

Tensions between the EU and West Africa off Africa's coasts

Are EU access agreements harming Africa's artisanal fisheries?

West Africa's fishery sector cannot be simply characterized by the alleged antagonism of local artisanal fishing and industrial foreign fleets. Realities are more complex – as is the West African coastal states' relationship with the EU. The two sides may have conflicting interests, but each is dependent, in its own way, on the region's abundant aquatic resources – and both are bound by a common framework of international law.

Photo: Lastrico-Schneider



Most of the population in West Africa's coastal regions rely on fishing for their livelihoods. The economic potential of this sector is by far not fully tapped.

«Foreign trawlers versus poor artisanal fishermen» – stereotypes and pre-conceptions are alive and well in all areas of journalism, including development policy reporting. The issue of West Africa and the EU's fisheries policy is no exception. It crops up everywhere: The familiar image of the poor fisherman, Ahmed or Mamadou, who ventures out to sea every day in his tiny boat, but with less and less success because trawlers from Europe, subsidized by a Eurocentric fisheries policy, are depleting his traditional fishing grounds. If only – so the argument goes – the EU put an end to heavily subsidized industrial fishing off West Africa, artisanal fishing could develop properly, and people living in the coastal regions would have enough income and food. There is just one problem with this simplistic scenario: It fails to take account of the complicated dynamics of an economic sector which – even in West Africa – is part and parcel of the global market, along with all its stakeholders. The image thrives on a number of naïve assumptions: That all fish are the same, that the development potential of traditional artisanal fishing does not need to be challenged, and that the industrial (European) vessels – portrayed as the bad

guys – really have no right to fish in these waters but are doing so anyway. In an attempt to replace this simplistic scenario with a more accurate and complex picture, we must start by answering one question: Why are European vessels fishing off West Africa?

The EU's interests

The economic reasons driving the activities of the European fishing fleet are well-known: Firstly, market demand for fishery products in Europe far exceeds the quantity and diversity of the aquatic resources available in European waters. In countless fish shops in European countries, cod and sole from the North Sea lie gill to gill with Nile perch from East Africa, shrimps from Asia and bream from West Africa. Secondly, as aquatic resources have steadily depleted, the EU has faced an overcapacity in its fishing fleet and must

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now identify alternative income-generating opportunities to avoid job losses in Europe's coastal regions. The purpose of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) is to develop and maintain, but also to restructure, the European fishing industry. As part of this policy, access agreements are being concluded to allow European vessels to fish in other countries' waters. The economic implications of these agreements are considerable. According to the European Commission's Green Paper on the Future of the Common Fisheries Policy, over the period 1993-2000, approximately 2 800 vessels benefited under the Community's 23 bilateral agreements, providing direct and indirect employment to more than 40,000 persons. The budgetary envelope dedicated to these agreements amounted to 276.1 million in 2000 – almost one-third of the Community's total budget for the fisheries and aquaculture sector.

The Council of Ministers of the European Union has reiterated its adherence to the CFP – and the fisheries agreements – but recognizes that changes need to be brought about. It has therefore reaffirmed the need to ensure that the agreements take a cost/benefit-oriented approach and are adapted to the Community's international commitments and the general budgetary situation of the Union. Account must also be taken of the developing countries' legitimate aspirations to develop their own fishing industry. And finally, the agreements should also contribute to sustainable fish resource management in these countries. The EU thus explicitly acknowledges that fisheries agreements may sometimes impede the development of a domestic (industrial) fishing industry in the partner countries.

The international framework: The Law of the Sea

The implementation of the fisheries agreements must be viewed against the backdrop of international maritime law. The Convention on the Law of the Sea grants coastal states sovereign rights for the purpose of managing the marine resources within a 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ). However, the Convention also obliges states to conserve resources, promote the objective of optimal utilization, and where the coastal state does not have the capacity to harvest the entire allowable catch, to give other states regulated access to the fishing grounds.

All West African countries have ratified the Convention on the Law of the Sea and have established 200-nautical-mile EEZs – as has the European Union. Furthermore,

all African and European countries have agreed to the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, which contains very detailed principles governing the responsible management of aquatic living resources. By acceding to the Convention and accepting the Code of Conduct, all stakeholders involved in fishing off the West African coast are bound by a common framework of international law governing the resources which, in keeping with the spirit of the Convention on the Law of the Sea, are a common human heritage. The provisions apply equally to the Senegalese fisherman venturing out in his pirogue, the official in the local fisheries authority, the skipper of a Spanish trawler, and the head of an EU negotiating party involved discussing a new fisheries agreement.

