feel that the network has overcome its main 'teething troubles'. So we have given our network a name. She is called VinVis, which is an abbreviation of *Vrouwen in de Visserij* (Women in Fisheries), but also the name of a large beautiful whale, which holds a symbolic meaning.

How did we begin?

In April 2000 some of us met during a symposium about the needs and aspirations of wives of fishermen in the Netherlands. Here the results of a survey by the research department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries were presented to the fishing community and the government. It was revealed that a large majority of fishermen's wives are involved in fisheries activities themselves and that the fisheries and the family enterprise gave a very important meaning to their lives. Nevertheless their role was still an informal one and women were not participating in formal fishery organizations. It was felt that this was the reason for the preservation of traditional gender relations in the fisheries and the continuing weak social position of the wives of Dutch fishermen.

Despite the good attendance at the symposium and the lively discussions (*see Yemaya no 4, August 2000*), there was no follow-up organized, either by the government or by fisher organizations. So it was the women from fishing communities that met during the symposium and wanted to continue the discussion, who took the initiative to meet again. On 22 June we had our first meeting at the fish auction of Urk, where it was decided to form the Network. After this meeting many more followed. Initially these were held at the fish auctions of the various fishery regions of our country. Of late, we have held our meetings at the offices of our two national fisher(men) organizations.

Who is in our network?

In our network there are wives of boat owners and crew from all important fishery regions of our country, representing all the different sectors fishing in Dutch waters. These women are involved in a range of activities in the family fishing enterprise, such as administration, responding to the concerns of the crew, contacting and dealing with banks, insurance companies, auctions, etc., cleaning, supplying groceries, and more. Some of the women are co-owners of the enterprise, together with their husbands. Some women have jobs, mostly in shops or as house help. The network is open for all women who feel concerned about the future of the fisheries and the fishing community and want to be actively involved in influencing present developments in a process of positive change.

What do we do?

We discuss and study a large variety of fisheries issues, such as concerns of the crew, fisheries management, fish trade, fisher organizations, and fisheries policies and politics. We exchange information and experiences about the different fisheries sectors. We also discuss the role and position of women in fisheries. We participate (and speak at) public meetings and maintain contacts with organizations that influence policy-making and with the media. We also aspire to build contacts with fishermen's wives in other European countries.

What have been the highlights?

- We have visited various fish auctions in our country and learned about present developments in Dutch fish trade.
- We have had meetings with each of the two Dutch national fishermen's organizations to discuss with them the objectives of our Network and the support we wish to receive from them.
- During the North Sea Crisis of February/March 2001 we sent letters to our Minister of Fisheries, Members of Parliament and the press about the negative effects of closing large parts of our fishing grounds in the North Sea for our community. We also gave our first public speech during a large fishermen's meeting in Urk (*see Samudra no 28, April 2001*).
- We have participated in several public meetings concerning (the future of) Dutch fisheries, organized by the government or by fisher organizations and voiced the concerns of fishing

families. We hold the opinion that in fisheries policy *the focus should be shifted from the fishing boat to the people on the fishing boat.*

Our public participation has been well received so far.

- We studied together the Green Paper for the Common Fisheries Policy of the European Union. This helped us to have in-depth discussions about present developments in fisheries as well as the role of women in fisheries and to develop our own vision. We sent our response to the EU Fishery Commission and the EU Parliament. We distributed our response to governmental, fisher, environmental and various other organizations concerned with the future of European Fisheries. We also had an exchange with fishermen's wives of other European countries regarding the Green Paper and, in particular, on the prospects in it for the women of the fishing communities.



What have been our limitations so far?

- Although we are from the same country, we face problems as a result of differences in culture, class and age. There are differences in perceptions and attitudes, which sometimes leads to miscommunication. There are also differences in knowledge and experiences about fisheries. In

spite of this we have succeeded in staying together and to be open and respectful of each other. We try to build open and transparent relationships, where friendship is more important than status.

