Along the commercialisation chain of the fishery product in Italy - New tasks for wholesale markets aiming to improve the value of the catch and guarantee its health benefits and quality

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Abstract

The role of wholesale fish markets in Italy and their importance for the development of Italian fisheries is presented. The evolution of the market system over the years is illustrated and the value in terms of public interest is underlined, particularly in terms of health benefits and quality.

1. Fish markets

The role of wholesale fish markets has been decisive for the development of Italian fisheries and this importance continues in the new circumstances which have come about following the widespread changes of recent years. The markets are called on to use innovative tools and methods in the task of providing strong, effective support to fisheries as well as to sea farming, particularly in this phase of restructuring and rationalisation of the sector. Clearly this is taking into consideration the new regulations and their implementation in the sector as a consequence of:

- European Union directives and regulations aiming to achieve a common policy which covers all aspects of fisheries, markets and the distribution of fisheries products.
- Challenges which such policies impose on the sector so that it can always be compared on equal terms to the solid economies and strong fishing fleet organisations of the other EU countries.
- The inevitable effects of the relentless internationalisation of the economy, thus also of fisheries, which should, however, be regulated and directed towards the protection of the interests of the world’s populations and a wider collaborative agreement which unites the work of fishers from different countries and especially those who work in the same seas, such as the Adriatic and the Mediterranean.
- Initiatives which it is necessary to carry out to increase ecological protection of the sea and to safeguard the fishery resources which are at risk, not only from fishers who use uncontrolled fishery practices or damaging breeding methods, but also from the thoughtless actions of people on the land near to or at some distance from the coast who provoke serious forms of pollution: sewerage, industry, chemicals, farm waste etc.
- The increase in consumption of fishery products and the associated need to modernise and widen the distribution network.
- The consumers’ comprehensible demand for hygiene and health guarantees and a fair price for products.

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The most significant regulations on which the organisation of the Italian markets has been based and which have governed wholesale trade of fishery products are:

- “Regi decreti” n° 1771/26 and n°927/29;
- Laws 1487/38 and 125/59;
- Several Regional laws (for the Marche Region this is n°4 of 4/1/80 and n° 29 of 31/08/84)
- EEC Directive n°493/91, which corresponds to the Italian Legal Decree (D.L.) 30/12/92, n°531 and subsequent modifications.

These regulations allowed some Municipal Administrations to organise wholesale fish markets in places where the conditions in terms of fishery landings (on the coast) or fish consumption (inland) had been satisfied. Currently in Italy there are at least 65 working markets.

In 1929 the Town Council of Ancona built the wholesale fish market on the quay of the fishing port; this was rebuilt in 1948 following destruction in World War II. In 1954 the market was equipped with a mechanical auction system and more recently is was modernised and completed with electronic auction equipment and sophisticated computerised information systems. For some years the management of this market has been transferred to a joint venture enterprise made up of the Town Council, local cooperatives of fish workers and boat owners and fish traders’ associations.

The value of the product put up for auction on an annual basis is over 7.75 million Euros; there are 193 registered traders, wholesalers and retailers.

In 1996 a second market was set up by a local consortium of fishers’ cooperatives, at which bulk species (anchovy, sardine, clam) are sold at a shout auction for a total value of about 129 million Euros; there are 38 registered wholesalers and retailers.

In the beginning, the “market system” worked above all to protect the interests of those who were weakest, the fishers; it also guaranteed quality, price and hygiene for the consumer. This “system” forged the first link in the commercialisation chain of the fishery product, thus facilitating its distribution and consumption at national level, adding value to the catch and influencing the speed with which the fishery sector in Italy has been modernised and improved. These changes began with the gradual mechanisation of the fleet, which led to significant structural and technological changes on board the vessels; the most important are as follows:

- The installation of a new system of propulsion; the previously used sail was substituted by an unusual piece of equipment comprising a steam boiler and propeller.
- The arrangement on deck of the trawl winch and other equipment which is extremely useful for the fishers.
- The creation of an area in the hold equipped with an icebox for the conservation of the catch which has already been put in crates.

Numerous further innovations followed, such as the construction of more suitable, larger vessels, equipped with modern motors, powerful refrigeration systems, the most advanced gear and nets made of very strong synthetic fibres.

The new vessels were steadily equipped with high-level instrumentation for navigational safety as well as electronic devices to detect the seabed and discover shoals of fish.
Development and revitalization has been made possible by studies and scientific and technological research carried out by the Institutes and laboratories of the National Research Council and the University of Ancona.

The improvement of the fleet and the extension of fishery activity along the Italian coast, as well as in more remote seas, have led to a substantial increase in catches. The commercialisation of the catches has only been possible thanks to the presence of markets which offer guarantees to the fishers for the sale of their product, to the traders for the supplies and to the consumers for a fair price.

