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Fisheries Management: A new Challenge to Sociology

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Ministry of Fishing and Aquaculture

As a Norwegian sociologist pointed out recently at the *Encontro Internacional de Vilamoura* on Fishing, “the fisheries management is the management of people, not fish”¹ This statement may surprise many specialists, but it puts once again a series of questions and problems in their true place: society, social relationships, individuals.

This is also why, from a scientific point of view, Social Sciences should carry out an increasingly significant role in the putting into perspective and analysis of the enormous challenges which face this socio-economic activity: fishing. I could almost say that it was not by accident that, at the same time as the aforementioned *Encontro Internacional* was coming to an end, an International Sociology Seminar on the challenges and controversy facing Sociology in the 21st century also commenced ². This all seemed to be a continuity, not necessarily discursive, but in content.

It was concluded that a better and more abundant local production of knowledge would tend to enrich the content of and enlarge the explanatory reach of the disciplinary references. In other words, the greater the production of knowledge, the more scientific investigation there is, the greater the intrinsic merit of the scientific production will tend to be. In the case of Portugal, it can be said that the growing visibility of our European (and international) periphery is based on the increase in the quantity and quality

¹ Jentoft, Svein: “Five Truisms of Fisheries Management”, *Encontro Internacional de Vilamoura sobre Pescas*, Vilamoura, SEPA-MADRP, 1997.

² Seminário Internacional Terra Nostra (AIS, APS, APSIOT, Azores University)

of the studies to be carried out. Apart from this, the international division of intellectual work is made more democratic in that it can lead to a greater integration of Portuguese scientific groups in the international community. But this effort, which can be translated in methodological terms into the practice of *comparison*, also requires sensible work methods. In other words, the sociological investigation of fisheries represents an important challenge to the sector, and for the subject itself, not only by reason of the new problems that may be defined, but also more importantly by reason of the results which may be obtained. Thus, the production of knowledge in this area will make it possible for Portuguese scientists to be a part of larger international teams, making their own work more consistent and of greater quality.

This in turn implies greater strictness and scientific, political and social responsibility of the investigation carried out. And when the sector in question is one that has undergone an evident transformation process, this responsibility is even greater. But not only sociology has felt this alteration in its parameters of intervention in a sector, such as that of fisheries.

In fact, if economics has come to carry out a valuable role, albeit still a limited one, in fisheries management, sociology in this field is still taking its first steps. But this does not mean that they will not become central scientific subjects in fisheries management. Quite the contrary!

As Monteiro de Oliveira mentioned in his speech at the 1st MAHRE Seminar in Peniche, unlike what has been happening in the development of bio-economic models for the forecast of land resources, in the forecast of marine resources

these mathematical instruments are not so well developed, owing to the difficulty in quantification³. But sociology has developed within a familiar fisheries context (difficulty in the forecasting of marine resources, growing government intervention in regulation processes, inability to reach social agreement within the sector, limited traditional business investment, low average levels of schooling and high average age, and conformist behaviour on the part of the consumer, among other characteristics), given that the change process in this sector is less concerned with technical, legal, ecological or biological questions than with social questions. And why is this?

The consecutive changes in the amount of marine resources can hardly be attributed to endogenous biological questions, or to sudden alterations in animal behaviour. Ecological factors, dominated by marine, atmospheric and land pollution, although influencing the evolution of some species, are not among the elements determining disappearance or shortage of resources. Nor does the greater technological sophistication used in capture explain the decrease in these resources. There are, therefore, other reasons.

As the Secretary of State for Fisheries, Marcelo de Vasconcelos, concluded recently, “Despite awareness of the present situation and the fact that relatively medium term prospects are not good, there are still those who insist on refusing significant changes in the exploration patterns which, for years, have been based on intensive fishing and the use of skills on an excessively large scale”⁴. And this is a social behaviour problem.

³ Oliveira, M.A. Monteiro: “The socio-economy of fisheries between theory and Pragmatism”, 1st MAHRE Seminar, Peniche, ADEPE, 1997

⁴ Vasconcelos, Marcelo: “Intervenção na Sessão de Encerramento” of the *Encontro Internacional de Vilamoura sobre Pescas*, Vilamoura, SEPA-MADRP, 1997.

However, most of the time, fisheries management decisions, particularly that known as the General Fisheries Policy, do not take this fact into consideration. The arguments about the European Commission rules and regulations are still too heated, and give rise to socially abnormal situations, in which the main participants consider these rules to be non-legitimate and unilateral, so they tend to disrespect them. A greater control would produce more distrust and the break-up of the social fabric may be imminent, leading to an increase in levels of unemployment and social ostracism, especially in communities with a large fishing influence. And this may not only happen with direct employment, but also with indirect employment, given that situations of strong economic instability may lead to dislocation in the processing, or service, industries.

