African Union

FishGov 2 Project

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Requirements for Operationalization of the AfCFTA to Empower Informal Women and Youth Enterprises in Fisheries and Aquaculture Value Chains

Executive Summary

While African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCTA) presents a development opportunity to generate significantly more value and socio-economic benefit for the African women and youth fish value chain actors (VCAs) through intra-regional trade, attention need to be directed at addressing marginalisation and gender-based barriers. The bulk of intra-regional trade in fish and fishery products tends to be informal; and the majority of the people involved in informal cross-border fish trade are vulnerable, and their businesses fragile, in part due to the connotations of being involved in an activity that is not legally regulated. This Advocacy Note urges for the need to equitably optimise the benefits of AfCFTA for women and youth by (i) implementing gender transformative approaches; (ii) supporting capacity building initiatives to empower women and youth to participate effectively in intra-regional fish trade; (iii) revising national trade policies with the aim to integrate fish in the product portfolio/annex, harmonize, reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers for women fish traders, including corruption, road blocks and unnecessary fees for cross-border women fish traders; (iv) investing in regional (REC) collaborative mechanisms that support RECs to develop and implement national, regional and continental trade development and facilitation plans that are coherent with the regional integration agenda; and (v) adopting innovative financing mechanisms to support small and medium cross-border women fish traders to access affordable financing.

Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents a development opportunity to generate significantly more value and socio-economic benefit from the African fish production sector through intra-regional trade. The AfCFTA offers potential benefits for medium, small, and micro size (MSMS) value chain actors (e.g. producers, processors and informal cross border traders) in the fisheries and aquaculture sector, particularly women and youth. More over the AfCTA's value chain diagnosis and findings have shown that that Based on these criteria, processed fish and meat to be the most relevant agricultural products to be promoted, noting that the potential to create many jobs on the continent, a high proportion of which are youth and women, considering that women contribute >60% of labour agriculture and agro-processing (AfCFTA 2021). However, to realise this window of opportunity, well-targeted capacity building measures are required to ensure that informal women and youth are not marginalized from the value chain development trajectory by better capacitated commercial enterprises.

The AfCFTA, which aims to promote industrial development through diversification, regional value chain development, and agricultural development is expected to eliminate import tariffs and open new markets thereby creating opportunities for increased fish production, processing and value-addition. In addition to unlocking the potential of the intra-Africa fish trade the agreement also opens enhanced opportunities for Africa's participation in the global trade in fish-based products (Albano, 2023). Through increased trade and valorization of fish-based products, the AfCFTA is expected to contribute significantly to economic development, creating jobs, eliminating poverty, improving food security, and promoting gender equality (FAO. 2021). When fully implemented, the AfCFTA will create a huge African single market for fish and fish-based products of about 1.7 billion people and consumer and business spending of about US$6.7 trillion by 2030 (Albano, 2023). The AfCFTA will potentially pivot subsistence and informal participants into more empowered value chain actors realizing greater value from their products (FAO, 2021). However, it is recognized that well-targeted support measures will be required to empower informal actors and youth to participate on a level playing field in a modernised and capital-efficient value chains envisaged by the AfCFTA (AfCFTA, 2020).

The African fisheries and aquaculture sector is positioned as a key development sector in the Africa's Blue Economy Strategy (AU-IBAR, 2019), for which the AfCFTA is a key enabling policy. The fish and aquatic products sector are valued at US$24 Billion, providing 14 million jobs and expected to provide 17.7 million jobs by 2063 in areas such as value chain development, intra-African trade, reduction in post-harvest losses and containment of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing (AU-IBAR, 2019). Africa's capture fisheries produce around 10 million tons of fish with a gross value-addition estimated at US$ 21 billion or 1.26% of the combined GDP (US$1.9 trillion) of all African countries AU-IBAR (2019). In 2018, the fisheries sector employed about 13 million people of which 7 million were fishers and 6 million were in the post-harvest value chain segment. The African aquaculture sector is growing rapidly, averaging >10% growth per annum and is valued at US$ 2.77 billion. Therefore, it is expected to fill the growing fish supply-demand gap up to 2063. In 2018, there were about 1.2 million aquaculture farmers across the continent.

