

Somaliland's Blue Economy

A combination of serendipity and necessity is creating a powerful force propelling economic growth in the tiny, semi-autonomous state of Somaliland. Amy Guttman reports on the entrepreneurs benefitting from the state's new, sustainable food supply



Fishermen unloading their boats in Berbera

Former ship-owner Per Gullestrup is an unlikely champion for economic development in the Horn of Africa. In 2008, Somali pirates hijacked and held his crew hostage before the Danish maritime executive negotiated their release. Two years later, after the shock subsided, Gullestrup considered addressing the root cause of the problem, poverty, by establishing alternative livelihoods.

'I thought, instead of running away from this, what if I could take a step closer to it? I managed to get the Danish ship owner's community to donate a substantial amount to look for solutions. At the time, there was a tremendous international presence in the Gulf of Aden. We thought this was a good way to show that we, as ship owners, were not just asking for help, but were also prepared to give it.'

Gullestrup established Fair Fishing, an NGO providing technical training, including swimming, and basic equipment in places where the fishing industry is under-developed, or doesn't exist. He used his connections to collect seed funding and donations of used goods such as reefer containers to be repurposed as freezers. He chose Somaliland for the initiative to serve as a model for other areas because of its long coastline, and stable government. But, there was a larger task than teaching people how to fish. In this land of nomads and pastoral farmers who, largely, inhabit mountainous terrain, Gullestrup first needed to persuade Somalilanders to eat fish.

SHIFTING MINDSETS

Unlike in Somalia, there is little history of fishing in Somaliland, outside of the coastal city of Berbera, where fishing has been limited to a very small scale due to a lack of ice and freezers. Without a way to store it, fish wasn't very appetising by the time it reached local shops.

'The perception of fish was that it was a poor man's diet,' Gullestrup says. 'It was smelly and was something you only ate if you had nothing better to consume.'

The current population didn't know how to fish, or how to cook it. So, Fair Fishing began with an education and awareness campaign in 2012. As knowledge about the health benefits and low cost of fish began to spread, so did demand for Somaliland's new food source. As the industry continues to mature, it is creating jobs across the value chain.

Chef Hana Abdi began teaching cooking lessons from her home in Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, in 2013. Her classes covered the staples of the local diet: mostly meat, with rice and some vegetables. Now, Abdi spends half her time teaching women about fish. Interest in her lessons has increased so much, she travels all over Somaliland, with students gathering to



watch her gut and clean tuna before marinating it in herbs and frying it in oil.

'Women want to know different ways to cook fish,' Abdi says. 'I teach them how to make grilled fish, fish fingers, fish soup. I teach them how to clean it, how to know if the fish is okay, how to fillet it and show them they can prepare it faster than meat. The more women I train, the more they can train others.'

DROUGHTS DRIVING CHANGE

Beyond its nutritional and economic potential, the development of Somaliland's fishing industry has become a necessity as a result of the climate crisis. Droughts that used to happen every ten years now occur every two to three. The last one, in 2017, wiped out more than half of the country's goats, sheep and

'We lack a formal wholesale process. We have meat markets for livestock everywhere, but no fish markets'

camels, threatening the survival of Somaliland's tribal communities. Livestock contributes 30 per cent to the national economy. Mubarik Ibrahim, director general of planning and national development sees the 'blue economy' as a solution. 'We need to shift our economy from being heavily dependent on livestock to fisheries,' he says.

The opportunities for the fishing industry are vast. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimates fish stocks in Somaliland are between 180,000 and 200,000 tons and that 20 per cent could be harvested sustainably. Currently, only ten per cent is fished. Still, Ibrahim isn't naïve about the task that lies ahead.

'I can count maybe 100 challenges, but the key ones are in the value chain,' he says. 'Cold storage, boats, nets, you name it, the core infrastructure is under-developed. We are lacking regulatory policies and frameworks to raise standards and protect fishermen. We need quality control for the fish handling process. We lack a formal wholesale process. We have meat markets for livestock everywhere, but no fish markets, except in Burao.'



Outside the coastal city of Berbera, fishing had little uptake in Somaliland

IMPACT INLAND

The city of Burao, a couple of hours from the coast, is known for its large livestock market. Fair Fishing chose the city to pilot a fish market after residents suffered acute losses from the last drought. Burao's mayor, Mohamed Yousuf, says that despite the city's location far from the sea, fish has provided a lifeline.

'Ten years ago, no one here ate fish. We were meat eaters. Now, 30 per cent of people eat fish. The people in this region, 80 per cent of them rely on livestock. The drought is not just about loss of employment. It created a health crisis. Fishing has created jobs... there are people who transport the fish, women who fry the fish in the market, fish restaurants...'

Solar panel-powered freezers and ice machines were installed to keep the fish fresh after arriving from places such as Berbera on the coast. Fishmongers were taught to handle and fillet fish. A visit to the market is now also part of the health and nutrition curriculum at a nearby university. For many students, it's their first time seeing a whole fish. Hipak Ahmed, a single mother, was one of the first trainees. She works four mornings a week selling fish and attends university in the afternoons.

