

# To fish or not to fish

The meaning of fish and fisheries among young people in the Faroe Islands

Fiska ella ikki fiska. Fatan føroyskra ungdómsins av fiski og fiskiskapi

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## Úrtak

Fiskivinnan var fyrr tað arbeiðspláss, sum flest ung væntaðu sær eina framtíð í, men sum tíðir eru broyttar, hevur tað unga ættarliðið í Føroyum eisini broytt framtíðarætlanir. Fiskivinnan hevur ikki somu atráttarmegi á ungdómin longur, og tað kemst av fleiri orsøkum. Í hesi grein verður hugt at sambandinum millum samfelagsbroytingar í nýggjari tíð og fatan ungdómsins av fiskiskapi í Føroyum. Hvussu er fiskivinnan stillað í huganum hjá ungdóminum? Eisini verða best umtókta framtíðarstørvinu ímillum ung í Føroyum lýst. Úrslitini eru í høvuðsheitum grundað á tvær víðfevnandi spurnarkanningar frá 2003.

## Abstract

The fishing industry used to be the working-place where young people expected to find themselves in the future, but as times have changed, young people in the Faroe Islands also changed their future plans. Due to several reasons the fishing industry doesn't have a strong attraction for youths any more. In this article we focus on the social changes that have taken place in recent years and their influence upon young people's perception of the fishing industry as a future work place. Also, I describe the most attractive future occupations among young people. The results are primarily based on two extensive surveys from 2003.

## Introduction

During the 90s the Faroese society changed radically. Traditional values and lifestyles associated with the fisheries declined in popularity, challenged by new preferences of education, work and leisure. Even if the fishing industry has lost recognition among young people and is considered less attractive than it used to be, most people in the Faroe Islands have some kind of connection to the fisheries, many also making career in the business after strong times past hesitations. Preferences of education, work and leisure may fit perfectly together in young people's representations of 'self', but their manifestations in social reality turn out to be much more complex and ambiguous. This paper starts with an introduction to the crisis of the early 90s' Faroe Islands, discussing its consequences for young people in particular and the Faroese society in general, followed by a presentation of data illustrating the preferences of



work and leisure among youth from: all Faroe Islands, Tórshavn, and southern Suðuroy (Southern Island). A brief discussion and analysis of possible consequences of the new priorities of young people on the future fishing industry follows at the end. This article is based on a paper presented at the Nordic conference 'Recruitment of highly educated labour in the fisheries' in Tórshavn, December 3-5 2003. Organised by the Centre for Local and Regional Development.

### Consequences of the crisis

Young people in the Faroe Islands differ in many respects from the older generations, not only due to the fact that they are 'young' and hence opposed to many values associated with the parents, but as much because of the radical changes that the Faroese society has undergone since the mid-80s. The youth of the third millennium grew up during and after the severe economic crisis of the early 90s. They are the 'post-crisis youth' or 'millennium generation', not familiar with the society of their parents' adolescence (Gaini, 2003b). The chaotic years of the early 90s, when the economic system collapsed and more than ten percent of the population emigrated to Denmark and other countries, affected most Faroese families drastically, altering living conditions for the worse (Jespersen, 1994; Arge, 2000). Therefore, today's youth is not only a product of the flourishing post-crisis era, but indeed also marked by the harsh years of the depression during their early childhood. During the crisis many children moved to their grand-par-

ents or other relatives in small villages as the parents became jobless and were forced to sell the family's house; others moved to Denmark with their parents, some of these families returned to the Faroe Islands later, but most of these are still living in exile (Arge, 2000). In short, the economic crisis — which indeed was a social and political crisis too — marks an important societal shift, as the Faroe Islands 'before the crisis' and 'after the crisis' are two different historical eras with quite different political and economic structures, as well as youth cultures. The last decade or so has been characterised by an impressive recovery of the national economy, the massive entry of communication and information technologies, and a general opening towards globalisation and post-industrial society with all its characteristics (Apostle *et al.* 2002; Hovgaard and Gaini, 2003). The contrasts between the époques can be represented in simple pairs of traits (Table 1).

