

THE SEA IS THE LIMIT

The Azores are an archipelago of nine beautiful, volcanic islands in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, located around 1,500 km from the south-western coast of Portugal. The islands' economy strongly depends on three main sectors: agriculture, tourism and fisheries. But while tourism seems to be booming, and agriculture remaining a rather stable source of income, the fishery sector has suffered some substantial setbacks over the last decade.



The fishery sector in the Azores is based on very old traditions

The fishery sector in the Azores is characterised by its traditional, artisan approach, using techniques, tools and boats passed on from father to son. These often unique traditions are now threatened by several factors. Firstly, European restrictions on fishing, putting limits on the species and quantity of fish that can be caught, have hit the Azorean islands harder than elsewhere in Europe. Being in the middle of the Atlantic, with the seabed rapidly becoming extremely deep at a short distance from the coast, it is already very difficult to catch a wide variety of fish, let alone catching enormous quantities of them. Another serious problem relates to the state of the

harbour infrastructure and fishing fleet, both in urgent need of renovation. Most of the typically small ports operating on the islands lack basic facilities such as cold storage and machinery to lift boats out of the water. The fleet, consisting of more than 80% of boats shorter than 9 metres, is also ageing – boats lack storage possibilities, decks or cabins. Their capacity is next to nothing compared to the huge, high-tech ships from other countries, fishing just outside their exclusive economic area.

Several social and cultural problems, partly a consequence of the above threats, are also weighing heavily on the already dramatic looking situation. Unemployment among fishermen is high, but hidden: 85% of all workers in the sector do not (or rather, are unable to) work full-time. The workforce is also ageing fast, as young people are no longer interested in pursuing a career in a sector where their future seems highly uncertain, and there is a danger of important skills getting lost. Finally, formal education and training levels of those working in the fishery sector are very low, but so far activities to up-skill workers and help them modernise have been rather unsuccessful, and have failed to address the community's real needs.

CHANGING TRADITIONS

The Mudança de Maré Development Partnership (DP) brought together a highly diverse range of nine different actors and many more local stakeholders to tackle the multi-dimensional problems faced by the Azorean fishery sector. Local development associations and organisations / cooperatives representing those operating in the sector, such as the Azorean Maritime Association and the Porto de Abrigo Commercial Cooperative (both also co-responsible for coordinating the DP), were involved to ensure grass-roots contact and consultation with the fishing community and to bring in on-the ground know-how. Together, the cooperatives represented more than 500 boats (and their crew). Youth associations took part to make young people aware of the many benefits of working in the fishery sector and to show them the importance of proper education and training. Two women's rights organisations were involved to address the specific gender problems characterising the fishing industry, heavily dominated by men and "male customs", and to make women aware of their potential in the community. A cinematographic company was drawn into the DP to visually improve the negative image of the

sector. Last but certainly not least, the Azorean regional authority for agriculture, fishing and environment got on board to directly link Mudança's activities with policy-making.

"Most of our partners had already worked together on previous occasions", comments Luis Rodrigues, coordinator of Mudança de Maré, "but we used EQUAL to bring together – for the first time – every segment of the fishing community, including organisations for women and young people, without whom the sector would not be able to survive".

Mudança de Mare was developed around three major axes: Modernisation; Reorientation; and Valorisation. A total of 39 separate but strongly inter-linked interventions were developed to modernise skills, techniques and infrastructure, to assist workers in finding alternative ways of making a living in the sector (for example through tourism or alternating fishing methods and species fished), to protect the nautical patrimony, to increase the confidence and spirit of collaboration among those working in the fishery sector and to improve its negative image. An in-depth "diagnosis" of the sector, looking at the overall socio-economic situation, profiling employment in the sector and identifying and forecasting new trends and opportunities, laid a solid basis for the DP's activities, making sure that every single intervention was well-targeted, relevant and addressing real problems and needs rather than perceived ones.

GETTING WOMEN ON BOARD



Fishing is a profession still dominated by men

In a traditional society such as the fishing community, the position of women is often limited to "housewife" and "helping hand" to the men when necessary - but women can of course be so much more than that. Generations of women living in the Azores have had fathers, brothers and husbands working in the fishery sector. They have helped to prepare bait, nets and traps, assisted in the unloading of their boats, and contributed to the further processing of the catch – and in doing so they have learned some valuable skills.

Mudança de Maré sought to further develop the existing knowledge and skills of women, and to make them aware of their rights. Women who assist in fishery related activities are hardly ever paid for their help, and therefore have no access to social security. The DP organised an 8-month training programme for 12 women from different backgrounds and ages, comprising 6 months of theoretical courses (including information technology, English, administration, health and sexuality) and 2 months of on-the-job training. Specific emphasis was placed on how their new skills could assist the fishing sector, for example by taking care of administration and accounting. It is hoped that, in the longer term, the women will be confident enough to set up small associations or cooperatives to provide support to the fishing sector against payment. Mudança de Maré also organised get-togethers with women from the other islands, and even invited the participants to take part in a conference in Spain, to exchange their experiences and views with women from fishery communities abroad.

