

## Positioning women smallholder fisher folk to benefit from the Blue Economy

By Jemimah Njuki and Michele Leone

In November this year, over 17,000 delegates from all over the globe gathered in Nairobi for the Blue Economy Conference. Among ministers, CEOs and scientists was Jackline Auma, a fisherwoman from Shakababo Lake, in the Tana River Delta, Kenya. Auma is one of the 47% women who are part of the 120 million people who earn money directly from fishing and processing. But unlike these other women who make up 85% of the workforce in jobs such as fish mongering, gutting, filling cans or other processing, Auma is a boat owner. She sometimes goes out to fish, and at other times she rents out her boat to others. Auma also processes fish and has employed several people who work for her. In a sector where fishing is a predominantly male activity, Auma was not always this successful. She had to follow men to the river to learn how to fish, how to sew nets and operate a fishing boat. She struggled to get capital to buy the boat and men were not always welcoming, telling her the waters were no place for a woman.

And while the key political messages from the conference included the promotion of action-oriented global strategies that place people and the blue economy resources at the center of sustainable development, current trends can lead to further marginalisation of women like Auma, unless key barriers are addressed and turned into opportunities.

The first set of barriers and opportunities is structural. The current blue growth narrative is framed in the context of the maximal exploitation of vastly untapped common goods via large investments with the assumption that this will create jobs for locals, small-scale fishers and women. However, most of the jobs created are low skilled, including cleaning and maintenance work. Big capital prevents, in fact, innovation from reaching small-scale fisheries and especially women who provides more than 85% of the landed catches, ensure food security and nutrition, and secure livelihoods and intra-regional trade in Africa. Moreover, the market of licenses in the fisheries sector facilitates unregulated access of foreign fleets in a number of African countries' territorial waters or exclusive economic zones, with negative impacts of local catches and livelihoods. Finally, ecosystem degradation through large-scale activities has not been sufficiently addressed despite growing research evidence of impacts. A human rights approach to governance of tenure, small-scale fisheries, right to food and ecosystem conservation, and which explores its trade-off consistently, is urgently needed. This requires the use of a political economy lens to dismantle the unequal distribution of wealth and resources, and allow modernization of small-scale economic activities.

The second set is social and cultural. Discriminatory gender and social norms prohibit women from participating in certain aspects of the blue economy, and create additional labour burden on them. Social attitudes frown on and punish women for being in certain spaces. In order for women to catalyse transformative change, investments and innovations, we must think beyond just participation: in Malawi and Zambia researchers have used processes designed to surface awareness of gender dynamics in the context and in relation to fish processing, and spark local ideas for constructive shifts in cultural and social norms that marginalise women. The findings *challenge the 'business as usual' idea* that it is sufficient for projects to *include* women in order for research or development to be empowering and transform gender dynamics.

A third set of barriers is around capacity. Women engaged in the blue economic continue to face lack of investments and access to capital and equipment to grow their businesses. In Kenya, in 2016, 80.9% of women to women business partnerships were denied loans including by microfinance institutions. Women *are* building their capacity: now financial institutions need to start viewing their businesses as bankable, and develop suitable products. In some countries, this has worked. The Bolivian financial institution for development- CIDRE - developed innovative financial services including equipment leasing for indigenous women and women's cooperatives working in the fisheries sector. CIDRE built two new agencies in the project area, and placed two women in charge. Women are bankable and in most cases, it is financial institutions that need to change become 'womenable': to address the priorities and needs of women.

Finally, there is lack of women's voice in decision making. Women's movements are and will continue to play a key role in building women's voices to participate in development and planning processes and demanding for accountability from governments. There are successful examples of organizations in Africa mobilising women to amplify their voices including the Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood -GROOTS Kenya and the Katosi Women Development Trust in Uganda.

And while global threats including climate change will continue to threaten women's livelihoods, they also provide opportunities for adoption of climate resilient innovations while also opening up new roles for women. Research in the Volta Delta in Ghana has for example shown that as men migrate to look of off-farm seasonal opportunities, women get more empowered to make decisions and to engage in activities in fisheries that they would not otherwise engage in.

As governments call for investments millions of women like Auma need is a just blue economy, one that does not only exploit resources, but ensures that the use of these resources leads to prosperity for all those that depend on them.

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