- Generally speaking our fishing communities are still very conservative in their perceptions about the role and status of women. Women, therefore, feel reluctant to join our network. All the women who have joined our network have the support of their husbands and also of their parents and in-laws.
- Although we receive support from both national fisher organizations we still feel that they want to patronize us. Initially our plan was to work closely with the two organizations. However, we now keep some distance because we feel they are not yet open to our concerns and ideas. By holding our meetings in their offices though, we do keep the door open to them.
- As we have decided to function as a network and not form a separate women's organization, we have no funds or institutional means. We also lack organizational experience. We depend on each one's personal capacity to contribute and we sometimes make use of the institutional resources of other organizations. This creates limitations, but also creates the opportunity for network building. It encourages the active participation of each one of us as we cannot depend on an office. Of course we readily make use of modern communication technology, such as the internet, that has become broadly accessible these days.

Those who want to get in touch with us and/or want to receive a copy of our objectives and our reaction to the Green Paper on the Common Fisheries Policy of the European Union, please send an e-mail to cornelie.quist@wolmail.nl

Europe/Netherlands

A village built with fish...

In Urk, the well-known fishing village of the Netherlands, a woman talks of her twenty-six years as a worker in the fish processing industry.

By Cornelia Quist, a member of the ICSF and contact person of the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands.

Our village is built with fish. We are a fishing community in heart and soul. With the largest fishing fleet of the Netherlands and also the biggest auction, we naturally also have an extensive fish-processing sector. In our village we only process fresh fish for consumption.

Most of the fish processing plants are small-scale. The very small ones have around 15 workers, while the others have 30 to 40 workers. The few large enterprises have around 250 workers. During the 26 years that I work now in the fish-processing sector, I have mostly worked in the small-scale plants. But presently I work in a large fish processing plant, which has much better working conditions.

The small-scale fish processing sector mainly does the primary level of processing, meaning they clean, strip and debone the fish. The large-scale enterprises, which are the chief buyers of the fish from the small-scale sector, process the fish further as high quality frozen fish in consumer packaging for supermarket chains. They have the capital and infrastructure to buy fresh fish from other domestic and international auctions. The small-scale enterprises are very dependent on the large-scale sector for both the supply and demand of fish and this is the main reason of the vulnerability of the small-scale sector of our village.

Working in the fish processing plants has a low status in the rest of the society, but not in Urk. Practically all the women of our village have worked for at least a couple of years in fish processing. Women here generally have no aspirations for higher education. As soon as they are 15 or 16 years, women begin to work in the fish processing plants as stand-by workers. Their first motivation is to save money for their wedding and to furnish their house. The piece-rate system and the possibility of long working days, give young women, who still have the physical strength for this, an opportunity to earn a lot of money in a short period of time.

They can only hold on to this stressful working life for three or four years. After that they get all kind of physical complaints. But the young women also do not work any longer than this, as they marry here at a young age and have kids soon thereafter.

Married women also work as stand-by workers, but generally only for a few hours per day. These women primarily work to buy extra things for the household or for some 'pocket money' as they call it. As we all know each other in this village, the fish processing enterprise just calls a few women when there is a good fish supply and a need for labour, and these women, in a short while, recruit other women.

There are not many women like me, who see their work in the processing industry as a real job and as a major livelihood activity. This is understandable because the working conditions are very hard. When I worked in the small plants, it happened quite often that we were sent home, because there was no fish supply. And in particular I, being unmarried, suffered from this more, because it was always the unmarried women who were sent home first. We also were only given temporary contracts and we had no regular wages.

I know that this situation still has not changed. I also have not seen a real wage increase in the last 15 years. The work is physically very demanding, monotonous and stressful. The absence through sickness is high. There are no chances for any promotion.

No, this is not the same for the men workers. There are also men, who do the same type of work as the women, but we can see that men are more often regular workers with a permanent labour contract. This is because men are considered as the breadwinners. Because they are regular workers, there are better chances for them to get a wage increase, a promotion and to undergo training. All the workers who operate machines are men, all the foremen are men, all the higher positions are occupied by men. This is why we women get no ear from our superiors when we have complaints. These men say that our complaints are 'typical women's moaning'.

In the fish processing plants of Urk, the workers are not, in general, members of the trade union. If you are a member, the chances are high that you will be boycotted in getting employment. But the trade unions are also not really trying to get a foothold in Urk. I once

have tried to get the support of the trade union, when again only unmarried women were sent out of their jobs. But there was no response from the union. The fish processing industry is one of the rare industries in our country with no collective labour agreement.

But in the large processing plants, the working conditions have improved. In the company where I work at present, we have a worker's council since 1998, where we can go with our complaints. But as women we still feel many barriers to open our mouth, as there are still only men in the management.

