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The role of producer associations in aquaculture planning

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SUMMARY - In the early stages of the professional aquaculture history in Europe, the planning process has traditionally been influenced by a combination of private (the entrepreneur) and public (government or regional authorities) interests. On the private side, the main planning elements are generally practical and financial, including the assessment of whether a project is technically viable and can become a profitable business, and where the markets for the final product remain the focal point. The role of the Producer Associations is rather obscure in the project planning process; being its main objective to offer a common voice for representation, particularly for the purposes of representative dialogue with authorities, development of common professional policies, information communication to and from members, and common professional efforts (e.g. generic marketing). During the last decade, most European Producers Associations, and so the FEAP, have become more pro-active in respect of their membership as well as with third parties. The need is evident for all of those who are involved in production, research, training and the administration of aquaculture to be able to exchange their ideas and experiences in a constructive and informed fashion if aquaculture is to be able to continue to develop in the future.

Key words: Aquaculture, Producers Associations, planning.

RESUME - "Le rôle des associations de producteurs dans la planification de l'aquaculture". Pendant les premières étapes de l'histoire de l'aquaculture professionnelle en Europe, le processus de planification a été traditionnellement influencé par une combinaison d'intérêts privés (l'entrepreneur) et publics (autorités gouvernementales ou régionales). Du côté de l'entreprise privée, les principaux éléments de planification sont généralement d'ordre pratique et financier, y compris une évaluation pour déterminer si un projet est techniquement viable et peut devenir une entreprise rentable, où les marchés pour le produit final sont le point de mire. Le rôle des associations de producteurs est plutôt obscur dans le processus de planification du projet ; leur principal objectif étant de permettre une représentation et une voix commune, particulièrement lors des dialogues des représentants avec les autorités, la mise au point de politiques professionnelles communes, de la communication de l'information avec les membres en direction bilatérale, et d'efforts professionnels communs (par exemple publicité générique). Lors de la dernière décennie, la plupart des associations européennes de producteurs, ainsi que la FEAP, sont devenues plus fortement actives en tant qu'interlocuteurs ainsi qu'avec des tierces parties. Il est clairement nécessaire pour tous ceux qui interviennent dans la production, la recherche, la formation et l'administration de l'aquaculture, d'échanger leurs idées et expériences de façon constructive et informée, pour que l'aquaculture puisse continuer de se développer à l'avenir.

Mots-clés : Aquaculture, associations de producteurs, planification.

About the planning process

In the early stages of the professional aquaculture story in Europe, the planning process has traditionally been influenced by a combination of private (the entrepreneur) and public (government or regional authorities) interests.

Entrepreneur's concerns

On the private side, the main planning elements are generally practical and financial, including the assessment of whether a project is technically viable and can become a profitable business being sprung up in a foreseen long lasting field, and where the markets for the final product remain the focal point.

Public Sector Concerns

On the public side, issues including: (i) planning permission and project licenses; (ii) environmental effects; (iii) water control and public health safeguard; (iv) employment; and (v) long-term suitability of the project itself are paramount in the planning process that ultimately leads to approval and implementation of the project.

Additional planning inputs are also applied to more developed aquaculture sectors, particularly when further development and sustainability is being promoted by public interests. Examples of such incentives include: (i) training (higher education, under-graduate, post-graduate studies and course, etc.); (ii) investment incentives (development banks, government aids, etc.); (iii) employment incentives; and (iv) export promotion or generic marketing programmes. Most of these initiatives are financed from public sources, either directly or indirectly.

Role of the producer associations

The role of the Producer Associations is rather obscure in the project planning process, particularly in the Countries where aquaculture is developing or is not very important. This is simply because a Producer Association is created on the initiative of professional farmers who recognise that the commercial production sector, of which they are part, needs a common voice for representation, particularly for the purposes of: (i) representative dialogue with authorities: with Government and with Interest Groups; (ii) development of common professional policies; (iii) information and communication: to members and from members; and (iv) common professional efforts (e.g. generic marketing).