This is a rough simplification of a complex social reality, but it emphasises the role of the crisis in the shift of the 90s in the Faroe Islands. Obviously, the 'before the crisis' era is also limited backward in time: when traditional or premodern society ended. Modernisation and industrialisation came very late to the North Atlantic region, never really eradicating traditional culture, hence the 'early modernity' and 'late-traditional' labels on the society before the 90s (Gaini, 2003a). Modern Faroese history is characterised by big changes and developments within a short span of time, making it difficult to delimit events and periods in clear-cut chronologi-



## Societal shift

	Before the crisis	After the crisis
Division:	'old generation'	'young generation'
Era:	modernity (early modernity) (late-traditional)	late-modernity liquid modernity (Bauman) reflexive modernity (Giddens)
Economy:	industrial	varied, knowledge-based
Family structure:	nuclear family	complex family entities
Development:	continuity, stability	discontinuity, risk
Culture:	local, national	local-global in interplay
Youth identity:	collective, inherited	individual, personal choice

Table 1

cal categories. The leap from the traditional society of farmers and fishermen to today's highly modern Faroese society is huge, but it happened within just a few generations (op.cit.). The adult Faroese population is standing with one leg in traditional society and the other in the global latemodern world, but the youngsters, born in the late 80s and 90s, have both feet safely planted in post-crisis society, representing a new generation with new opportunities and preferences (op.cit.).

The cultural influence from abroad through television, internet and other media has increased gradually, the establishment of a national Faroese television (Sjónvarp Føroya) in 1984 symbolising the first big step out of isolation (Forchhammer, 1998). Satellite dishes and videos were also introduced in the Faroe Islands in the mid-80s,

giving people direct access to foreign television emissions and films. In the 90s came the internet, e-mail, mobile phones etcetera, and today there is no significant difference between Faroese and other Nordic and European youth concerning the use of modern technologies of communication and information. The consequences of the opening towards globalisation and post-industrial society in the Faroe Islands are extensive, changing e.g. youth cultures and identity, hence also priorities regarding education, lifestyle and working career.

### Who wants to fish?

The interest in fish and fisheries, it must be admitted, is rather limited among Faroese teenagers anno 2003, maybe especially among the Tórshavn youth. Only few lower secondary school pupils plan to make a



career in the fisheries, a number that will most likely decline even further during the next years. The prestige of the fisheries as a working-place has dropped seriously among young people, especially the physically hard 'traditional' work in the fishing industry has lost popularity.

Young people in the Faroe Islands have various leisure-time activities, fishing definitely not being among the most popular today. Only 74 out of 637 9<sup>th</sup> grade pupils, i.e. 11.6 percent, have 'fishing' as one of their leisure-time activities according to the new national ESPAD-survey (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs) from 2003. The questionnaire contained twenty leisure-activity options in total, only three of them being less popular than fishing in the aggregated results.

The same picture appears from another recent national survey, conducted by the Centre for Local and Regional Development in Klaksvík in 2003: less than ten percent of 900 respondents have 'fishing and sailing' as leisure-time activity, while 'sports' and 'music and movies' are the most popular activities with scores above 50 percent. 'Fishing and sailing' and 'music and movies' are part of the leisure-time of 85 and 550 youths respectively, a clear indication of the rock music leisure dominance over fish and fisheries. At the bottom of the list, with less than five percent scores, are 'political activities' and the open category 'others'. This survey included all students from 9<sup>th</sup> grade (aged fourteen and fifteen) at all lower secondary schools in the Faroe Islands, i.e. the complete age cohort, as well as all students

from the *last* school year in all upper secondary schools.