Although the large processing plants have mechanized a great deal of the work, there is still a big need for human labour in the processing of fresh fish. Women are still the major labour source for the menial type of jobs in the sector, certainly here in Urk. But I think that the labour supply for the fish processing industry may become a problem in Urk in the near future. Although our community still has conservative ideas about women, we can also see here that more and more women today have aspirations to obtain better education and better jobs. Besides that, there is more competition from other industries in our region, which offer better working conditions and better wages.

The people of Urk are known for being hard workers and therefore very much in demand. I have heard that in other places there are more migrant workers now entering the fish-processing sector, because Dutch workers are not willing to do these types of jobs. I don't know if this will happen in Urk, because we are still a very closed community.

If the fish processing industry wants to keep its local labour force, it will have to adjust the labour conditions and listen to women's needs. We can see this already happening in the large processing plants. But most probably this will be at the cost of the small-scale sector.

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FROM EUROPE/ Netherlands

Vocal, independent, but still invisible

Women ('wives') of fishing families in the Netherlands want to participate in fishermen's organizations, but meet many barriers.

by **Cornelie Quist, a member of ICSF and contact person for the Women in Fisheries' Network of the Netherlands**

Women ('wives') of fishing families in the Netherlands, are not members of fishermen's organizations, in spite of their work in the fisheries enterprise. One reason is that the membership is based on boat-ownership and it is primarily the men who own the fishing boats. Another reason is that the women feel that the organizations are a real bulwark of the male gender, where they feel out of place. This is one of the outcomes of a survey on the needs and aspirations of wives of fishermen in the Netherlands, implemented by the research department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fishery (1999). The survey was also the reason to call for a meeting of women of fishing families, where they could give their reactions and discuss their position.

The attendance at the meeting was very good. Women of about 60 percent of the Dutch artisanal fishery ("kotter") sector had responded to the survey, of which about 50 percent had come to the meeting. As the survey had only covered the wives of boat owners, the large majority of participants came from this back

ground. There were only a few women boat co-owners and also only a few wives of 'mates' (workers).

Practically all the women indicated that they were involved in the fishing enterprise, but mostly in activities on the land, such as administration, book-keeping, contacting the banks, auctions and other business, and last but not least, in cleaning and buying provisions. Only a few women were involved in actual fishing. Women in families with smaller fishing boats clearly worked more hours for the enterprise, compared to those with larger boats.

The survey furthermore revealed that around 60 percent of the women are involved in decision-making regarding investments, finances and labour for the enterprise. The women indicated that their involvement in the fishing enterprise is primarily because they like it and because they are interested. Another reason is—and this counts primarily for the smaller enterprises—that their participation is seen as an important money-saver.

Despite this clear participation of women in the fisheries business, they are practically invisible 'in the books'—they do not receive a salary, neither are they insured—and in the fishermen's organizations.

Also, though the large majority of women indicated their interest in fisheries policies, only a few women had accompanied their husbands to a meeting of the fishermen's organization. This non-participation of women in fishermen's organizations became the major issue discussed during the meeting.

The discussion was far from half-hearted. The women were literally queuing up near the microphone, because all had something to say. I nevertheless observed a clear difference in response by age and by regional culture. Women of the older generation and the more conservative (protestant) cultures indicated that they were satisfied with the way the men ran the organizations and they did not see why women should become members. They were happy with their informal status and felt that they already had sufficient influence by participating in decision-making regarding the finances of the fishing enterprise. They also felt that the organization played an important social role for the men, who already had a poor social life because of their long trips at sea. They felt that the men would feel better if there were no women around.

Women of the younger generations, on the contrary, clearly indicated that they would like to participate in the fishermen's organization and become members. The main reason they gave is that they feel part of the fishing enterprise and, therefore, are very interested in fisheries policies. They also indicated that they want to participate for their personal growth. Some of these younger women have already participated in local meetings. Nevertheless, all women agreed that it was not easy for a woman to enter fishermen's organizations, as they are seen as true male bastions.

Women said that their husbands did not like them participating in meetings of the organization, because they felt that *women are too critical* and this made them feel embarrassed in front of other men. The men also did not like their wives to be one of the few women in the meeting, because they were afraid of gossip.

