

# “Fish for the Poor”

## Competing with Chickens

Fish has long been known as the “food of the poor”. Yet increasingly, it is becoming a food of the rich. The international trade in fisheries products has been growing rapidly, at an annual rate of about 18 per cent in the 1970s and nearly 10 per cent in the 1980s, and the net flow is from poorer nations to rich ones. In 1988-1990, developed nations imported 76 per cent by weight of the food fish traded internationally — about 14 per cent of total world fish production — while developing countries imported 24 per cent. Much of the trade is in high-value products such as shrimp, tuna, squid and salmon, but fishmeal for animal feed and fertilizer is also a significant component.

While the export trade has boosted foreign exchange earnings for Third World governments, its impact on many local communities has been severe. In many countries, such as Malaysia and Surinam, exports have increased while total production has dropped, resulting in significant declines in the amount of fish available for local consumption. However, major exporting countries such as Senegal, India and Mexico have maintained *per capita* supplies despite the drain of the export trade.

*Per capita* figures for fish supplies give no indication of how the supplies are distributed. Malnutrition generally results not from a lack of food in the community but from the skewed distribution of the food that is available. The inequity results because some people are too poor or too powerless to make an adequate claim on the food that is available. In a market economy, fish products, like other foods, tend to gravitate towards those who can pay for them. Fish ceases to be seen as “food for the poor” and becomes instead a market commodity, yielding profits for those who control the market. A net gain of benefits to the nation as a whole (in terms of foreign exchange earnings, for example) can mean a net loss to the poor. In Senegal, for instance, “species once commonly eaten throughout the country are now either exported or available only to the elite.”

In the period 1988-1990, Northern consumers ate almost three times as much fish per head as people in the South. Moreover, this gap is widening in many regions. In the years 1978-1988, the amount of fish eaten in Europe rose by 23 per cent and in Asia by some 27 per cent, the latter accounted for largely by a doubling of Japan's post-war fish consumption. In Africa, however, the *per capita* supply decreased by 2.9 per cent, and in South America, it decreased by 7.9 per cent.

### Competing with Chickens and Pigs

In addition to the trade in fish for direct human consumption, some 30 per cent of the world's fish catch is converted into fishmeal and half of this is exported to developed nations to serve as poultry and pig feed. In 1990, the fishmeal trade amounted to about 16 million tonnes in live weight equivalent. Fish used as feed produces far less nutrition for humans than would be obtained by eating the fish directly. Moreover, while the “low quality” fish used for feed is most likely to be consumed by poor

people, the pork, chicken or other products that result from the use of the fish for feed would otherwise probably be consumed by richer people. Using fish as feed thus redirects fish from the poor to richer consumers. Some of the raw material that is used for making fishmeal would be welcomed by poorer people for their own consumption. Fisheries sociologist John Kearney illustrates the conflict:

“Boys from the neighbourhood near a fish processing plant in Talcahuano, Chile, jump into the backs of the moving dump trucks that carry jack mackerel the single block from the wharf to the processing plant. The boys kick as many fish as they can out of the truck before it reaches the plant, while others gather the fish from the pavement to take home or sell on street corners.”

Poor people are, in effect, in competition with livestock for low-quality fish products. The substantial profits to be made from raising pigs and poultry assures that it is the animals which win that competition. However, given the large quantities of fish that are discarded as by-catch, under judicious management it should be possible to provide edible food for the local poor while maintaining a profitable fishmeal industry from the genuine waste.

### The Lion's Share

The new law of the sea as set out in UNCLOS has affected the worldwide allocation of fish in two stages. First, with Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) extending everywhere out to 200 miles from the coastline, developed countries gained larger increases in jurisdiction over fishing grounds than developing ones. For instance, five developed countries — the US, France (through its island protectorates), Australia, New Zealand and Japan — now between them control 33 per cent of total EEZ area.

Second, because UNCLOS mandates that “surplus stocks” in an EEZ be made available to fleets from other countries, many developing countries which do not have the capacity to exploit their EEZs fully are licensing foreign vessels to fish in their waters — the catches are counted as being of the countries whose flags these vessels fly. Overall, more than a third of the fish caught off the West African coast, for example, is now taken by foreign fleets. Such licensing results not only in the effective export of fish but also of jobs.

The worldwide competition for the world's fisheries is depleting fish stocks and steadily increasing prices. Under these conditions, the fish that remain tend to move away from the poor towards the rich. For many people, the impact of declining fisheries amounts to little more than an inconvenience — they can get their food and protein elsewhere. For those who depend on fish in their diets, however, the prospects are ominous.

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A full copy of George Kent's article “Fisheries, Nutrition and Nutrition Rights” is available from the author, Department of Political Science, University of Hawai'i, Honolulu, Hawai'i 96822-2281, USA. Fax: +1 (808) 956 6877.