

Tropentag 2009
University of Hamburg, October 6-8, 2009
Conference on International Research on Food Security, Natural Resource Management
and Rural Development

Struggle for Survival: Women fish traders fighting institutional and cultural constraints in fishing communities in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

E. Udong ^a, A. Niehof ^a and A Van Tilburg ^b

^a Wageningen University, Sociology of Consumers and Households Group, Social Sciences Department, Hollandseweg 1, 6706 KN Wageningen, The Netherlands

^b Wageningen University, Marketing and Consumer Behaviour Group, Social Sciences Department, Hollandseweg 1, 6706 KN Wageningen, The Netherlands

Introduction

The Nigerian fishery is characterised by a rich resource base with a water area of 140,000 square kilometres and 42,000 square kilometres continental shelf area, adjacent to the country's 853-km coastline. The huge Niger Delta, the Rivers Niger and Benue, and their tributaries, natural lakes, wetlands and reservoirs constitute the total water area. 35 percent of animal protein consumed in Nigeria comes from fish, and the Niger Delta contributes over 35 percent of the fish supply. However, despite its huge water resources, fish production is declining, resulting in 800,000MT being imported in 2006 out of 1.5m MT total consumption (FBS, Nigeria 2007). This has been attributed to insecurity along the country's coasts and waterways, higher energy costs than before, overfishing, poaching, degradation of fish habitats and coastal environments, and poor road and market infrastructure.

Numerous researchers have found that in Nigeria, as in other West African countries, women are the major marketers of fish, and that this involves mostly small-scale, subsistence marketing with little working capital. The volume of fish marketed and the incomes realised depend mainly on the seasonality of production (Adewale and Ikeola 2005). Variations in both local demand and supply conditions between years and seasons are also sources of constraints to the fish trade. Adequate information on supply and demand is difficult to obtain but is crucial for the successful operation of the business. Most of the fish transactions in the market are small and the quantities traded are highly variable. Imperfections in related markets also constitute constraints as transport services are only limitedly available, and the formal credit sector does not provide credit for the women's trading activities and for insurance (Moll et al. 2001). Also there is very little formal financial and infrastructural support for the fisheries sector. These features taken together translate into high transaction costs and low incomes, which constitute a serious barrier to livelihood security. The cultural norms of the people also pose constraints to women's success in the fish trade. The extent to which cultural and institutional constraints affect the performance of the fish traders however, is not well known, and no attempt has been made to come up with clear implications of these effects to the fish traders. This paper, therefore, aims to establish how these constraints determine the coping strategies of the fish traders, in their attempt to construct a sustainable livelihood. Understanding the effects that these constraints have on the fish trade and the

traders is crucial to facilitating policies aimed at reducing them. To the fish trader, removing these constraints would mean greater access to resources and hence higher performance, and more food and livelihood secure households. The objective of this study therefore, is to determine the strategies employed by the women fish traders in Ibaka in coping with the prevalent institutional and cultural constraints.

Their economic activities, the institutional and cultural constraints faced by the women traders, and their coping strategies, were examined in relation to their personal characteristics (age and educational status) and business related economic factors (number of years in the business and investments and working capital outlay). The study also looked at the norms, beliefs, taboos, marriage and inheritance practices of the people as well as the status of the infrastructural facilities, formal and non-formal institutions in the community, and how these affect the livelihood strategies of the women.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Akwa Ibom State in the Niger Delta, Nigeria, where oil is explored both offshore and onshore. The Ibaka community was purposively selected because fish production is the main occupation in the community and many women fish traders are involved. It is a permanent fishing community with a road link to the hinterland, and several federal, state and local government establishments. The community benefitted from the IFAD/UNDP assisted project which disbursed loans to the fisher-folk between 1991 and 1996, and implemented some rural development projects. There are over 20 churches of different denominations which offer moral and spiritual support to the women. Many ethnic groups are represented including migrant fishermen from Ghana and Cameroun.

A sample of 103 fish traders was purposively selected using a multi-stage sampling technique involving area and subject sampling. Primary data were collected from the 103 fish traders using a pre-tested and structured questionnaire. To ensure reliability and validity however, facts were further confirmed through triangulation (Yin, 2003). Information collected in the survey included the fish traders' livelihood activities and strategies in the domestic and economic domains, the fish processing and marketing practices and their non-fish economic activities. The cultural and institutional constraints related to the fish trade, access to services and resources, and the coping mechanisms used by the women to overcome the constraints were discussed during the case studies.

After the survey and preliminary data analysis, three important fish trade groups: bonga, big fish and crayfish, were identified. Additional data were collected from these three groups through 11 case studies. Apart from the grouping into bonga, big fish and crayfish traders, three different categories of traders were considered from each group: the large scale, with working capital of over Naira 200,000 (\$ 1700), the medium scale, using N50,000- N200,000 (\$ 500 – \$1700) and the small scale, using less than Naira 50,000. A case study protocol was used for each interview to ensure consistency in data collection, and enhanced research reliability. Information was also obtained from interviews and desk research, to unravel the major constraints affecting the economic activities and the coping strategies adopted.

A summary report based on the findings of the survey and case studies highlighted the main issues, and was used for interpretation of the results. By comparing results obtained through quantitative and qualitative analyses within and across the fish trade groups, major constraints, coping strategies, and factors determining the coping strategies adopted by different

categories of women in the fish trade were isolated. Achievements made despite the challenges were determined, and challenges peculiar to individual groups apart from those experienced by all were identified.