An overview of the Italian fishery sector, in very general terms, can be obtained from the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catch</th>
<th>1931</th>
<th>140350 t</th>
<th>140350 t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Currently</td>
<td></td>
<td>550000 t (+291%)</td>
<td>220000 t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From fish farming</td>
<td></td>
<td>140350 t</td>
<td>140350 t</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Average annual per capita consumption | 1931 | 5 Kg | 5 Kg (+360%) |
| Currenty                           |      | 23 Kg | 23 Kg (+360%) |

| Motorised fishing vessels          | 1931 | 792 | 792 |
| Currenty                           |      | 19300 (+2336%) | 19300 (+2336%) |

According to the report of the 6th Fisheries Plan of the Italian Government, (years 2000 – 2002), motorised fishing vessels which have begun operating:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Less than 10 years ago</th>
<th>15%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between 11 and 20 years ago</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 21 and 30 years ago</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 30 years ago</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Classifications by gross tonnage:

| Under 10 tonnes               | 83.3% |
| From 10 to 50 tonnes          | 11.6% |
| From 51 to 100 tonnes         | 3.3%  |
| Over 100 tonnes               | 1.8%  |

These data demonstrate that the fishing fleet is rather old, moreover for the most part it is made up of small, family-run artisanal vessels which are forced to operate in the crowded coastal waters. On the other hand, there is a very low number of high-tonnage vessels with the necessary spaces on board to perform a more thorough preparation of the catch.

It is necessary to bear in mind that in order to satisfy national demand, internal production was sufficient until 1951, when production totalled 244900 t; however there has always been some degree of importation from other countries, especially of fish preserved species which are not available in Italy (stockfish, salt cod and herring). Subsequently, the national fishery catch was insufficient to meet demand (in spite of an ever-increasing fleet of motor powered vessels); the contribution of aquaculture is limited, and together with marine fisheries covers
just 53% of the market demand. It has been necessary to resort to importation from abroad which currently amounts to 680000 t (of which about 75000 t is fresh), for a total value of about 2.5 million Euros.

The role of fish markets at the landing ports has been particularly positive, where the solution of the age-old conflicts between fishers and traders has been facilitated through an equity plan. Fishers have managed to release themselves from social isolation and economic disadvantage due to the organisation of the sale of fish by public auction and a cash register/treasury service within the markets, thus ensuring a suitable price is conferred to the product and the reliable, prompt payment of the takings.

The fishers have also been able to take advantage of the “minor credit” offered quickly and without excessive formality by the banking institutes which also manage the cash register service. This advantageous loan scheme, which is governed by Laws of 1926 and 1929, was draw on particularly in the first decades; repayments were made through deductions from the product which the fishers gave to the markets for sale.

In addition to this, for the first time the fishers were able to use other essential structures and services within the market:
- Refrigeration units for the storage of crates of fish waiting to be sold
- Areas to deposit ropes, thread, nets, cables and general equipment from the vessels
- Covered area in which repairs can be carried out to nets and equipment
- Substitution of crates
- Filtered, sterile water to wash and re-pack the fish caught

The importance of fish markets, in general terms and also in terms of the public interest, is further demonstrated by:
- The impartiality and transparency with which the price of products auctioned is decided (the auctions take place using various systems according to the local traditions and conditions, such as shout auction, Dutch auction or those using electronic equipment);
- Open disclosure of the auction price tendencies on a daily basis;
- Veterinary control of the products displayed for sale, thus guaranteeing public health;
- The possibility to have further information (statistics, fiscal etc), which can be useful in the creation of policies and programmes concerning fisheries.

In 1959, thirty years after the first fish markets were set up, the liberalisation of wholesale trade in meat, vegetables, fruit and fish products began. Unfortunately, this step did not solve the problem of the improvement of technology and the reduction of the distribution costs that the fishery sector must bear. On the contrary, it concentrated wholesale trade into the hands of the strongest private economic groups (national and foreign) and also reorganised the role of the markets themselves. The so-called “liberalisation” has in actual fact permitted wholesale trade to take place outside the established markets; this has led to a noticeable reduction in the fishery product brought to public auction, which is subject to legitimate checks of an administrative, sanitary, fiscal, statistical etc. nature. However, even then (1959), there was the need to improve and renew the organisation, equipment and services of the markets as well as to reduce red tape, thus opening the markets up to the responsible and competent participation of the fishers and traders who unite in cooperatives or fishery associations, however this has only begun to take place more recently.
It is worth remembering that, after a long and period of difficulty, the role of wholesale fish markets is also recovering from a legislative point of view following the EC Directive n.493/91 and Italian Legal Decree (D.L.) n.532/92 which has already been mentioned. As a matter of fact, the markets which are demonstrating efficiency in the auction systems and the various internal services, as well as complying with the prevailing hygiene/sanitary laws, could be entrusted with the task of veterinary and quality control of the fishery or aquaculture product to be put into the sales network for consumption.