Small-scale fisheries account for more than 60% of Africa's fisheries production and almost all the catches from the sector are destined for human consumption. Trade within and between regions of Africa is substantial, and some cases, greater than the export of fish to countries outside of the African continent

(Kaunda, et. al. 2018). For example, fish trade between ECOWAS countries and other African countries (inter-regional trade) represented the highest proportion of fish exports, followed by trade between ECOWAS countries (intra-regional trade), and then by trade from ECOWAS countries to the European Union (37%, 31% and 24%, respectively) (University of Dakar & WorldFish, 2016). However, the bulk of intra-regional trade in fish and fishery products tends to be informal. The Informal Cross Border Trade (ICBT) in the SADC region accounts for approximately 30 - 40 percent of total intra-SADC trade and value estimated at US$17.6 billion (FAO, 2017). It is estimated that over 70% of the informal cross border traders in the SADC, Western and Central Africa region are women (Afrika and Ajumbo, 2012; FAO, 2017; OECD, 2017). Most intra-regional trade is conducted as ICBT (Afrika and Ajumbo 2012; Chiukira 2021). It is therefore imperative that specific AfCFTA strategies to include informal and small to medium enterprises in the opportunities of the fish product value chain are implemented, otherwise there is a risk of larger value chain players marginalizing the less capacitated actors, particularly informal women and youth.

Women play a significant role in the post-catch activities of the fisheries and aquaculture value chain, with 92% employed in the post-harvest activities. The role of women in fisheries and aquaculture is crucial to food security in ensuring the distribution and availability of fish supplies to households. For example, on the border between Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, traders are predominantly women from villages and often married to fishermen; and they process fresh fish bought from their husbands, crossing borders to sell at markets in the adjacent country (Anoh, et al 2017). Women make significant contributions to food security, livelihoods and household incomes in the sector, however, their contributions are often not sufficiently recognised or adequately considered. Besides, people involved in informal cross-border fish trade are vulnerable and their businesses fragile, in part due to the connotations of being involved in an activity that is not legally regulated (Kaunda et al., 2018). Vulnerability is often more serious for women, with over 95% of female fish processors and traders in Ghana facing livelihood insecurity (Appiah et al 2020).

The fishery and aquaculture sub-sectors are performing well below their potential in terms of production tonnage and value addition. The primary reasons underpinning this underperformance are: 1) many of Africa's fisheries and ecosystems are poorly managed resulting in sub-optimal harvest levels and high IUU fishing losses, 2) high post-harvest losses of over 33% (Abelti and Teka, 2025) and 3) the relatively low current contribution of aquaculture to total fish production. The African Natural Resource Center (ANRC, 2022) estimated that Africa could increase its production of fish from around 10 million tons to 15 - 19.5 million tons by 2050 if these issues were addressed through systematic and coherent blue economy strategies. The African fisheries and aquaculture value chain is projected to grow due to rising demand and increased aquaculture production. The trend is towards formalization of the fisheries value chain driven by urbanization and growing demand, cold chain development, and policies such as the African Continent Free Trade Agreement Initiative (AfCFTA). The AfCFTA has a pivotal role in supporting a more efficient fisheries value chains through facilitating improved fish primary production and post-harvest value, trade infrastructure, and market access through reduced tariffs and efficient borders. The expected growth in production and value open creates a window of opportunity for achieving equitable participation by women and creates new opportunities for Africa's youth.

