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Fishing at sea, a risky activity «by definition»?

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Fishing is regarded by international bodies, governments and citizens as a hazardous activity and this indeed could be the case since most statistics reflect that injuries and fatalities are considerably higher than in other sectors, including construction. In fact, although the number of injuries has been dropping over the last few years, the fatality rate has remained steady. Thus, is fishing just an inherently risky activity due to factors such as weather conditions, fatigue and a perilous working environment? Or is there something that can be done to improve the fishing reality and change this perception?

Bearing in mind that international statistical data from official sources is almost non-existent, the sole in-depth report published by the International Labour Office (ILO)¹ indicates that back in 1999 that, at world level, fisheries accounts for a global fatal accident rate of 80 per 100 000 workers, or around 24 000 deaths per year and some 24 million non-fatal accidents annually. Particularly, in the Community fishing industry, there were 2 527 injuries and 160 deaths, making a total of 2 655 victims. More recently, Great Britain's Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) in its annual report reveals that out of a total number of 5 774 vessels registered in the UK, 248 accidents were reported, including 18 lost vessels and four fatalities.

So, what is the origin of these accidents? Contrary to what some may believe; only 1% of accidents happen as a result of weather conditions in the EU². The reality shows that despite the development of technology, legislation and more accurate weather forecasts, fishing still poses a great number of hazards. In fact, according to the ILO report, human behaviour or error is estimated to be responsible for 80% of accidents in the fishing industry.

Consequently, the truth is that increased competition, fatigue, lack of sufficient professional training and re-training, recklessness, deficient fisheries management measures (which do not take sufficient account of the human element or fishermen safety into consideration), diversified fishing operations unaccompanied by training and adequate skills, little adaptation of an ageing workforce to new technologies, shortage of sufficiently qualified personnel and economising at the expense of vessel maintenance equipment and manpower are some of the main factors contributing to fishing being a dangerous occupation.

¹ ILO Safety and Health in the Fishing Industry, Geneva, 1999, page19.

² European Parliament study "Safety and the causes of accidents in the fisheries sector, 2000, page 6

Now that we have a newly reformed Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) which lays down a set of rules for managing European fishing fleets and for conserving fish stocks, we should expect state-of-the-art measures to tackle these issues. However, contrary to the dictates of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU³) and due to a limited view on safety at sea in fishing, it fails to integrate measures concerning safety at sea as envisaged in United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS⁴) and the FAO “Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries”, contrary to good governance practices.

Europêche, the body representing 80,000 fishermen in the European Union, are building on the successes of its membership in the EU Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee for Sea Fisheries to combat these obstacles. In this Committee, we devote all our efforts to bring EU policies in line with international standards on training and certification of fishers and decent living and working conditions on board fishing vessels.

We have identified a number of areas where progress can be made at European level to improve safety for fishermen. For instance, over the past decade our Committee advocated the transposition of the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel⁵ (STCW-F, 95) in Europe through an EU Directive (as the EU did for the shipping sector). This Convention is the first attempt to make standards of safety for crews of fishing vessels mandatory internationally, including basic safety training⁶ for all personnel regardless of the size of the fishing vessel. In this sense, it would not only improve safety at sea in fishing but also further enhance the free movement of fishers through its own system for recognition of fishers’ certificates of competence. However, this Convention, which is essential for promoting health and safety in the fishing industry, is only useful if implemented by EU legislation.

In this context and notwithstanding the repeated request of Europêche, the European Commission is proposing a Council decision authorising Member States to become party to the Convention, instead of implementing the STCW-F 95 into Union law. At international level, it is not getting any better, since the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) is reviewing the text in order to update the content and promote its ratification. However, we believe that some IMO member states are delaying this process with the intention to never ratify the Convention, which was already the case of Torremolinos International Convention for the Safety of Fishing Vessels⁷.

³ TFEU, Article 9: “in defining and implementing its policies, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health”

⁴ Art. 94.3 “Every State shall take such measures for ships flying its flag as are necessary to ensure safety at sea”

⁵ IMO STCW-F convention has come into force on 29 September 2012

⁶ STCW-F, ANNEX, Chapter III, Regulation 1 “All fishing vessel personnel shall receive pre-sea basic safety training approved by the Administration of the flag state in personal survival techniques, fire prevention and fighting, emergency procedures, elementary first aid, prevention of marine pollution and prevention of shipboard accidents”

⁷ The 1977 Convention contains safety requirements for the construction and equipment of new, decked, seagoing fishing vessels of 24 metres in length and over, including those vessels also processing their catch

Against these developments, Europeche will continue to play a leading role in promoting high standards for safety and working conditions both in the EU and worldwide, by keeping close contacts with international and EU institutions and organising promotional events such as a workshop in Athens during the European Maritime Day called “Education and training for the maritime sector” where the ratification of the STCW-F is at the core of the event.

The safety of human life is so important that all political obstacles should be removed to ensure its protection. Therefore, only through true commitment from those responsible for regulating the fishing sector and true implementation of international instruments in our legal systems we can ensure seafarers integrity at sea.

So, is fishing a risky activity «by definition»? We cannot afford to accept this limited approach. Having 100% safety will always remain an unattainable goal simply because eliminating all dangers of nature and the inherent physically-demanding work of this profession is not possible. However, we believe that adequate training and certification of the crews along with minimum standards for the construction, equipment and operation of fishing vessels as well as better working conditions on board will make fishing operations safer and certainly reduce the number of accidents at sea. It will undoubtedly contribute to transform the fishing sector into a source of attractive jobs that enable a fair standard of living for fishers and ensure the viability of coastal communities.

Europêche achievements

Europêche has been committed to contribute to the dissemination and integration in coastal fishing communities of a culture of prevention and safety on board in fishing vessels. We have been developing over the past years a series of actions in different areas (employment, safety, training, legislative and political level), to allow this industry to meet all the challenges and achieve an “intelligent sustainable inclusive growth”.

For instance, we have proudly contributed to set up European Network for Fisheries Training and Employment (www.refope.eu), publish the “European handbook for the prevention of accidents at sea and the safety of fishermen” translated into 16 languages and signed a Social Partners’ Agreement for the transposition of the ILO Work in fishing 188 Convention into EU legislation. More recently, we are participating in different European projects which aim amongst other outputs to produce a glossary for the safe navigation and operation of fishing vessels in different languages as well as a DVD training tool for risk prevention and safety in the trawling fishing.