Questioned, in the same survey, what they would like to do for a living in the future, what were their highest working preferences, the fishing industry was surpassed by several 'trendy' businesses. Fisheries (on sea) ended fifth from the top, while 'fisheries on land' and 'fish farming' actually were among the least popular businesses on the 22 options list. 'Hairdressing and face/body care' is the most attractive business, the prime choice of 172 respondents, while 'music and art' and 'lawyer and accountant' follow on second and third positions respectively. The fishing (on sea) business is, by the way, the future working preference of 116 respondents.

The favourite future jobs of Faroese youths are clearly not directly related to the fisheries. Among students with a clear idea of what training and education they will aim at, the top list of job preferences is though a bit different: (1) trade and office; (2) health care science; (3) educationalist; (4) hairdressing and face/body care; and (5) captain. Lawyer, chef and mechanic are also quite popular future jobs. There is anyway a variety of job preferences with some common immanent aspects. Young people want to be creative, aesthetic and independent, as well as using their intellect. They avoid what they view as 'boring' routine work without challenges. The high status jobs in the fisheries on sea are obviously 'captain', a position securing good earnings and power, and 'chef', a position associated with artistry since cooking became attractive and fashionable (for men and



women) through domestic and foreign television emissions in the Faroe Islands.

In a comparative sociological study (Jónsson *et al.*, 2000) 538 Faroese, Icelandic and Greenlandic teenagers were, among many other questions, asked: What do you think is going to be your future position? - 6.5 percent of the Faroese respondents said 'agriculture/fishing', while the corresponding figures for Iceland and Greenland were only 3.7 and 2.5 percent respectively. There were in total 92 Faroese respondents of the average age of nineteen, and eighteen answering alternatives to this specific question. The favourite future occupations of Faroese youths were the vague 'social science' and 'trade and office' categories, each with thirteen percent scores.

Most young people in the Faroe Islands are working during summertime, many also after school in the evenings. While permanently employed workers are on vacation, young people serve as their replacements and gather some hard-earned money. More than one half of the respondents in the survey made by the Centre for Local and Regional Development have worked in the fishing or fish farming industries sometime in their lives, Tórshavn being the only place where the majority is without experiences from the fisheries, while not less than 75 percent of youths from industrial regional towns have working experiences from the fisheries. Young people with experiences from the fisheries have in most cases been employed in fish fillet factories, i.e. engaged in the least skilled industrial work.

Taking all kinds of work besides school

into consideration, Tórshavn youth are as hard-working as the rest.

The prospects for the fisheries in the Faroe Islands may seem rather negative from the data presented, because the fishing industry is not a top working or leisure priority, but on the other hand, most people work in other businesses in the Faroe Islands already. There is nothing new in that. The fishing industry, of course, doesn't require the whole youth generation for its survival. The aim is to get resourceful and well-educated people with creative capacities to the fisheries. Moreover, many youths dreaming of 'fancy' challenging jobs far from the smell of fish, end up working in the fishing industry anyway, because they have to take what they can get – or what gives money: "The fish smell, but people always come back to the smell of money" (quoted in Apostle *et al.*, 2002: 101). The fishing industry is much more varied and flexible than we usually seem to think.

### **Tórshavn youth**

Even if most young people have a connection to the fisheries through family and friends, the majority prefers, as we have seen, to make career in other parts of the labour market. In a survey that I made in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade class from a random lower secondary school in Tórshavn, composed of 24 pupils aged fourteen and fifteen, only two persons had working preferences associated with the fisheries: 'to work on a fishing ship' and 'chef'. The class was also asked about leisure-time activities, none of the pupils mentioned 'fishing', one out of seventeen options given. Even if they were



free to choose several options, most of them selecting at least three, 'fishing' scored zero. At another lower secondary school in the Faroese capital I gave two 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes identical questions about leisure: three out of 27 pupils had 'fishing' as leisure-time activity.