It is no coincidence that there is a saying that goes 'Where the production sector is strong, the Association is strong', a dictum that refers principally to the will to have a professional and efficient Association that responds to members needs, individually and collectively. In most European countries, these demands increase every year due to the ever-changing requirements of commercial aquaculture.

Within the countries of the European Union, the structure of professional representation continues to develop even though many of the production sectors are well established (notably in respect of trout, salmon and carp). In countries where aquaculture production is important, one tends to find Regional Aquaculture Associations which are then grouped within one National Federation (e.g. Germany, France). Alternatively, one can find separate National Associations that are based on individual Species (e.g. British Trout Association and the Scottish Salmon Producers Association in the United Kingdom) which are in some cases grouped under a global National Association (e.g. Denmark).

Federation of European aquaculture producers

Within this context, the Federation of European Aquaculture Producers (FEAP) is composed of National Aquaculture Associations of European countries, both EU and non-EU, and acts as a common forum for these Associations in order to discuss and develop common policies on a wider basis. The FEAP, composed at present of 25 National Producer Associations from 21 countries, meets officially twice a year to address issues that are of interest to the professional aquaculture sector. Following the meetings, the deliberations of the Assembly are then communicated to European Interests and, through the individual Associations, to National bodies.

Sectoral responsibilities

As the aquaculture sector grows so does its public responsibility. Through the effects of applied policies and legislation, a highly professional attitude towards the different elements that compose the aquaculture activity is required. This comment refers specifically to: (i) livestock management and

welfare; (ii) aquaculture management and the environment; (iii) product conditioning and processing; (iv) use of pharmaceutical products for livestock; (v) marketing of live, chilled and frozen products; and (vi) relations with consumers and public image.

In many cases, an individual producer or entrepreneur does not know everything about the legislation in action or being considered, the policies being pursued, historical trends etc. and this is where the Associations start to play an important role in sectoral planning.

Producer Associations are inevitably formed by producers, for producers. It is normal, therefore, that they also become involved with presenting and defending the points of view of the production sector. Any Producer Association has to define its activities and objectives and, therefore, be structured in order to carry these out and provide value to its members. This latter comment refers to the very basic fact that most producer associations operate on the basis of revenue which is obtained from the individual members.

Structured communication

Authorities, whether they are Regional, National or European, increasingly require effective dialogue with the production sector in order to be able to consult and discuss different aspects of the aquaculture sector's activities (such as those referred to above) before proceeding to develop and apply legislation (Fig. 1). For these purposes, it is impractical to talk to each individual producer, nor would it be representative just to talk to the most important ones. It should also be noted that most of the aquaculture sector is small, family businesses, and it is the role of the Producer Associations to defend the interests of all those involved in the appropriate sector. Consequently, the Associations usually have to become involved in the consultation process of formative legislation.

