Putting Fish Back on the SADC Menu: *as the regional per capita fish consumption rise*

*Fish can play an important role in improving Southern Africa’s food security and nutritional status*, as more than 100 million people in the region eat fish regularly. Fresh, but more often processed, fish is a critical source of dietary protein and micronutrients for many isolated communities in rural areas. Fish may also be the sole accessible and/or affordable source of animal protein for poor households in urban or peri-urban areas. Fish also contribute indirectly to national food self-sufficiency through trade and exports.

*Fish is more nutritious than staple foods such as cereals, providing in particular essential fatty acids and micronutrients* and can play an extremely important role in improving the nutritional status of individuals, in particular those at risk such as children and women. It is an efficient converter of feed into high quality food, and it has a lower carbon footprint compared to other animal production systems. Because of all these attributes - fish should definitely be on the menu in the region.

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**Figure 1: Nutritional value of fish (FAO, 2016)**
The recently concluded study by the Centre for Coordination of Agricultural Research and Development in Southern Africa (CCARDESA) in collaboration with SADC Secretariat titled “Contribution of fisheries to food and nutrition security in the SADC region” (SADC, 2016); demonstrates how fish can increase food and nutrition security in the region. For instance, small fish species existing in the region such as arenque (Clupea harengus), dagaa (Rastrineobola argentea), kapenta (Limnothrissa miodon), matemba (Barbus paludinosus), sardines (Sardina pilchardus), usipa (Engraulicypris sp.) and utaka (Copadichromis sp.) to name a few, if consumed regularly, play a critical role in providing micronutrients, especially when consumed whole with bones, heads and internal organs as this is where micronutrients are concentrated.

Box 1: Small fish = Big benefits

- Small fish are quick to produce through aquaculture; they are more affordable, can be bought in smaller quantities, and can be processed and stored for longer periods.

- Protein from fish is said to be 5-15% more digestible than that from plants, and fish protein improves the digestion of plant protein. Gram for gram, small dried fish provide more protein than the same amount of beef, chicken or goat meat.

- Even small quantities of fish in human diets are great for health and development as they are a source of Calcium; Eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and Docosahexaenoic acid (DHA); Iodine, Iron; Omega 3 fatty acids; Polyunsaturated fat; Selenium; Vitamins A, D and B12; and Zinc.

- Sustainably managed fisheries offer affordable essential nutrition for all. Promoting good management and consumption of fish can help us to tackle the challenge of feeding our people.
Where does fish stand in the regional food policy discussions? The problem is that specialists in fisheries debates have been concentrating predominantly on questions of biological sustainability and on the economic efficiency of fisheries, neglecting issues linked to its contribution to reducing hunger and malnutrition and to supporting livelihoods. Most regional non-fishery food security experts and decision-makers seem unfamiliar with these facts and, therefore, unaware of the critical role that fisheries and aquaculture are playing and are likely to play in the future, especially aquaculture. Fish has so far been only marginally included in the regional debate. Many nutritional programmes are still not aware of, or not recognizing and building on the potential of fish for the reduction of micronutrient deficiency. According to the outcome of the SmartFish study titled “Flavoring Fish into Food Security” (Kurien and Lopez-Rios, 2013), this lack of integration of fisheries in the food security policy scenario is attributed to the low participation if any of national fishery officers in the design of policies.

Fish deserves more attention in food policies than it currently receives due to its importance in the food basket, its unique nutritional properties, its higher efficiency of production and carbon footprint compared to other forms of animal production systems. Some challenges which need to be addressed include making fish more affordable for the poor, improving the environmental sustainability of the sector, access to fish and fish-related employment, tension between small-scale and commercial producers and climate change. The best available projections for fish supply and demand are relatively positive in terms of the capacity to meet future demands, but more solid modelling is still needed. For instance in 2011, regional average per capita fish consumption was around 9kg per annum, and globally it was at around 18kg. In 2014, the regional average was at 11kg per annum and 20kg globally. This is thanks to stronger aquaculture supply and firm demand (FAO, 2016). Fishery products accounted for one percent of all global merchandise trade in value terms, representing more than nine percent of total agricultural exports. Worldwide exports amounted to $148 billion in 2014, up from $8
billion in 1976. Developing countries were the source of $80 billion of fishery exports, providing higher net trade revenues than meat, tobacco, rice and sugar combined (FAO, 2016). This clearly shows that life below water, which the UN Sustainable Development Agenda commits us to conserve, is a major ally in our effort to meet a host of challenges, from food security to climate change.

For the region, the **Blue Economy/Growth initiative** was identified at the SADC Extra-Ordinary Summit held in Harare, Zimbabwe in 2015 as part of priorities under the revised Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (2015-2020) and the Industrialization Strategy and Roadmap (2015-2063), which provide guidance for the Region to leverage its diverse resources for sustainable economic and social development through beneficiation and value addition. Fisheries are vital oceanic and aquatic resource that forms the core of blue economy. Hence a strong advocacy in raising the fish profile should be continued in all levels of discussions, be it national, regional and global so that its potential contribution to food and nutrition security and sustainable economic development strategies is captured and maximized.

**References:**


**For more information:**

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