The AfCFTA also has a critical role to play in addressing the challenge of food and nutrition insecurity in the continent through the enhanced production of fish and aquatic products, also known as "blue foods". The prevalence of undernourishment in Africa stands at an alarming 20% and is rising (FAO, 2020). Aquatic foods are an essential contributor to Africa's food systems with fish and fish-based products supplying 20% or more of the animal protein in Africa (FAO, 2017) and providing food and nutritional security to 200 million people (Bené and Heck, 2005). Nonetheless, Africa's consumption of aquatic food is relatively low, at approximately 10kg/capita/annum compared to the world average of 20.5kg (FAO, 2022). Reasons for low consumption include population growth outpacing supply, and high post-harvest losses due to factors such as poor infrastructure and underdeveloped cold-chains (Bova and Britz, 2023). Thus, unless Africa increases its production of fish, demand for fish products will continue outstrip supply and Africa will remain a net importer of fish to sustain domestic consumption (AU-IBAR, 2019). The AfCFTA therefore has a pivotal role to play in enhancing Africa's fish production through infrastructure development to promote the growth of aquaculture and sustainable fisheries, the reduction of post-harvest losses, and access to markets.

Problem Statement

The AfCFTA is expected to unlock a sectoral transformation that will generate significantly value from fisheries and aquatic products. The AfCFTA 'Futures Report' (AfCFTA, 2020) recognizes the gender challenge noting that i) over 70% of cross border trade is conducted by women who are mostly informal traders, and ii) women and youth might only access limited gains in agriculture (and fisheries) due to barriers in accessing finance, productive resources and other assets. This, combined with expected increased foreign direct investment (FDI) flows producing high productivity and better equipped business operations based on efficiencies and economies scale economies, may broaden existing inequalities and further exclude women informal traders who operate largely outside of the regulatory framework.

MSMS value chain actors in fisheries and aquaculture face several challenges that may hinder them from seizing the socio-economic benefits created by AfCFTA including:

- Structural marginalization of women and youth in terms of resource ownership and control;
- Low literacy levels which make it difficult for them to comply with various trade rules and requirements such as long customs procedures, costly Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures, complex rules on product standards and licensing requirements; unless these procedures and processes are simplified;
- Limited access to markets and market information systems plus continued fragmentation of markets associated with informal trade;
- Limited access to business development services and affordable financing;
- Weak market and transport infrastructure;
- Safety and security of marginalized groups such as women and youths from source to markets;
- Inadequate climate-smart storage and processing infrastructure; and
- High vulnerability to climate change and other shocks such as pandemics.

The African fish trade is dominated by informal women processors and traders, many of whom live in impoverished circumstances

due to a lack of opportunity exacerbated by deep-rooted gender inequalities. For many women, the informal subsistence fish trade is their only livelihood option, but their capability to grow their enterprises and be competitive in a modern fish value chain is limited by the above-mentioned constraints, as well as patriarchal gender roles and gender-based violence (Alexander and Britz, 2023). The informal cross border fish trade is de facto illegal, increasing the vulnerability of women to bribery and sexual coercion, and reducing their competitiveness as value chain actors. For women to participate equitably in the African fisheries and aquaculture sector, and to access the opportunities available, strategies to address informal women's competitive disadvantages need to be mainstreamed into the African Continent Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) developmental approach. Failure to put concrete strategies for women's empowerment in place will result in a 'winners and losers' scenario, in which informal women will be further marginalized from the fish and aquatic products value chain by more competitive commercial enterprises monopolizing the opportunities for expanded market access and value addition that are enabled by the AfCFTA. Therefore, well planned programmes are required to empower women to be competitive actors in the modern fishery value chain. This requires empowerment with business and technical skills, access to and understanding of internet and communications technology, working capital, cold chain facilities, market networks, and phyto-sanitary and regulatory compliance.

AfCFTA targeted investment in women's empowerment in the fisheries and aquatic products value chain will unlock enhanced economic value and socio-economic benefits. Research demonstrates that when women thrive as value chain actors, the entire sector becomes more equitable, sustainable, and resilient. African women often drive innovation, quality control, and sustainability in fish processing and trading. Empowered women reinvest in their families and communities, improving nutrition, education, and health, creating a ripple effect of positive outcomes (Alexander and Britz, 2023). Supporting women thus enhances the economic, social, and environmental performance of the value chain.