In the 'old days' every Faroese man wanted to own his own boat for leisure and part-time work, because of the sense of freedom to move and fish that this gave him; an old Faroese saying runs as follows, 'tied down is the boatless man'. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade class was also given the following question to answer: Do you think that you will buy yourself a car, boat or summerhouse when adult? Everyone expected to become a car-owner, quite many also summerhouse-owners, but only two boys imagined that they were going to possess boats; five others, though, answered 'maybe a boat'.

I gathered, through individual interviews and open conversations in this school class, informations about the pupils' relation to the fisheries among other subjects. One of the boys told me that he was probably going to spend the summer on a fishing vessel together with his father, who was a sailor; two pupils had brothers who were sailors; a girl's father was an engineer on a fishing vessel; and two boys wanted themselves to make a working career in the fisheries – at least for a couple of years. One of them (Peter), playing guitar in a rock band, told me that his dream was to become a professional musician, but he didn't expect the dream to come true, therefore he bet on a career in the fisheries:

Peter: I would like to become an engineer [on fishing vessels, FG], and then work on fishing vessels for two years, then go back home, and then become a carpenter or something like that...or continue to work as an engineer or something like that.

*FG: But why not more than two years [on a fishing vessel]?*

Peter: Because it becomes a bit boring after some time...maybe longer, I really don't know, it is just a...

*FG: You think that you are going to become tired of it?*

Peter: Yes, people often get tired of it, yes...sitting in the 'engine-room' at the bottom of the ship...so I don't know, maybe if I am going to like it very much...maybe I am going to be there for a longer time...

*FG: Yes*

Peter: But I can also use the education as an engineer here.

[...]

*FG: Are there others sailing in your family?*

Peter: Yes, not right now, but there have been some...my uncle is a skipper, and his son was sometimes with him, and then it was also...grandfather was a sailor...it was mostly in my mother's family that people were sailing...and there was someone...

*FG: What kind of fishing vessel would you like to work on?*

Peter: It should be one where you...where you gain big money, ha?

This Tórshavn boy has a plan, not aiming at any very special high status occupation, which is the result of reflexive considerations about his future and way of life. He



wants to work on a ship for a couple of years, to try it and hopefully earn some good money, thereafter work on land, because life on sea becomes, as he says, too boring as an engineer. Probably he has other aspects in consideration as well: playing guitar as leisure activity, creating a family with a 'modern family-life' impracticable for sailors, to get experiences from other occupations, and so on. The big earnings associated with parts of the fisheries (on sea) in the Faroe Islands make the business quite attractive for young people, but the dilemma is that sailors' lifestyles and working conditions are not favoured among youths in our times. The other boy (Hans) with working preferences in the fisheries is more determined to work on the sea, not mentioning any restrictions concerning the sailor's career. He wants, like his classmate, to become member of a successful ship crew in order to earn big money.

Hans: I am going to be a shipmaster or captain or something like that

FG: *So you would like to work on ships?*

Hans: Yes.

FG: *Is this something you always wanted?*

Hans: Yes.

FG: *Are there sailors in your family?*

Hans: Yes, many.

FG: *Then you will go to navigation school?*

Hans: Yes.

FG: *What kind of fishing vessel would you like to work on?*

Hans: I don't know...just a good one... where you earn big money.

FG: *On a trawler maybe?*

Hans: Yes, maybe yes.

The outcome of the societal changes during the 80s and 90s is an individualised knowledge-based society, giving individuals the responsibility of their own destiny (Gaini 2003b, 2004). This is in turn affecting the relation between generations, hence also the cultural continuity and social reproduction through time. Guy Debord says: 'Men resemble their times more than their fathers' (quoted in Bauman, 2002: 128). People don't expect boys to step into the shoes of their fathers nowadays; if they imitate their fathers or mothers, then it is, in principle, their own free decision out of several equal opportunities; in other words a reflexive strategy - not a 'natural' process.

