Exporting fish from The Gambia: An overview

The Gambia’s fishing industry has huge potential, most which have not yet been tapped. David Jas-Ikepene Junior takes a in-depth look at this industry and what it has to offer investors, especially those looking to export fish from the country.

The fisheries sector, apart from providing a valuable source of sustenance and protein for the Gambian people, is also a major employer as well as a vital source of foreign exchange for the government and businesses involved in the export of fish. According to figures released by the Fisheries Department, the fisheries sector contributes approximately 12% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The sector has huge scope for growth in the future as most of the fishing done within Gambia waters is 'artisanal' - done by local fishermen using local equipment.

Anyone looking to invest in or start up a business which has long term viability and the potential to bring in steady, if not spectacular returns, should seriously consider the fish export business.

How to get started

Of course one has to get all the logistics in place. This involves getting in contact with fishermen, fishing companies and middlemen who will act as your suppliers. You will also need to know about issues like the availability of storage and processing facilities (if necessary) and how much will cost to procure and run these facilities. Getting office space for running of the administrative side of the business and the hiring of staff are also essential pre-requisites for getting started.

Meeting Regulatory Requirements

Apart from the usual certificate of registration, an operating permit is required to establish a fish export or processing company. The rules governing the establishment of fish export and processing businesses in The Gambia are governed by the 1995 fisheries regulations. It would be prudent to familiarize yourself with these regulations in order to avoid the risk of closure or the refusal of the issuance of a permit.

The 1995 fisheries regulations state that all fish processing export businesses should provide detailed feasibility studies that cover all aspects of their operations, including sources of supplies, construction, quality control measures, management & financial analysis. This feasibility study, which should be diligently attended to, should be forwarded to the Fisheries Department.

Identifying your markets

Fish, of course, is consumed all over the world but when trying to pinpoint where to export your product to, the entrepreneur has to consider a number of factors like proximity, accessibility, size, income levels and economies of scale.

In The Gambia's case, the European Union (EU) is the most probable market for fish and other goods because of its proximity and the size of the market.

Meeting the requirements of the export market

The Gambia's trade with the EU and other regions is governed by WTO and GATT rules. However, for many years under the flexibility of the GATT agreement, The Gambia and other African, Carribean and Pacific nation (ACP) have had preferential non-reciprocal trading agreements with the EU under the Cotonou Agreement. This allows The Gambia and other ACP countries to export fish and other commodities to the EU without having tariffs & import duties imposed on them.

The creation of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has however changed things as tariffs are being slashed across the board, eroding whatever advantages ACP countries had. New Economic Partnership Agreements are being worked out between the EU and ACP countries but the reality is that fish exports
from The Gambia are going to be facing a lot more competition because of the general liberalization of trade rules that is taking place. This calls for greater inventiveness and imagination on the part of entrepreneurs in the fish business who may have to think of moving away from the more common processed products to fresh varieties.

Knowing about the EU's food quality and safety requirements is also important. Fish is not allowed into the EU if it is suspected that it will pose short, medium or long term health problems for certain groups of consumers within the EU and your product will definitely not be allowed in if there is evidence of contamination, deterioration or decay, which may make it unfit for human consumption. In order to avoid the possibility of seizure or withdrawal of your product, everything must be done to ensure that your product meets the required safety standards. Apart from making sure that your storage and processing facilities are as clean and hygienic as possible, labeling the product is also essential as this indicates if there are any allergic or toxic materials in the product.

**Taking advantage of government programmes and incentives**

The Gambia Government has a duty waiver system for fishing inputs along with duty waivers for fish exports as well as tax waivers for fish exports as well as tax waivers on equipment. Today, these incentives can make starting up the business a lot easier, especially as it relates to your financial outlay. Engaging in the fish export business can be fraught with a lot of pitfalls if you do not do your research properly. This is why a thorough feasibility study is important as it will make clear what you have to do and what you should avoid in order for you to get the rewards you hope for.

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