

Aquaculture and sustainability in the Africa region: investment is the key to sustainability

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Aquaculture is increasingly being recognized as a potentially important food producing sector with numerous benefits including offsetting imports of large quantities of aquatic products, generating local employment and helping fill the growing fish supply gap. However, since its onset several decades ago, aquaculture has been viewed as an initiative promoted by, and dependent upon public sector support. This support was typically provided through donor assistance and was, from its origins, unsustainable. At the end of the last decade, donor support to the aquaculture sector in Africa reached new lows and public programs suffered the inevitable consequences; little if any assistance going to farmers and a continued insignificant contribution by aquaculture to the national economy.

Business or bureaucracy. The decline of public programs in the 1990s was accompanied by an increasing awareness by the private sector that aquaculture was a business opportunity; this opportunity underscored by rapidly rising prices for aquatic products. As aquaculture became demystified, and people better understood the basic technologies of aquatic animal management, aquaculture became part of the menu for those looking at where and how to invest in agriculture in Africa. But these investors were often confronted with convoluted bureaucracy, a remnant

of the previous state-run programs. The investors best equipped to deal with the complex bureaucracies were often the large and well-connected trans-nationals or industrial-scale operators. These investors could bring with them what was lacking locally and had the necessary capital to ensure inputs and access to high-value markets. Yet if big business had a significant impact on national aquaculture production, this was limited in terms of the number of stake-holders involved and its sustainable links to local society.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs). As aquaculture became a viable business, small- and medium-size investors entered the arena; sometimes prompted by local community organizers and other times encouraged by anticipated profits. By virtue of their scale of operations, these aqua-SMEs were not vertically or horizontally integrated and needed to work together, often forming “clusters” of aquaculture production. While these more modest investors have their own requirements and comparative advantages, they have proven themselves to be the effective catalysts for sustainable and profitable national aquaculture programs. Aqua-SMEs are now expanding rapidly in many countries and, at long last, providing the mechanisms to sustainably meet the objectives set for the sector decades ago. Financial and environmental sustainability. Profit potential

is not sufficient for sustainable aquaculture. Investments must be responsible and environmentally sustainable. In this area, the Africa Region is benefitting from errors committed in other regions of the world. Application of best and responsible aquaculture practices will ensure truly sustainable aquaculture development where the social and environmental aspects of aquaculture development are built into national aquaculture development strategies that effectively designate roles and responsibilities for the public and private sectors as well as civil society. Since its introduction in the 1950s, aquaculture in Africa has come of age. It is now viewed by most decision-makers, investors and other stake-holders as a beneficial component of the national economy in those countries that have the prerequisite bio-physical and socio-economic resources to allow profitable aquaculture to become a reality.