The economic role of fisheries in West Africa

Everywhere in West Africa, artisanal coastal fishing is a highly visible activity which is evident to anyone traveling along the coast – unlike industrial fishing, which is less picturesque and out of the tourist spotlight but is just as, if not more, important than artisanal fishing in many countries of the region. Although fishing plays an important and sometimes even a primary role in all West African countries, its macroeconomic significance varies from country to country. Consequently, the implications of the EU fisheries agreements vary as well, mainly because of the unequal distribution of aquatic resources. Due to their proximity to upwelling systems, countries such as Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal have far more abundant fish stocks than the countries further south. The EU's access agreements with these countries are therefore more important than those concluded with other Atlantic coastal states in Africa, not only in terms of the maximum permissible catches but also the payments made in exchange for access rights.

Fishing is a factor which must be maintained in the region and it is confronted with the expectation that it will continue to be a source of jobs, foreign currency,

The EU's access agreements with West African countries

In West Africa, agreements implemented on the basis of protocols currently exist with Cape Verde (680), Côte d'Ivoire (957.5), Guinea (3 400), Guinea-Bissau (10 000), Mauritania (86 000) and Senegal (16 000). The figures in parentheses show the annual compensation payments in 1 000 euro.

government revenue and food. However, almost all the marine resources are already fully or over-exploited: landings are declining, species are disappearing from catches, and there is a decrease in the average size of fish caught. Hardest hit are pelagic fish, mainly caught by foreign industrial distant-water fleets, along with the high-value demersal species which are found close to the coasts and are the mainstay of artisanal fishing, and various cephalopods – the backbone of the Mauritanian and Senegalese fishery sectors, which are caught by large trawlers and small artisanal vessels alike.

Mauritania: A case study

Historically, Mauritania has few maritime traditions and still lacks the technical resources to exploit its fishing grounds, which count among the richest in the world. In an effort to tap into the potential wealth of its fish resources and use the benefits for domestic development, Mauritania signed cooperation agreements with a number of North African and Eastern European countries back in the early 1970s. The agreements concluded with the EU since 1987 are therefore simply further links in a chain which already forged. Whereas the earlier bilateral agreements earned the country license fees and, above all, boosted infrastructural development, the characteristic feature of agreements with the EU is that they generate a substantial revenue stream for the state coffers as is also the case elsewhere.

Photo: Lastrico-Schneider
Mauritania's fishing grounds count among the richest in the world but are mainly fished by the European fleet.



So has Mauritania won out as a result of this policy? That is debatable. Mauritania remains dependent on earnings from fisheries but has failed to integrate this sector fully into its domestic economy, with fishing still accounting for just 6 to 10 percent of GDP. Mauritania's own industrial fishing fleet is moribund, and for many of the economic and commercial elite, fishing is of interest purely for speculative reasons rather than being a genuine field of activity. Despite numerous attempts, the Mauritanian Government has been unable to implement a fisheries policy which is capable of developing fishing as an independent economic sector with a sufficiently strong profile to curb third-party interests and enable Mauritania to manage its abundant marine resources on its own. Only a portion of the compensation payments – amounting to just 5 percent, i.e. the lowest share of all the countries mentioned in the text box flows into development and structural measures for the fisheries sector. However, unless the state is prepared to invest and promote structural development, there will be no private-sector commitment. Finally, in Mauritania as in other countries of the region, the financial resources made available for the management, protection and conservation of marine resources are far lower than is customary in Europe or North America, primarily because the pressure to divert revenue to other areas is simply too intense. In an exemplary way this highlights some critical factors in the relationship between this coastal state and the EU which also apply to other countries in the region. Nonetheless, positive aspects of cooperation under the fisheries agreements should be underlined as well.

