The Importance of Capture Fisheries in Food Security in Africa

Fish are an essential natural resource for ensuring food security, reducing poverty, and promoting proper nutrition in Africa. Establishing best practices for fisheries management can restore and increase productivity and facilitate long-term sustainable capture fisheries. Fisheries management should be a component of a country's food security and natural resource management strategies.

Capture fisheries play a decisive role in food security, hunger mitigation, nutrition, and early childhood development in many African countries.

- **Food Security, Hunger & Nutrition:** Sustainable capture fisheries are essential for food security, nutrition and cultural diets throughout Africa, often serving as the staple food. The proportion of dietary protein that comes from fish is extremely high in many countries, such as Senegal (47%), Gambia (62%), Sierra Leone (63%) and Ghana (63%). In Africa, fish caught along coasts and waterways are often dried and sent inland through informal trade routes, serving as major protein and income sources for communities throughout the continent. Due to the informal nature of this trade, there are no direct statistics regarding fish trade and the importance to the local economy; however, the sheer number of people that depend on fish for protein and livelihoods demonstrates the importance fisheries play in local economies. Fish is protein that can often be directly accessed without spending money. "For those who cannot afford to buy food—especially not meat—fish obtained through the household's own efforts (subsistence) is essential; it can make the difference between good and bad nutrition, between recovered health and prolonged illness, or between food security and starvation." (NAGA)

- **Early Childhood Development:** Fish contain essential oils and vitamins - including vitamin A - that are part of normal brain development. Traditional infant formulas used in West Africa are often based upon fish products. "About 60% of deaths in the under-five age group are attributed to malnutrition, with mineral, vitamin and protein deficiencies standing out as leading causes. In many parts of the continent, fish has been the main source of these vital nutrients, especially among the poor. Fish consumption during pregnancy and lactation further improves the nutritional and health status of women, thus reducing susceptibility to diseases."(CGIAR, WorldFish Center)

- **Fisheries and HIV/AIDS:** Fishing communities are among the poorest communities in Africa and have some of the highest HIV/AIDS rates. Due to their transient nature, fishing ports often serve as conduits for the spread of the disease. Fish provides essential nutrition and protein for those infected. "Fisheries products contain 12 of the 15 vitamins and minerals most important for the health of HIV/AIDS affected persons." (FAO)

Fisheries provide livelihoods and income for many Africans often serving as the last social safety net when crops fail. Sustainable capture fisheries are one of the crucial tools in reversing food insecurity and encouraging a self-sustaining solution to hunger and poverty.

- **Poverty Alleviation:** An analysis by the African Development Bank of 29 Poverty Reduction Strategy Plans (PRSP) revealed that fisheries play an important role in poverty reduction in many African countries, yet, this sector is adequately covered in only three PRSPs. The ADB report emphasizes the role fisheries play in proper nutrition, poverty alleviation, and economic growth. (ADB)

- **Fisheries Employment:** The WorldFish Center estimates that up to 45 million Africans are dependent upon fish for their way of life. About 50% of those employed in the fisheries sector are estimated to be women, with 95% of fishers involved in small-scale fisheries. "In many parts of Africa, small-scale fisheries and related activities (trade, processing) provide income to rural communities where alternative employment opportunities are scarce or even non-existent. In these situations small-scale fisheries, fish processing and trade provide people with an important, and sometimes crucial, form of safety-net that helps protect them against the effects of agricultural product price volatility, macro-economic crises, structural reforms, harvest failures, political turmoil and other factors that threaten rural stability and food security." (CGIAR, WorldFish Center)

- **Income Generation and Economic Growth:** In many West African countries fisheries make a significant contribute to the overall GDP. The contribution from fisheries could be higher: a World Bank study estimates that over $1 Billion is lost each year in Sub-Saharan Africa from illegal fishing and poor management. Small-scale fisheries are also important. "Fisheries contribute to Africa's development by… stimulating the growth of a cash-based economy. Fish are caught and sold on a daily basis; most small-scale fishing is best regarded as small enterprise, not subsistence. Small-scale fish trading is a particularly important means of women's economic empowerment." (Reducing Fisherfolk's Vulnerability)

Fisheries productivity and food security can be increased through improved governance, secure access and tenure rights, application of modern practices, and maintenance of the resource base.

- **Secure Access to Resources and Improved Governance:** Open access to common fish resources is a key driver of resource degradation and unsustainable fishing. Securing access and tenure rights to resources is a necessary step toward sustainable and productive fisheries. Co-management approaches, in which both the fishers and government share management responsibility can increase resource stewardship, improve compliance, and promote open and transparent decision-making. Sound economic and governance policies are also needed to direct fisheries towards sustainability and capture economic rents from these valuable resources.

- **Maintain and Restore the Resource Base:** Modern fisheries management practices can restore and increase the productivity of fisheries and livelihoods. An ecosystem-based approach to management can conserve critical fish habitat, improve reproduction and increase fish populations.

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