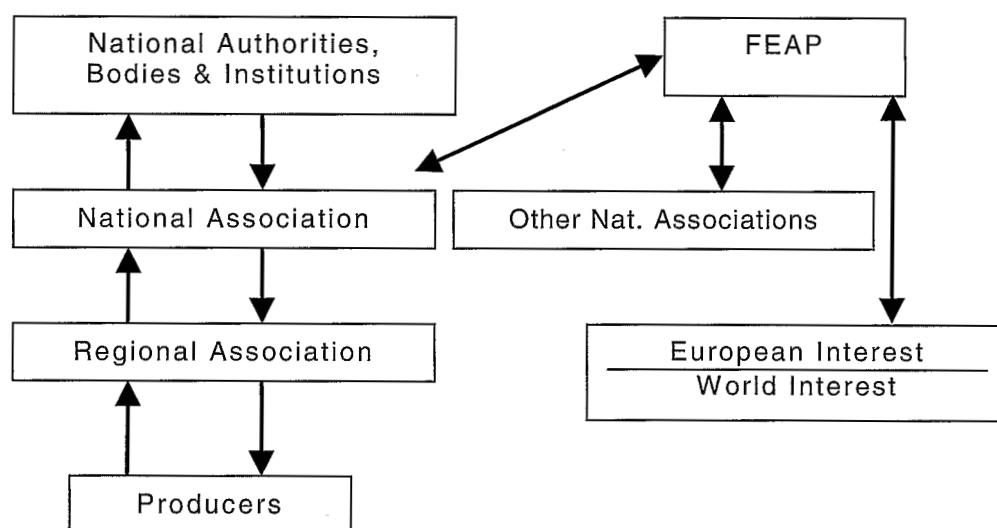


Fig. 1. Structured communication.

In the European Union, this is presently achieved through the Special Aquaculture Section of the Consultative Commission for Fisheries. Equally, those Associations who are members of their National Agriculture Union can adhere to Committee of Agricultural Organisations in the European Union (COGECA) which also has an Aquaculture Working Group.

Such meetings allow for dialogue and also provide the opportunity for the defence of the sector against actions or legislation that is seen as being incorrect, unjust or misguided.

Additional trans-national committees that are of importance include EIFAC (European Inland Fisheries Advisory Committee) and the Aquaculture Section of the General Fisheries Council of the Mediterranean, both of which are co-ordinated by the FAO, and in which the FEAP participates.

One of the major problems with keeping abreast of the wide-ranging topics that are addressed in the consultation processes is that of recognising the responsibilities of each body and the clear definition of National and trans-National issues that affect professional aquaculture. This observation returns to the original definition of the role that Aquaculture Associations are required to fulfil. Nonetheless, each such Association needs to have official recognition from Government that is representative and that its statutes and structure allow it to participate in the dialogue required for its purpose.

Association tasks

During the last decade, most European Producer Associations have become more pro-active in respect of their membership as well as with third parties, which include the following:

(i) Government and governmental bodies (Ministries). *Role of the Association:* Dialogue concerning legislation and actions for the sector, notably in terms of the application of the FIFG (Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance - EU Funding Mechanism for sectoral assistance) and topics for National research support.

(ii) Marketing organisations. *Role of the association:* Organisation (or participation/co-ordination) of generic marketing campaigns for products.

(iii) Press and media, consumer and environmental groups. *Role of the association:* Communication either for Promotional purposes or for response to questions that directly concerns the sector.

(iv) Education and training organisations. *Role of the association:* Dialogue on requirements, communication and participation.

Examples of dialogue between FEAP and other bodies

Recently, wide industry participation was requested by the Commission of the EU in the consultation process for defining the aquaculture sector's requirements for the 5th Framework Programme and many of those present were representatives of (or nominated by) National Producer Associations.

The FEAP recognised that improved communication was necessary between different players within the aquaculture sector and initiated in 1997 an ad-hoc Commission to allow discussion between different interest groups of importance in the aquaculture sector (FEAP, FAO, European Aquaculture Society, AquaTT, and CIHEAM).

Additionally, the FEAP is participating in a number of actions that geared to assisting the sector, notably the AQUAFLOW Project (with EAS and AquaTT), which is targeting improved research information dissemination, and the development of market information data collection and diffusion. So, as one can see, a wide-ranging subject of topics which can be either extremely detailed and technical or be more simple and communicative all tend to fall on the desk of the Association and many of these can be interpreted as being an integral part of 'Aquaculture Planning'.

There is no doubt that within many Associations, the elected representatives (Producers), the permanent staff and advisers have ever-increasing amounts of subject matter and paper to deal with. On the other hand, this is also increasing the experience and the skills of those that are dealing with the matters that affect directly or indirectly the future of the sector.

All those who are involved in production, research, training and the administration of aquaculture feel the need to exchange their ideas and experience in a constructive and informed fashion, keeping in mind that the continued future development of aquaculture will be the result of the efforts of all the people concerned.