One woman said that she was the only woman participating in the local fishermen's organization and the men, at first, looked strangely at her. She also realized that she had to know her business well, because one mistake from her side would immediately call for facetious reactions from the men. But after some time, the men had got used to her participation and now respect her. Another woman said that, at first, she had not understood all the technical topics that the men were discussing during the meetings, but that this had encouraged her to read and educate herself. Now she is a full participant in the discussions.

It was discussed how to improve the participation of women in the fishermen's organizations. At first the women directed their questions to the chairperson of the Dutch Fishermen's Union, who had also been invited to this meeting, to ask him why invitations were sent only to the men for meetings. Because of this the women felt they were not welcome to participate. The chairperson answered that there was no conscious policy to invite men only, but that it happens this way because the membership is based on boat-ownership and that the owners are primarily men. But he immediately promised to send the invitation next time to the husband and the wife.

Some male participants suggested that the first step should be to involve women in the local organizations, but this was not shared by some of the women. One woman shared that she always attended the meetings of the national union, because it was there where the most important matters were discussed. She also said that if women would only participate in local organizations, they would not have the chance to occupy influential positions.

Another suggestion was to form a separate women's organization within the national union. This did not find sufficient support, because the women were afraid not to be taken seriously by the union. However, in the end it was agreed to start an informal network to explore possibilities and strategies and a group of women volunteered to be contact persons for such a network.

The chairperson of the Dutch Fishermen's Union indeed kept his promise. The first national meeting of the fishermen's organization was well-attended by women. Towards the end of June the 15 contact persons of the Women in Fisheries Network of the Netherlands had their first meeting in the fishing village of Urk. The women were from all over the country and represented different fishery sectors, but mostly the small-scale fishery (shrimp fishers). The wives of 'mates' (workers) were also represented.

There was a lively discussion again. I pointed out to the women how surprising it was that they were so vocal and independent, but still invisible. The women mostly blamed themselves for this, because they had not taken the initiative to change this situation. Although there were differences of interests, the women were successful in arriving at a common agenda. On top of this is the need for recognition of the role of women in fisheries, both formally and in the society. I can not tell you more, because we first want to further discuss our strategy. In September we shall meet again. I will keep you informed.

From Europe/ Netherlands**Remembrance of things past**

In Zoutkamp, a fishing village in the north of the Netherlands, an old fisherwoman speaks about her youth and the changes she has seen

by **Cornelie Quist, a member of ICSF**

Those days, in the early years of the 20th century, we suffered terrible poverty. The families were big—10 to 14 children—and we all had to work from early morning to late evening. When I was a kid, I had no time to play. After school, we were peeling shrimps, often till late in the evening. In the middle of the pile of shrimps was a bowl with water to wet our eyes to keep us awake.

When I was 13, I went to work in the sheds to remove mussel shells. This was done in secrecy, because child labour was illegal, and when the police came, we had to run and hide. We also had some income from grading sardines and bundling seaweed.

In fishing families, the mother played a central role. The fathers were most of the time at sea those days. Most women had a small store at home, where they sold sweets, snacks, soap and other small consumer items. These shops guaranteed a daily income for our basic needs. Nevertheless, it happened quite often that we children went to sleep without the evening meal, as there was no money to buy food. Particularly in the winter, times were very difficult. We had to buy our basic provisions on credit and then hope that in the fishing season the catch was good enough to repay our debts.

The government did not do much for us those days. There was a public work programme for unemployed men. The work was to carry sand from a ship. The work was so depressing and the food so bad that the men went on strike. But the government only told us to pray, so everything would become all right. The people did not believe this, but had no other choice than to continue.

The highlight of my youth was the yearly fair. A carousel was brought by ship and all of us children had by then already selected his or her horse to ride. On Saturday afternoon, we all went in our best clothes to the fair. There was also a beautiful doll, dressed in

lace, like a princess. We could look at her for hours.

Today all this has changed. Shrimp peeling is not done by the women of this village anymore. The shrimp trader in our village of those days is today the owner of the biggest shrimp business enterprise in Europe. It not only buys shrimps locally, but from all over the world. The shrimps are taken for peeling to Poland and Morocco, where wages are low, and labour and hygiene laws less strict. During the past years many of our fishermen have stopped fishing too, as they could not afford the high capital investments that fishing requires today. People are no longer poor these days, but, looking back, I often long again for those days. Despite all the poverty, life was much more sociable. We were always together and could still enjoy the small things of life. The village was much more alive and the fishery was what bound us all together.