Results and Discussion

Women in fishing communities in Nigeria carry out many activities including processing, trading in fresh or smoked fish, fishing, farming, petty trading, and supplying equipment and credit to fishermen as marketing agents. The livelihood strategies employed by the women, as observed by Adewale and Ikeola (2005), depend on their age, educational background, experience in the trade, income levels, as well as the seasonality. In Ibaka processing and trading in fish were women's major economic activities. However, the medium and large scale traders diversified into water transport, ownership of cosmetic and clothes shops, and supply of credit while the small scale traders diversified into farming, petty trading, and food processing, depending on their age, savings mobilised, status and family circumstances.

Among the women fish processors and traders three fish trade groups were identified:

- Bonga traders who buy fresh bonga (*Ethmalosa and Sardinella spp.*) in basins at the beach, process, and sell in baskets, on sticks or mats at Ibaka market.
- Big fish traders who buy fresh fish species such as *Barracuda*, *Shiny nose*, *Snappers*, and *Croakers*, in kilograms from fishermen and sell to retailers at the beach.
- Crayfish traders who buy already processed crayfish (*Palaemon spp.*), in wrappings at the beach and transport them to Ibaka market for sale.

The case study shows that specific institutional constraints such as lack of infrastructure, financial assistance, market information and Government or NGO's support and cultural constraints such as polygamy and patriarchy affect all the fish traders. Group-specific challenges are shown in Table 1. The livelihood strategies used by the fish traders in coping with the constraints vary, depending on the age, educational status, size of capital and experience in the business. They include the use of indigenous knowledge (80%), credit transactions (95%), child labour (30%), social capital (100%), networks of trust (100%), dependence on female friends and relations for credit (100%), innovation (20%) and use of mobile telephone (65%).

Similarities of the three groups

Similarities between the groups were observed in the following areas:

1. Mode of entry into the trade: This was always through female friends or relations
2. Categories of traders: Three categories of turnover classes were identified for each group, large, medium and small scale traders. The majority were small scale traders.
3. Diversification: Every trade group diversified its livelihood strategies but the large and medium scale traders diversified, using their savings, as a means of insuring against the vagaries of the fish trade while the small traders diversified in a bid to earn sufficient income for the maintenance of their households.
4. Institutional and cultural challenges: Living in the same community meant experiencing the same general institutional and cultural challenges even though a few trade - specific challenges exist.
5. Achievements: A few large and medium scale traders have succeeded in the fish trade and own assets such as houses, land, fishing and transport boats, cosmetic and fashion design shops, as well as savings in the bank, while the small scale traders have not been able to achieve anything and are struggling to make ends meet.

Table 1: Differences between the Three Trade Groups

Characteristics	Bonga Group	Crayfish Group	Big Fish Group
Age	Middle Aged	Younger group	Middle Aged
Education	High illiteracy rate	More educated than bonga	Most educated group
Experience	20- 25 years	15- 20 years	5-16 years
Source of Fish	From fish mammy	From fishermen	From fishermen
Nature of Product	Fresh fish	Smoked crayfish	Fresh fish
Challenges	Smoke before selling Need smoking and cold storage facilities Health problems from smoke and heat	Sell already smoked Need dry and cold storage facilities No problems from smoke and heat	Do not smoke, sell fresh Need cold storage facilities only No problems from heat and smoke

The main differences between the groups as represented in Table 1 depend mostly on personal and economic characteristics and the species each group is dealing with.

Conclusions and Recommendation

The fish trade is a major source of income for the women fish traders and recruitment into the trade is through female relations or friends. Competence in the trade is positively influenced more by years of experience, ability to establish networks of trust, and size of capital outlay and this determines the scale of operation and level of success. The strict division of labour between men and women has ensured guaranteed incomes which have given women traders a source of livelihood, autonomy, agency and a measure of independence. However, institutional and cultural constraints, notably, lack of infrastructure and finance, polygamy and patriarchy limit their economic activities and livelihood strategies and as a result most women diversify as a survival strategy.

Though a few women entrepreneurs were identified among the medium and large scale categories, most of the women are doing what Clark (1994) refers to as “nursing mother work” in the market place, that is, struggling on a daily basis to secure the livelihood of their households. In view of the fact that households’ upkeep and children’s education rest squarely on women’s shoulders in rural communities, and there is an acute lack of institutional and cultural support, it is recommended that they should be targeted in the provision of financial services, infrastructural facilities, and other services in the future.

References

- ADEWALE, J. G. & R. F. IKEOLA (2005) Resettlement Coping Strategies of Women Settlers around Dams in Nigeria: A Case Study of Erelu Dam in Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria. *Journal of Human Ecology*, 17(3): 177-181).
- CLARK, G. (1994) *Onions are my Husband: Survival and Accumulation by West African Market Women*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.
- FEDERAL BUREAU OF STATISTICS (2007) Annual Abstract of Statistics of Nigeria, 2007. Abuja, Nigeria.
- MOLL, H., F. VAN DER STAAIJ & A. VAN TILBURG (2001) (Eds.) *Smallholder and Markets: Towards a Conducive Environment*. Policy and Best Practice Document 8, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Hague, 102p.
- YIN, R. K. (2003) ‘Case Study Research, Design and Methods’. Third Edition. *Applied Social Research Methods Series*. Vol. 5. London, Sage Publications.