

# Better rights for female clam collectors in Tunisia

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## **Abstract**

In Tunisia, the clam production sector employs more than 4 000 women at 17 production sites, primarily concentrated in two major coastal areas – Gabès and Sfax – with an average annual production of 700 tons mostly directed to export markets. These women have no rights on the resource they are collecting even though these resources represent their only source of income. Thanks to the joint-coordination between FAO and the Tunisian government, together with private stakeholders, Tunisian women clam collectors have been given privileged access to the high-value European market, with an equity partnership with the main Italian importer of clams. Women collecting clams have increased their sales price by about double due to this agreement. However, they have no right to own the beach grounds or get concessions for aquaculture activities, where they could grow undersized clams. This problem with user rights, originating in the Tunisian law for aquatic resources, is also an obstacle for potential culture and growing of other bivalves, such as razor clams, which the FAO project had identified as a product with excellent growing possibilities and with good market opportunities. It is still a long way for the women to have equal rights to the clam resource.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Description of the fishery**

The Gulf of Gabès in southern Tunisia is a particularly rich fishing area. The most productive areas are in the Governorates of Sfax and Gabès, where a large proportion of the local population earns its living primarily from coastal fisheries. This wetland is known for its natural beds of carpet shells and razor clams, bivalve molluscs of the clam family. Foreign demand for clams is growing steadily. In Tunisia, the clam production sector employs more than 4 000 women at 17 production sites, primarily concentrated in two major coastal areas – Gabès and Sfax – with an average annual production of 700 tons mostly directed to export markets.

Over the past five years, production has averaged at 500 tonnes, worth 1.9 million Tunisian dinars (one million euros), or nearly one percent of the value of domestic fishery production during this period. Southern Tunisia is responsible for 98 percent of domestic clam production. Clam-digging is an artisanal activity carried out mainly by rural women living in precarious and marginalized conditions.

### **1.2 Economic contribution and social implications of the fishing activity**

Most rural women living around the two coastal areas of Gabès and Sfax derive their main livelihood from beach clam collection. There are no other forms of livelihood sustainment available in these very poor areas.

## **2. MANAGEMENT OF THE FISHERY AND RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH**

### **2.1 Management of the fishery**

As part of a policy of gradual State withdrawal and to overcome numerous health, administrative and organizational challenges and build momentum around beach clam fisheries, clam development and harvesting groups (GDP) have been set up in production areas. These GDP are responsible for the management of the fishery, for handing out licenses, and for the control of the water quality (sanitary

measures). There are fishing zones established which are controlled for water quality and are closed on a rotation basis. The resource situation of the clam resource is unknown, but there are several indications that the resource is overexploited. In the past, women were exploiting all different types of clams, without respecting a minimum size.

Since 2011, FAO is helping female clam collectors to better access markets through a document called “the Programme”. Prior to the Programme, the female collector had no negotiation power with the middlemen, including the transporters to the fishing areas. This Programme created cooperation between the female collectors, the depuration plant and the Italian importer, guaranteeing a minimum price for each kg of clams collected. In addition to the stronger bargaining power of women clam collectors through cooperation among stakeholders and the organization of the female collectors, FAO’s advocacy at the policy level triggered a more transparent environment for marketing transactions. This is especially true for the traceability of the process from the landing, weighing and purchase of clams to the delivery to the clam exporters.

## **2.2 Brief history of the former rights-based approaches used in the fishery**

Before the creation of the GDP, the clam collection was an open-access fishery.

## **2.3 Rights-based approach: allocation and characteristics**

At present, the GDP gives out licenses to female collectors. Each woman can collect a maximum of 5 kg per day. The fishing period is fixed. Generally, clam collection is allowed from October to May, and the areas are closed during the remaining months. The GDP has also created zoning, with closed areas that rotate, in order to give some recovery time to an area.

## **3. CONTRIBUTION OF THE RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY**

### **3.1 Sustainable use of the resources**

The Programme established a premium fee to reward women collectors who exploit larger sized clams. This incentive has created a more sustainable production system.

### **3.2 Economic viability of the fishery**

Thanks to the minimum price paid with the establishment of the Equity Link through the Programme, the price of one kilo of clams rose from USD 3.30 per kg to USD 7.60 per kg for the entire collection season. This new pricing increases the income of the women and improves their families’ standard of living.

### **3.3 Social equality**

The FAO project focuses on empowering women collectors and developing a strategic partnership with the private sector to improve the women’s income by giving them direct access to valuable markets. This new approach to clam commercialization in Tunisia provides a win-win scenario for all stakeholders. A fixed price set in advance guarantees the predictability of payments and receivables for both the importer and the women collectors throughout the harvest season, while onsite purchasers (representatives of the depuration centre) pay mandatory cash payments to the women collectors.

## **4. MAIN CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD**

### **4.1 Challenges for the fishery**

Despite the positive results for the female clam collectors, the resource situation in the Gulf of Gabès could be better. The resource is still overexploited, but the growing awareness of the female collectors towards avoiding the collection of undersized specimens will lead to some improvements in the near future.

#### **4.2 Improving fishery sustainability in the future**

With the premium price and the organization of the women, a resource protection mechanism could be implemented, using the existing organizations. The single female producers are now far more attentive to the minimum size and would be receptive to further management measures implemented with their collaboration. It is crucial to ensure better involvement of women in the GDP by giving them a voice and management roles within the organization. Illiteracy and the lack of any form of guidance or training, are the main reasons for their exclusion, together with the traditional gender roles.

Another important step towards sustainability of the fisheries would be the creation of growing facilities, licensed to the female clam collectors, for both undersized clams and for razor clams, which have proven to be an attractive species for growing, with huge market potential. There are already some areas dedicated to this type of activity, and if it proves successful, further areas could become open for these activities as well.

The involvement of the importer side in fair trade has proven to be difficult, but it is ultimately the right path to guarantee a better life for women in line with SDG 5, 12 and 14.