'If not for this fish market, I would work in a beauty salon, but I couldn't earn what I do selling fish,' she says. 'Here, I make double the income with shorter hours. I can look after my son and pay for my education.'

FEMALES FIRST

Fishing, itself, remains male-dominated in Somaliland. But, the number of women prospering from the industry is immense.

In Berbera, Fadumo Nuur began selling fish in 2013, with only a small ice box. Now, the 36-year old mother employs nine fishermen and a supervisor for her wholesale business.

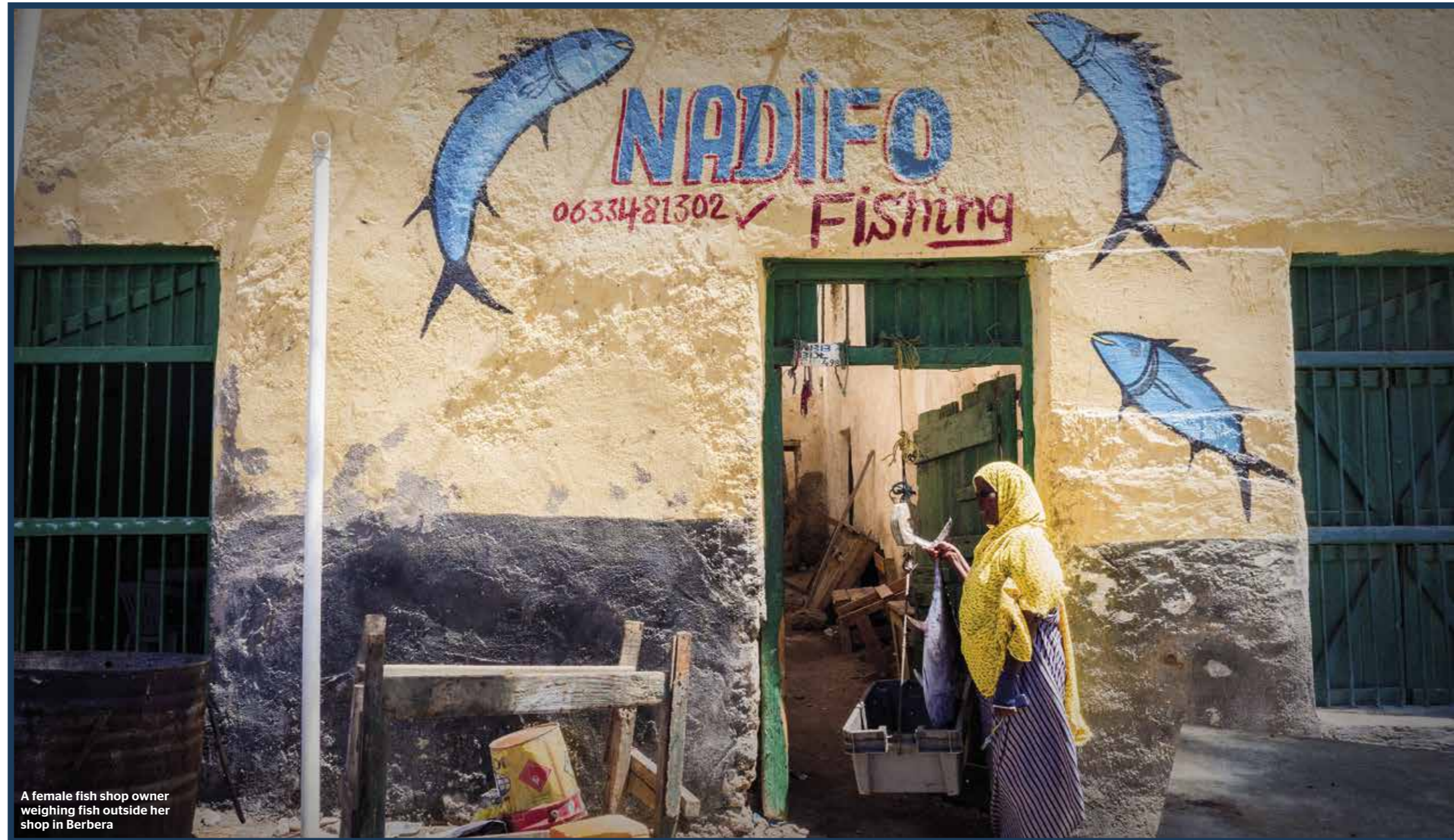
'My son was a few months old, and I was desperate to help my impoverished parents, so I bought fish from the boat,' Nuur explains. 'I connected with someone in the city of Burao who had a shop and I would put the fish in an ice box and send it on the next transport and they would send it back on the same truck.'

Nuur sold fish box by box until she saved enough money to buy first a small boat, and then a second, larger one. She and others have benefited from a processing station Fair Fishing installed at the port, where fish is weighed, stored and packed in ice before being loaded onto trucks for the three-hour road journey to Hargeisa. Cold storage, Nuur says, has been a game-changer.

'Before, the fishermen used to throw away surplus fish because they had nowhere to store it. Now, when they catch a lot of fish, it stays in the freezers for up to 20 days, until there's demand for it.'

