

De Telegraaf

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Dutch factory runs on canoes full of fish in Gambia

DEN HELDER – It takes some getting used to: the canoes going out to sea in The Gambia don't look anything like Dutch cutters. Nonetheless, the canoes, which are 6 to 15 metres long, bring in 20 to 40 kilos of fish per day. That quantity is enough to be processed by The Atlantic Seafood Company (Tasc) of Dutchman Michel Huijser and to be exported to Europe. "It is a matter of staying the course, but eventually we'll end up working at a profit."

Giving up is not in Huijser's vocabulary when it comes to the fish factory. Not after all the difficulties that have been overcome in the past five years. And especially not because now some 2000 families depend on fishing and the factory.

Huijser ended up in The Gambia in 1993. "My father was honorary consul there at the time. We wanted to do something for the local population. By showing how to do things, people can learn them for themselves. It seemed a better idea to us than just pumping money into something."

The Huijser family started with a bakery "but it didn't get off the ground", all the more because the family had to leave the country due to a coup. However, they upheld a warm relationship with the people and when a fisherman convinced him that an investment in fishing would be worthwhile, Huijser came round.

Without any experience in the fisheries sector or subsidies Huijser started with processing sole and cuttlefish in a rented factory. Soon it became clear that the conditions there did not meet European standards, making it more difficult to sell the fish in

the European Union. Because of this Huijser decided to build a brand new factory which complied with the strictest requirements.

At present about 500 canoes bring in fresh fish for The Atlantic Sea Company daily. In the factory the fish, about 800 tonnes of cuttlefish and 400 tonnes of Atlantic sole, are processed for the European and South African markets. Huijser supplies various wholesalers and the hospitality sector. In 2004 sales were €60,000, whereas last year sales were already €2,4 million, reaching break-even. "But owing to the economic crisis there won't be any profit this year. The wholesalers also mainly supply the hospitality sector and fewer people go out for dinner."

It is no reason for Huijser to shut up shop in the West African country. "First of all because I am very sympathetic towards the people there. I have been coming to Gambia for so long, I have a bond with it. And we have survived so much: theft, unbreakable things breaking anyway, power failures, trade unions that never existed before suddenly paying you a visit, energy bills increasing by one hundred percent, too much to mention", he says. "We know the tricks of the trade, it would be a shame to give up now."

What's more, Huijser's company is working hard to get certified for sustainable fishing, a requirement set by several large retailers to get the fish on the shelf. "It's in the bag, we are meeting all requirements. It would be nice if we could round it off soon, so that we can enter that market too."