### **Youth of southern Suðuroy**

In the southern part of Suðuroy fish is to a higher degree present in youths' minds, as most people in the region work in and depend on the fishing industry (Mentamálastýrið, 2001; Apostle *et al.*, 2002). Young people from the leading town Vágur and its neighbouring communities express their attitudes concerning fish and fisheries - among other subjects - in a UNESCO-report, 'Northern Futures Young Voices' (Holm, 1999; Bjørndal and Aarsæther, 2000), comparing young people from twelve peripheral municipalities in seven countries: Canada, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia and Faroe Islands. The reflections of southern Suðuroy youths demonstrate the multifarious facets of 'fish' and 'fishing': tradition, local culture, working place, nature, hobby etcetera. It is thus not solely an economic occupational issue; its meaning is much deeper and more



substantial for local identity and culture of people in the Faroe Islands. "I like it here, because you can always go sailing and because my father is a farmer", says a sixteen-year old boy from Sumba about his community in the comparative report (op.cit.). Others say e.g.:

[Boy, 15 years, from Vágur]

I plan to get an education, but first I am going out to sea as a sailor, before I will sit on a school bench again. I don't relish the thought of spending the whole day in front of the computer. I would much rather be a fisherman and have a regular job. It is unhealthy to be a sailor, but if that's the only work opportunity, then one would have to settle for that.

[Girl, sixteen years, from Porkeri]

The opportunities for work are rare here in Porkeri. We have a salmon-smoking factory, which provides around 200 jobs. If a person is not interested in working in the fisheries, he or she would have to leave the town, or even the island, and find work elsewhere.

[Girl, sixteen years, from Porkeri]

Most of the people have jobs, some work at the salmon-factory in Porkeri, but I think most of them work in the villages called Tvøroyri and Vágur. Many of the men have fishing boats; they go fishing and return back home to sell the fish.

Escaping the fisheries is an arduous enterprise according to these youths, making it a question of staying or leaving home; fol-

lowing or breaking tradition. The teenage boy from Vágur wants to work in the fishing industry, but he also wants an education giving him alternative opportunities for the future. He has, like other Faroese youths, to take many aspects into consideration: where does he want to live? What work can he get at the place? What way of life is the best for him? The population of the island of Suðuroy, far from Tórshavn, ergo considered peripheral, is declining year by year (Mentamálastýrið, 2001). Young people in large numbers leave the island to study and work in the capital area or in foreign countries (primarily Denmark), quite a few of them never returning back to Suðuroy for permanent settlement. The future of the island according to a concerned boy from the small village Akrar (Holm, 1999):

In many places the population will grow, and everything is going to depend on computers, but in my hometown I don't believe anything is going to change, but I hope that people will settle down here in the future.

A Porkeri boy reflects on his working priorities, which differ from the 'normal' choice of men in his community:

Several men [from Porkeri] are sailors and make lots of money, and some young people are sailors too. Two classmates of mine were on a ship last summer [...] I plan to study on a higher level, because I believe that this will better my opportunities. If one wants to get a good job, one has to get the necessary education.

The dilemma of the youths is to choose between the fisheries and a higher education; between a fast but insecure income



and knowledge and a 'stable' occupation; between tradition and reflexive modernity. As a matter of fact, it is not necessary to oppose fisheries to higher education. The fishing industry desperately needs to achieve a new image, not being identified with boring routine work without any prestige and reputation anymore. The viability of small remote communities in the Faroe Islands depends on the efforts, local and national, made to hold the rising generation.

To fish or not to fish, that is the question many young people around the Faroe Islands have in mind, when they cogitate future life in their native community, because local economic structures makes it difficult to establish alternative businesses, even if indeed it is a possible and desirable task (Apostle *et al.*, 2000).

### **Consequences of new priorities**

It is not easy to find a place on the labour market without a diploma from a higher education institution as ticket of entry. Educational requirements have grown in all the economic sectors, even in the traditional manual fisheries. The attractive occupations in the fisheries are for people with training and qualifications, as well as solid experiences (Gaini, 2003b).