Nuur earns ten times the average income. Growing up, she was kept home from school to help with housework. She can't read or write, yet, Nuur earns enough to pay for the education of her eleven siblings' children and has bought six homes for her family. 'I am the most successful member of my family – even more than those who are educated,' she says.

In Hargeisa, restaurant owner, Sahra Muhammed and her six employees chop vegetables and set



A female fish shop owner weighing fish outside her shop in Berbera

tables, preparing for the lunchtime rush. The growth of Sahra's business parallels Somaliland's fishing industry. Five years ago, few people in the land-locked capital were eating fish, but Muhammed believed if she served it, they would come. Then, there were only two fish restaurants in the capital. Muhammed began selling fried fish from a street stall near Hargeisa's busy bus station.

'There were a lot of restaurants when I first opened, but they were mostly selling meat and I wanted to try something new. I opened the only restaurant cooking fish. Now, there more than 100 restaurants selling fish in Hargeisa. Hotels were once only serving camel meat. Now they're also adding

Five years ago, few people in Hargeisa, the land-locked capital, were eating fish

fish dishes and some of them are no longer serving camel, only fish as people have gotten used to it and the supply of livestock has decreased.'

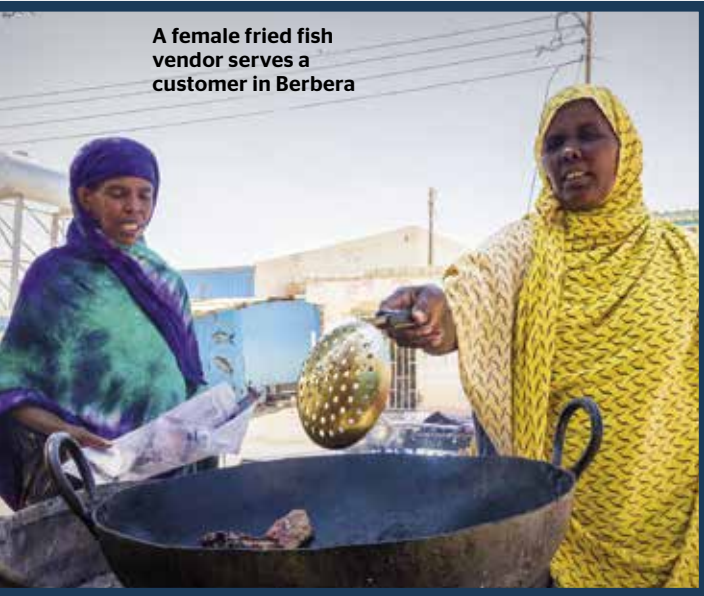
The success of Muhammed's stall exceeded her expectations. She first expanded the business beyond takeaway meals, setting up stools for a makeshift restaurant. In 2017, Muhammed grew the business yet

again, becoming a legitimate restaurant with tables. But, she quickly outgrew the space and last year relocated to an indoor-outdoor venue seating 52 people.

Being a pioneer wasn't easy, Muhammed says. Like many others, she lacked basic knowledge: 'It was trial and error and I lost money because sometimes I bought too much fish, or I didn't cook it properly, so people wouldn't eat it. I was over-cooking and using too much oil and salt, but now I've learned how to cook the fish for less time and serve it with spices. People prefer it this way. Only one out of 20 people asks us for over-cooked fish,' she says with a smile.

Sahra employs six people; three women and three men. Most of them are new to the restaurant trade,

A female fried fish vendor serves a customer in Berbera



‘Everywhere you go, you will find nomadic people who have come to work in the fish industry’

as well as city living; the droughts forced them from their homes in the mountains, in search of work. Abdi Hashi is a cook and waiter.

‘I came here to earn a living after losing all of our animals in the 2016/2017 drought. We had 100 goats and 20 camels. I support the rest of my family. I will never go back to the nomadic life. Even if there were animals in the future, I would not go back. I have many more opportunities here. Fish is more nutritious and creates these opportunities. Everywhere you go, you will find nomadic people who have come to work in the fish industry. This is because they have lost their animals, and the fish industry is bringing jobs and opportunities as it continues to develop.’

BLUE ECONOMY

An impact report produced in 2019, by the independent Nordic Consulting Group, found the income for those in the fishing industry grew more than 300 per cent from 2013 to 2018. The average monthly income for a fishing crew rose from \$150 in 2012 to \$470 in 2018. Ibrahim wants to build on that success.

‘We want to create fishing communities along the coastline. As people lost their animals and a lot of people have been displaced, we need to re-settle these people in some of these coastal areas. Coastal communities could contribute up to six per cent of the GDP. The Blue Economy has the power to transform this country’s economy.’

For Per Gullestrup, the goal of propelling Somaliland’s economy with training and tools, rather than handouts has become a reality: ‘Our ambition



A fish shop owner in Hargeisa

initially was to be a catalyst for change and I believe we have succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.’

Gullestrup and his colleagues intend to continue expanding their programme to increase the quality of the value chain from catch to table, and extend their geographical reach to other communities in the region. The sea that was the cause of such misery for some is now a source of opportunity for many. ●