In respect of youth, the projected fish and aquatic products sectoral growth potential opens a window of opportunity to empower the 'demographic wave' of young people entering the workplace to sustainably increase fish production and enhance sectoral productivity. In the rapidly evolving global economy driven by digital innovation and new technology, education is essential to empower Africa's youth to take advantage of the opportunities on offer in the fish and aquatic products value chain that will be opened by the AfCFTA. It is thus essential that well-planned fisheries and aquaculture sector capacity building, education and training is put in place to empower Africa's youth to grow fisheries and aquaculture production and national economic productivity over the next three decades and thereby contribute to realizing the aspirations of the AU Agenda 63 and the AfCFTA.

Gender Transformative and Youth Development Lessons and Best Practices

In order to optimize the benefits of AfCFTA in an equitable way for women and youth, advocacy is required for gender transformative approaches in its implementation to address the nuanced and varied challenges that women and youth face. If a gender transformative approach is not adopted, the agreement may widen the gender gap by negatively affecting women and youth-led MSMEs who rely on informal trade, including cross border trade (ICBT) for their livelihoods (FAO. 2021). The following gender transformative and youth empowerment lessons and best practices are highlighted to inform the implementation of the AfCFTA in respect of the fisheries and aquaculture sector:

- **Gender transformative best practices**
  - ***Support women's cooperative groups and networking.*** To enable cross-border and rural-urban fish trade requires a high level of organization and coordination by a wide range of national and international value chain players, including government and non-state stakeholders; as well as timely access to information on logistics and markets (Ayilu et al., 2016). Therefore, the establishment of women fish traders' associations will also help improve dialogue between traders and government agents involved in facilitating cross-border trade (Ayilu et al., 2016). The power of women's groups, networks and collaboration should be leveraged to share knowledge, technology and market information and enhance product aggregation to meet market demand. A good example of a gender transformative approach is the establishment of the Africa Women Fish Processors and Traders Network (AWFISHNET), founded in 2017. The AWFISHNET comprises of more than 40 national chapters/platforms of women involved in fish processing, trading and aquaculture and is recognized as an African Union institution. AWFISHNET activities include:
    - collaboration and cooperation;
    - sharing of best practices, experiences, technologies and learning together;
    - organization of symposia and trade fairs to promote their products;
    - safeguarding and protecting women's rights and welfare, for example, creating a safe working environment for women in the fish sector; and
    - advocacy for the integration of women in policy processes and decision making.
  - Access to mobile digital tools for market access, credit, e-wallets, information and networking;
  - Legal recognition of informal women traders e.g. women's trader group membership cards, regulatory review to legalise informal women trader's activities;
  - Equal and equitable access to education, training and capacity building.
  - Equal participation in leadership roles; and
  - Addressing gender-based violence, harmful discriminatory practices, and sexual exploitation (e.g. sexual coercion for access to fish and to avoid regulatory penalties).
- ***Youth education, training and capacity building.*** Youth targeted programmes to create awareness of the career opportunities in the fish and aquatic products sector, education curricula and bursaries, training, mentorship, internships and capacity building for youth entrants into the sector;
- ***Role of Regional Organisations.*** Experience demonstrates that Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have a key role to play to scale up trade facilitation of fish and fish-based products, with empowerment programmes for women and youth;
- ***Formalize export and import harmonization.*** While all countries in the RECs have committed themselves to free trade, the implementation of the trade liberalization schemes have not been accompanied by an increase in trade for community enterprises, including fish traders, because trading rules still generate costs and transactions through such procedures as approval applications (Ayilu et al 2016).