Many young people regard fishing as definite low status work, suited for people without any education or 'talents' only. If everything else goes wrong, then you can find work in the fisheries; this is a common view among young people from the upper secondary schools. The Faroese fishing industry is actually a highly modern trade, computer technology being an irreplace-

able part of it (op.cit.). The negative attitudes towards the industry are a consequence of the persistent image of fishery work as dirty, cold, and outdated; an image not matching today's social reality, a problem that must be solved if the recruitment of young educated labour into the fisheries shall be a successful venture. The fish and fisheries have to get rid of their poor reputation among upper secondary school youths.

The fisheries are, according to many people, a branch without room for creativity, personal development or 'mind work'; it is a closed world of traditional masculine norms and ideals that are incongruous with the demands and lifestyles of many people today. The working preferences of young people are closely related to leisure and lifestyle preferences, a characteristic of 'post-crisis' latemodern Faroese society. What used to be strictly leisure is often the future working preference as well, and vice versa, something clearly manifested in relation to sports and music. Faroese youth wants to play rock music, not work on a fishing vessel, argues the Danish music journalist Morten Steen Nielsen (Oyggjatiðini, June 25, 2003) after a short visit in the Faroe Islands. A statement telling the truth with some modifications; rock music is very popular as a leisure activity in the Faroe Islands, but very few people end up as professional musicians; in many cases the music life is part of a youth culture, hence linked and limited to a specific period in life. There is therefore no logic contradiction between working in the fisheries and playing in a rock band.



There is a wide gap between preferences and dreams of future career and concrete work in adult life. Maybe the freedom to choose future work has increased, and the opportunities to make a living out of arts and sports are expanding, but the future has correspondingly become more unpredictable. Future planning is a mission full of uncertainties. Students, says Zygmunt Bauman fatalistically, 'will soon find out that the demand for their skills does not last as long as the time required for mastering them' (Bauman, 1996).

The uncertainties associated with late-modern society are, combined with the dependency on personal choices and responsibilities, shaping the strategies of young people. Everything, says Bauman critically, 'seems to conspire these days against distant goals, life-long projects, lasting commitments, eternal alliances, immutable identities' (1996: 51). While continuity and stability were characteristics of (early) modern society, doubt and risks are the main characteristics of late-modern times (Beck, 1987; Giddens, 1994). These social and cultural characteristics, defining contemporary society, are indeed influencing the preferences and priorities of Faroese youth, thus also directing the fisheries' position in the minds of young people. They want a 'reason' for choosing the fisheries, because the options are countless, every branch trying to catch their eye and mind. Young people are forced to make their own choices, to build a cultural identity, and their different essential decisions should somehow coordinate: making lifestyle, leisure, values and working conditions har-

monious. But what if you don't know what to choose? Many young people are in doubt, they feel lost in the jungle of opportunities offered, and wish that somebody could help them through the process.

To be able to take 'good' successful decisions, avoiding social marginalisation, people need basic practical knowledge: cultural capital. Knowledge is the most important resource in the process of deciding future education, lifestyle and career, reducing the risk of making inadequate decisions with fatal consequences (Giddens, 1994). Therefore, the future of the fisheries is directly related to the youths' knowledge and experience from the fisheries. The fisheries have to satisfy some of the youths' demands, to convince them of the manifold career possibilities within the fishing industry, in order to get a new image as modern, open and challenging. The rather-rock-than-fish argument from the music journalist is a typical way of stereotyping and contrasting the businesses: Fish/rock, closed/open, routine/variation, old-fashion/trendy, past/future.

The fishing industry is full of hidden potentials – and young people are highly conscious of this fact. They reflect on their personal choices, and try to combine modern 'fancy' works with the fishing industry, which still dominates the Faroese national economy.

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