"Meeting women from another country, even from another Azorean island, was a real eye-opener" says Margarida, one of the participants in the training programme. "It made me realise that traditions and habits vary enormously in Europe, and even between two islands of the same Archipelago! For example, on our island (Sao Miguel), it is considered inappropriate for a woman to work – or even set foot sometimes – on a boat. And on the other island (Terceira), just a few kilometres away, women do it all the time, and there are even some that navigate their own boat." When asked about the reaction of their husbands to their intensive participation in the courses and other activities organised by Mudança, both confirm that initially they met some serious scepticism. "But when my husband saw how much I enjoyed and learned from the courses, he actually started helping me, by contributing to household tasks, etc", comments Lucilia, another student. Both Margarida and Lucilia consider their participation in the Fishermen's Fair in 2004 their main achievement. "For the first time, a group of women, all students taking part in the courses, occupied a stand with foodstuffs at the Fair – something which would have been impossible to even imagine some years ago. Some of the women were afraid to participate when

we first discussed the possibility, and there were intense discussions. But in the end we all agreed to go through with it and it was a success!”

HIGH-TECH SOLUTIONS TO STRENGTHEN TRADITIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

With such a high number of permanent partners and local actors involved, based on different islands in the Azorean archipelago, Mudança de Maré realised that it was essential to make sure that all those active in the DP could easily communicate and have access to information and products coming from the other partners. For this purpose, the SAD (Documentary Administration System) was developed. SAD is an information database connecting all partners online, providing them with a central storage space for all documents they produce, as well as email and other tools such as templates and financial management tools.

SAD is a very sophisticated communication tool, as it includes some smart solutions to problems often encountered when setting up shared information systems. All documents entered on the system are automatically coded according to a series of predefined references and terms. The code shows which user created the document, and what category and type of information is included. Users uploading documentation can, through a single click, invite all other users to validate it – this is important when they are, for example, jointly working on a document or where the specific approval of all partners is required. The search engine specifically developed for SAD enables users to quickly get access to relevant information. Partners have different access rights: most can only see the information stored by their own organisation, whilst others, responsible for example for monitoring and coordination, can have access to all documents placed on the system. In fact, SAD strongly helped the difficult task of monitoring and evaluating a complex project such as Mudança de Maré, as it gave direct access to reporting on physical and financial progress.

“SAD was developed in less than two months, using low-cost or free programming tools and applications.” explains Judite Fernandes, who has been responsible for the creation of the system. “We developed a clear guide and trained people so that they could easily start working with the system, and reactions have been very positive. Right now, hundreds of documents have been stored on SAD, which shows that people consider it a reliable and useful tool. We have recently presented SAD to the university, and several other organisations who expressed an interest in the system as a new online tool for archiving. Costs for building the system are low but its potential is simply enormous”.

SCOPING NEW HORIZONS – MAINSTREAMING TRANSNATIONAL APPROACHES



Modernising production processes is essential for revamping the fishery sector

Mudança de Maré wasn't the only EQUAL partnership helping the fishery sector to adapt to the demands and trends of the new millennium. The majority of the European Union's borders are defined by the sea, and in a great deal of countries fishing is an important economic activity. The Azorean DP joined forces with three of these countries: Spain, Italy and France, combining 4 DPs which all had fishing as their central theme. Together they formed the Peche et Aquaculture transnational partnership.

The overall aim of the transnational partners was to influence the EU's Common Fishing Policy, by showing new approaches and interesting practices from the ground. However, several exchange meetings were necessary to identify common viewpoints, as the partners soon found out that in a few cases their interests were clearly conflicting. For example, whilst Spain was in favour of

obtaining access to other national maritime territories (having a relatively small part of the Ocean itself), the presence of the large Spanish fishing ships in the coastal waters of Portugal was exactly what the Mudança de Maré DP had identified as one of the key threats to the Azorean economy.

“It was actually extremely useful to discuss our different views and experiences, as this gave us a much better understanding of the specific challenges that each of us were facing. The Spanish DP realised that our concerns regarding access were valid, and not simply based on ‘patriotic’ feelings to maintain exclusive rights on our own territories. Of course we couldn’t agree on everything, but we learned to respect each other’s opinions and came forward with a series of common recommendations for EU fishing policies”, says Francisco Liberato Fernandes from the Porto de Abrigo cooperative.

The transnational partners also organised several bilateral exchanges of a more practical, concrete nature. Italy’s legislation on tourism in the fishery sector inspired Mudança de Maré on how to best go about adapting their own policies and legislation in this area. The regional authority has currently proposed new legislation to help the fishing community contribute to the tourism sector, using the Italian approach as a model.

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