The existence of social objectives in fisheries management policies seems to be an important means of regulation. But when this does not occur, the lack of interest in the social questions of fisheries management is replaced by the sole preoccupation with the preservation of the fishing grounds or with the maintenance of a profitable industry, in the sense that it does not rely mainly on intangible investment, and is therefore carried out on low salaries, in poor working conditions and results in an incalculable exhaustion of the natural resources. And, in fact, as Marcelo de Vasconcelos also stated on the same occasion, “the logic behind a system of industrial exploration and a traditional market which operates on a profit basis and in the short term, with the help of technological advances, only serves to create a vicious circle, characterised by over fishing, over investment and waste”⁵.

⁵ Ibid, pg. 2.

Another Norwegian sociologist, Åge Mariussen, emphasised the fact that this sort of problem often encounters a long tradition of scientific analysis, worry, controversy and development, supported by sociology, especially when approaching concepts such as “social action”, “social order”, “social structure”, “bargaining” or “anomy”⁶. According to this author, the co-operation between fishing communities (which includes not only fishermen, but also the boat owners and the producers), policy makers, industrialists, consumers and managers “can be achieved through the definition and implementation of social objectives”, recognising a relationship between these and economic, environmental and social turbulence, and where “a social objective is considered to be the basis for a social contract which gives those affected by resource management policies certain rights in exchange for their co-operation”⁷. Clearly, the establishment of these social objectives in these negotiation processes is an instrument of industrial restructure.

Jentoft also points out that fishing is a practice driven by values, by social rules, in short by the culture of fishing communities. When these disintegrate socially and morally, they become a serious threat to the conservation of fishing-grounds⁸. It is therefore necessary to take into consideration both the social structure of these communities and their culture in order to propel them towards more effective co-operation and communication, negotiating for the establishment of social objectives. Different associations, groups and organisations can be considered the managing and

⁶ In the same text quoted above, Jentoft also very correctly pointed out that over-fishing - like the Commons Catastrophe - is a sign of illegality, a social phenomenon studied at the beginning of the century by Émile Durkheim. Therefore over-fishing is the result of the confusion of standards and the weakening of social ties characteristic of lawless societies.

⁷ Mariussen, Åge: “Social Objectives as Social Contracts in a Turbulent Economy” in Crean, K. and Symes, D. (eds.): *Fisheries Management in Crisis*, Fishing News Books

⁸ Jentoft, Svein: op. Cit., pg. 6.

regulating institutions capable of involving these fishing communities in the direct and decentralised management of available resources. This should not fall to Public Administration alone, but also to the trade unions, producers' organisations and business associations, among others.

The working out of conflicts - which in turbulent atmospheres can be quite pronounced - is based on debate, negotiation, shared decision making and also on the development of scientific and technological knowledge and the legitimacy of government activity. Leaving out this accord between some social partners or participants makes it possible for there to be fissures which interfere with the agreed-upon restructuring.

And if in order "to rebuild fishing grounds we must start by rebuilding fishing villages"⁹, then we can understand that one of the most important tasks in this process involves a greater need for the involvement of social sciences in the furthering of knowledge about these problems, which are not immediately "visible", which are disguised. It is not enough to say, as the Portuguese novelist Raúl Brandão did in 1922, that in fishing "the transporter, the employer and the trader grow rich; only the fisherman remains poor and unconcerned; the sea never ends and the sea is theirs..."¹⁰.

In this very individual, almost uncontrolled activity, every social participant brings about the devastation of resources. Raúl Brandão in *Os Pescadores* said in response to the complaint about lack of fish "we have only one well organised system - that of destruction. First the steam trawlers stirred up the banks killing the young and destroying the feeding grounds. Next came the criminal trawlers, which

⁹ An idea based on the conclusions arrived at in Jentoft's speech, pg. 11.

¹⁰ Brandão, Raúl: *Os Pescadores*, Lisbon, Anagrama, pg. 51.

kill using dynamite, and last of all the foreign boats, which now use carbide. If we add to this the lack of method and effective control, the excesses carried out by all and the laws and regulations which are not heeded, it is easy to see why there is a lack of fish and also to predict that within fifty years there will be not one scale to be found within the very fertile Portuguese waters. Stuff yourselves while you can” (1923!).

It is precisely in order to do away with this persistent situation that it is necessary to adopt a new attitude, a new type of intervention, a new vision, which may mean “community management”, a system of co-management, new models of business organisation and consumer behaviour.

Towards this end, sociology can and should contribute with its analytical instruments, with its set of scientific reflections and controversies, to the enrichment of the knowledge about a complex reality in profound change, such as that of the socio-economic fisheries system.