The aquatic resources which are targeted by industrial fleets are generally better managed than those exploited by artisanal fishermen: The fishing capacity of a limited number of industrial vessels is a known quantity and is easier to monitor than the combined capacity of thousands of individual pirogues. Industrial vessels are subject to detailed regulations governing both the fishing zones and the periods when they are allowed to fish. In Mauritania in particular, effective monitoring systems are in place which – partly due to many years of German financial and technical cooperation – are very well resourced and well organized and supply a constant stream of statistical data, enabling the impacts of fishing activity on fish stocks to be evaluated more precisely. Industrial fleets are easier to monitor, thus benefiting conventional stock-oriented management.

It is also significant that the negotiations to prepare the ground for the conclusion

of agreements are increasingly being conducted on the basis of ever-improving scientific knowledge about the state of fish stocks. In Mauritania, this applies especially to cephalopods, which are a key focus of attention in the agreement with the EU. The impact of industrial fishing on cephalopods is very well researched, especially compared with artisanal fishing, for which insufficient data are available.

Artisanal fishing

The development of artisanal fishing as a critical, indeed negative factor in the management of fish stocks is a highly contentious issue which currently receives too little attention, at least in reports on the fishing industry in West Africa, and barely features in the policies being pursued by the countries of the region. In Mauritania and Senegal in particular, artisanal fishing has developed enormously and is now integrated into the world market. In Senegal, around 85 percent of catches come from non-industrial fishing, while in Mauritania, recent estimates indicate that artisanal fishermen catch just as many high-value fish species as the industrial fleets. In both countries, then, the importance of artisanal fishing is far from negligible.

Unlike the industrial sector, none of the West African countries has established limitations on artisanal fishermen's access to aquatic resources. On the contrary, anyone can fish for a living. In practice, this means that poor people become fishermen while most of the artisanal fleet belongs to businessmen and large boat-owners. These small, profitable boats fish in coastal waters – often on grounds which are the nursery of other species – which are inaccessible to many of the large vessels, thus undermining stock management efforts. When Mauritania about eight years ago introduced a closed period of several months for cephalopods, based on the Moroccan model, this was only applied to the industrial vessels. As a result, the pirogues increased their catches and supplied to a receptive international market. Nowadays, both the trawlers and the pirogues are obliged to observe the closed period.

In Senegal in particular, artisanal fishing is exerting great pressure on fish stocks, but despite steadily falling catches, is still expanding without any controls or regulation. Although the entire sector is in crisis and priority should now be given to finding ways of encouraging people to move out of fishing into other industries, the state is proving slow to develop solutions. The political pressure exerted by 600,000 fishermen and their families is as powerful in

Senegal as that brought to bear on the EU's external fisheries policy by fishermen on the Iberian coast. Industrial fishing is also better regulated than artisanal fishing in Senegal, and the agreements with the EU play their part in ensuring that at least part of the fishery sector is subject to a management strategy which aims to strike a balance between sustainable yields and deployed fishing capacity. Here, as in Mauritania, the responsibilities of both partners – the coastal state and the EU – are recognized to a far greater extent by the industrial fleet than in artisanal fishing.

Future challenges

In West Africa, the fishery sector faces two major challenges. Firstly, it is essential to strike a balance between the immediate need to generate income via access agreements and the establishment of autonomous economic structures for the long-term use of fish stocks. Secondly, artisanal fishing must be integrated into a sustainable resource management system. Failure to do so will mark the start of a decline in this renewable resource, which until now has been used more and more profitably each year. In this context, the EU's attempt to pursue a two-pronged but ultimately irreconcilable strategy – seeking to protect the interests of an industry which is important for the Community while simultaneously attempting to step up adherence to development policy principles – will not be of much help. As the examples of Namibia and Morocco show, the development of a domestic fishing industry is entirely possible without the EU; indeed, it may even be highly advantageous for a country in both economic and financial terms. In 1990, after independence, Namibia expanded its domestic fishing industry and refused to conclude an access agreement with the EU. Around five years ago, Morocco opted not to renew its agreement with the EU – a decision which has greatly benefited domestic production. However, both countries had a well-established domestic fishing industry which is large enough to assert itself in the market. These conditions do not exist in the West African countries, which remain reliant on granting third countries access to their aquatic resources. The EU, for its part, will be unable to resolve its structural problems in the fishing industry any time soon and will continue to search for alternative income-generating opportunities to offset the overcapacity in its fishing fleet. The complications and tensions within the relationship between the EU and West Africa in the fishery sector therefore seem set to continue for the foreseeable future.