- ***Community-public-private partnerships (CPPP).*** An overarching 'best practice' to build fishery and aquaculture value chains is the promotion of community-public-private partnerships;
- ***Support to women and youth entrepreneurs.*** Develop long-term and customized business develop support services to address needs of the value chain actors specific to their stage of business growth (e.g. commercial mentors and partnerships for emerging aquaculture enterprises); and
- ***Land and Infrastructure.*** Government support for zoned and environmentally approved access to land for shore-based fish holding and processing; and water for aquaculture.
- ***Infrastructure development for fish processing,*** marketing trade take into account youth and gender needs – notably WASH, security and childcare (0-5 years) facilities and public health services

Recommendations

Value chain actors

1. Support capacity building initiatives to empower women and youth to participate effectively in fish trade;
2. Assist women and youth to acquire facilities, equipment and relevant knowledge and skills to enable process, package, label, store and transport safe and good quality fish products that meet the required standards;
3. Embrace innovative financing tools such as savings and credit cooperatives (SACOS) to finance their enterprises;
4. Embrace technology such as e-commerce and digitalization to enhance trade and financial inclusion;
5. Promote coaching and mentorship to encourage peer-to-peer learning;
6. Leverage collaboration and networking to strengthen women's and youth participation in new and formal markets;
7. Redefining existing business models and embrace climate-smart and inclusive business models;
8. Facilitate the establishment of women and youth organizations and strengthen their operations through training programmes in strategic planning, leadership, advocacy, business management and communications; and
9. Governments should revise their national trade policies with the aim to integrate fish in the product portfolio/annex, and harmonizing and reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers for women fish traders, including corruption, road blocks and unnecessary fees for cross-border women fish traders.

Public sector (national, regional and international government organisations) and non-state actors (NGOs, social enterprises, industry associations, and development organisations)

1. Integrate women and youth in future trade policies, trade missions, practices, and regulations to facilitate them to seize new opportunities created AfCFTA in fisheries and aquaculture sub-sectors;
2. Create enabling conditions to support women and youths to enhance their access to resources, technical and business knowledge and services, and finance;
3. Enhance the integration of women and youth-led MSMEs in the formal economy through strengthening and formalization of their enterprises;
4. Create programmes to address gender-based violence, sexual coercion and harmful discriminatory practices in the value chain;
5. Collect and document gender and age disaggregated data and information to appreciate and monitor the role of women and youth in fisheries and aquaculture
6. Put in place demonstration Centres for best practices to meet quality, safety and traceability requirements for fish and fishery products trade
7. Implement strategic interventions in fisheries handling, processing, storage and transportation infrastructures along the value chain to ensure the safety and quality of the traded products;
8. Capacity building of members of SME's to understand and appreciate the different market required standards and take the necessary actions to fulfil them in order for them to access these markets;
9. Creating and operationalizing reliable market information systems;
10. Develop critical cross-border trade infrastructure;
11. Harmonize and simplify trade standards and requirements such as licensing protocols, SPS measures, rules of origin certificate, eco-labelling etc.;
12. Invest in regional (REC) collaborative mechanisms by supporting RECs to enable them to develop and implement national, regional and continental trade development/facilitation plans that are coherent with the regional integration agenda.
13. Create innovative financing mechanisms to support small to medium actors to access affordable financing;
14. Collaborate and utilise the AU recognized Centers of Excellence and other knowledge-based institutions to bridge the R&D gap and build the capacity in fish processing, storage and transportation;
15. Create regional hubs to facilitate intra-African trade of fish-based products;
16. Create awareness and share information on the AfCFTA targeting small medium enterprises;
17. Promote consumption of fish and fish-based products so as to create market and income for the women fish traders and value chain actors;
18. Fast-track the development of infrastructure and provision of support services the government should embrace the principle of Private Public Partnership (PPP); and
19. Encourage keeping track of the volumes and value of trade conducted by micro, medium and small enterprises (MSME) and their contribution to the national GDP.

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