This is a new opportunity for the fishers who find themselves needing to confer a more acceptable price on their product, thus improving their earnings and recreating the economic balance of their enterprises which has been damaged by various aspects of market dynamics. In actual fact all costs have increased significantly, while earnings form the fishery catch have not grown so rapidly. It is clear that the initiatives to reduce costs of investment and management of fishery enterprises will need to be carefully studied before taking new directions. Where the improvement of product valuation is concerned, the market structures will once again be able to assist in landing areas where there are no other suitable structures for this purpose.

It is worth noting the existence of specific legal regulations which impose strict sanitary checks on the treatments carried out on foodstuffs of animal origin (including fish), these checks are carried out at all stages: production, conservation, transport and even during sale. This puts the fishers under further pressure, it is to their advantage to offer the consumer a product which is fresh, easily identified, healthy, of high quality and well preserved.

Clearly this will have to begin before capture, by verifying the ecological requirements linked to the fishing zone and then supplying every assurance concerning the hygiene/sanitary conditions on board the vessels where the operations of sorting, washing boxing and conservation of the catch are carried out. To win the race against time and guarantee the freshness of the product, fishers on the larger vessels could carry out further preparation on board, concentrating on the more valuable species due to limited space, in order to make the fish easier to prepare in the kitchen thus making the product more attractive to the consumer and improving its value. These treatments could consist of additional cleaning and packaging in ready-sorted crates for “home use” or “catering”, by species or mixed, to be put directly onto the market.

Operations on board can be carried out with the help of special machines which need not take up too much space. Such machines could package each category of fishery product as vacuum-packs, or in a protected atmosphere by inserting gaseous mixtures into the packaging (oxygen, nitrogen etc.). Preparing the product in this way will guarantee greater standards of hygiene and allow it to be conserved for longer while fresh, even in home fridges. However not all of the catch can be treated in this way on board, partly because on most vessels it is not possible to install the machinery mentioned. In this case, for those species and the significant quantities which are considered necessary and opportune, these treatments which add value to the product could take place in suitable structures on land; should such places not be available then inactive fish markets (to be adapted) could be used or specifically equipped areas could be found in the working markets. Such circumstances could also see the fishers themselves involved in the post-catch treatments described, managing these structures and machinery through their cooperatives and fishery associations.

Fishery products, which have thus been prepared, packaged and standardized, could receive a trademark which assures origin, quality etc. and which would in all likeliness facilitate
consumption. Furthermore, contacts with operators of large-scale distribution would be made easier, and long-term supply contracts could be drawn up as happened many years ago for the producers of fruit and vegetables, through the relative associations.

A very important sales system, which is even more modern, consists in the sale of carefully prepared and packaged “fresh” fishery products directly to the home (door to door). This distribution method has, until now, been mainly used for frozen products. It is fast and even telematically linked to the customers and can supply all information concerning the products available and gather orders that will be rapidly satisfied. This advanced system arose form the traditional “travelling salesman” who, a few decades ago, used old-fashioned barrows to carry boxes and baskets of fresh fish, molluscs and crustaceans which were kept fresh with ice. However it is important not to neglect the detailed network of retail traders, either in a fixed location or itinerant, which over time has had an extremely important role, one which has been essential for fisheries, in taking the catch away from the coast, therefore making the fish known in every local market, group of houses, hamlet or village. This also allowed strong, trusting relations to be forged between these operators and the consumers in view of the quality and security of the products offered.

Well-tested means of distribution like this need to be continually renewed so that they can become a decisive part of the commercialisation chain of the fishery product; these means also need to be brought into line with the regulations currently in force relative to the preservation and transport of products.

It is worth reflecting on the need for much of the catch from our Seas to receive the recognition offered by one the aforementioned trademarks, naturally following the necessary sanitary and quality controls which are carried out at all stages. That is to say, from the areas of the sea in which the fishers operate, to the fishing/breeding methods, the selection, packaging and preservation right up to the retail outlet.

In order to give the highest possible guarantees concerning the freshness and the quality of the packaged product, and also to prevent any kind of forgery, it is possible to use the same system which for years has been employed with bivalves and gastropods. In this way boxes of fish, molluscs, cephalopods and crustaceans would be wrapped in a nylon sack, sealed and labelled in order to make clear: species, capture area, health certification, weight, price and expiry date. Ideally other solutions will also be sought which could prove to be more convenient, taking into account the guarantees to be given. In order to carry out these operations and the necessary controls, it will be possible to use the systems and equipment in the wholesale fish markets so as to comply with the EC and national laws.

In conclusion, to realise this vast project, important tasks will be given to the fishers’ organisations, traders and consumers although clearly concrete legislative and financial support is required from the public institutions and health structures.

In the Province of Ancona (Italy) the A.S.Pe.A. (Special Agency for Fisheries and Agriculture of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Crafts and Agriculture of Ancona) which has been active in the sector for many years will have a significant role. However it will be indispensable to carry out a carefully prepared and extremely thorough campaign of information among the various categories of consumers. When commenting on the importance of fisheries for the society and the economy, journalists from the press, television, radio, internet etc will have to remark in particular on the safety, hygiene, freshness and quality of fishery products, detailing their nutritional benefit which their consumption has on the health.