

Brussels, 27/03/2020

Dear Colleagues,

As we are all aware, the worldwide pandemic of the coronavirus, COVID-19, poses serious challenges for many sectors but it is hitting fishing and aquaculture particularly hard. Fishing fleets in many EU countries are docked or have reduced activity as the demand for fresh fish and seafood plummets. Consumers are buying less and less fresh fish, restaurants are closed, fishmongers and fish auctions are also closing down. Aquaculture businesses face similar market issues which means they have to find ways to keep their stocks alive and incur subsequent higher costs (notably in terms of feed and manpower) while no income is coming in.

The COVID-19 outbreak has created an unprecedented situation which requires a **general mobilisation** of the actors involved in the sector.

Now more than ever, **as FLAGS, you are in the first line and best placed to develop local responses to the local specific problems** due to the crisis. Your field knowledge is a valuable advantage that we should use to the benefit of local communities. Therefore, it is vital that you **cooperate and share** with each other your best way to mitigate the impact of the crisis. FLAGS are a **source of innovative ideas** and we welcome any initiative you take in order to help the sector, for example, some FLAGS have already suggested the following:

- a **“buy fresh local fish” communication** campaign by your FLAGS. This could raise awareness of local communities on the importance of supporting the local fleet and aquaculture farmers by continuing to buy fresh fish and thus supporting the local economy.
- the **organisation of a “takeaway day”** when this is still possible in order to promote distance sale. This would help boost sales during the pandemic. It is important to remind the consumers that seafood is a vital part of a healthy diet!

As a direct consequence of the crisis, the decrease of imports of fish is **increasing the demand for fresh local fish**. Our sector should make the best out of this opportunity in order to **support the income of fishers**, in particular SSCF, to **continue fishing by promoting short circuits**. In this crisis, **solidarity** is key and consumers have a big role to play.

In many places, FLAG budgets will not be sufficient or are already exhausted. Please, do not underestimate the value of your network, which is a resource in itself. Your network of local stakeholders and local, regional and national public authorities can help you tailor any **emergency package**. The latter could be financed by other sources and reach out to those businesses most affected by the crisis.

Please note that the European Commission has adopted a **Temporary State Aid Framework** to enable Member States to provide relief to economic operators hit by the crisis. The new Temporary Framework allows aid up to €120 000 per undertaking active in the fishery and aquaculture sectors. This [factsheet](#) outlines the emergency response to support the fishing and aquaculture sectors.

In addition, an [Information Note](#) from DG MARE **provides Member States with information on possibilities**, which are immediately available and which can be used without delay, either under EMFF current rules or under the new Temporary State Aid Framework, or – once in force – the additional measures under the Commission’s Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative. For more information, We invite you to visit the [DG MARE website](#).

In the meantime, we also have to bear in mind the necessity to **prepare for the next** steps. Each FLAG should look at how it will be able to use its resources to help **relaunch its local economies and restore normality in its communities** in the aftermath of the crisis. Most local development strategies allow for **projects supporting the local seafood** value chain and the development of the wider local economy through **diversification activities**. We encourage you to already think about potential projects that could be developed in the months to come to restore vitality in the local economy.

**If your FLAG is already actively supporting your local fishing and aquaculture communities in coping with the crisis or if you are planning special actions to be launched as soon as the crisis will allow, we and the whole network of FLAGs want to hear from you.** Please get in touch with the FSU at [richard.freeman@farnet.eu](mailto:richard.freeman@farnet.eu) to share your stories and ideas for initiatives to deal with this challenge. We look forward to hearing and sharing your ideas.

With best wishes for you and your communities in these difficult times,

The FARNET Support Unit