

The European Union races to catch the last West African fish

“There will be no more fish around 2050”. A few weeks ago, the world was shocked by a scientists report telling us our oceans are getting empty. Decreasing fish resources plays an important role in how fisheries relations between the European Union (EU) and developing countries are evolving. This is particularly the case in West Africa, where the EU is signing bilateral deals. The most important of these agreements, both in terms of EU’s access to developing countries resources and in terms of financial compensation, is the fisheries partnership agreement between EU and Mauritania.

In November 2006, there were two important news for Mauritanian people: the first democratic elections were held and the first fisheries “partnership” agreement with the EU was finally adopted by the European parliament. If the fairness of the elections was a cause for joy, some Mauritians, the artisanal fishermen in particular, were less convinced about the fairness of the fisheries partnership agreement signed with the EU.

Although they are neighbours, EU and Mauritania are far from equal partners. Mauritania’s GDP stands at 275 euros/inhabitant, with 46% of the population living below the poverty line. Mauritania is built in Sahara desert, with only mineral and fish to trade: about half of export revenues come from fish. On the other side, the European Union’s GDP is about 80 times higher¹. The EU also collects fisheries titles: world first market for fish products, world fourth fishing power. The growing interest of European consumers for fish, combined with fish stocks depletion in European waters, has led to the current situation where approximately 60% of fish products consumed in Europe are coming from outside the EU, like for example, West Africa. To build up a partnership between partners of such disproportionate economic and political weight is a real challenge....

The newly signed fisheries partnership agreement between EU and Mauritania will last six years and allow more than 200 boats, - many of them trawlers, most of them Spanish-, to fish in the Mauritanian EEZ. Mauritania is rich in a wide variety of fish resources. However, some stocks are either heavily overexploited (e.g. octopus) or fully exploited (e.g. coastal shrimp). In exchange for accessing Mauritania’s fish, the EU will grant financial compensation of 86 million euros per year².

For local artisanal fishermen, if 86 millions euros is a lot of money, it doesn’t compensate the damages EU trawlers will do to their activities, particularly in the octopus fishery. For catching octopus, artisanal fishermen use lines of plastic pots, a selective method where juvenile individuals, or gravid females, can be released without harming them. Such selective fishing results in an extremely high quality product, with the price obtained on international markets being far higher than that obtained for products from trawler fishing.

¹ EU’s GDP in 2004 was 21000 euros/inhabitant

² An additional amount will be coming from ship owners’ contributions and is estimated at 22 million euros, in the event that all fishing possibilities are utilised.

High prices on markets has allowed Mauritanian small-scale octopus fisheries to boom in the early 1990s. But they soon had to face strong competition from industrial octopus fishing operations, both from Chinese boats “in disguise”, - reflagged under the Mauritanian flag-, and European boats. This intense competition has not surprisingly led to the overexploitation of octopus

Nevertheless, despite the numerous obstacles encountered along the way, Mauritanian small-scale fisheries made remarkable progress. The figures speak for themselves: in 2004, Mauritanian artisanal fishermen supplied more than 80% of factory raw material, provided 30,000 of the 35,000 jobs in the entire sector, and met the total needs of the country for fish proteins (between 12 to 15,000 tonnes). Artisanal fishery sector also generates significant revenues to the national treasury from license fees and taxes, and contributing considerably, both directly and indirectly, to poverty reduction.

With the access of EU trawlers to Mauritanian octopus through the new fisheries partnership agreement, the EU directly contributes to overexploitation of this stock, and, through competition with the artisanal sector, undermines Mauritanian efforts to reduce poverty. Bad start for a “partnership”.

About what a fair partnership should be, the director of the Mauritanian NGO Pêhecops (for Ecological Fisheries generating Social Progress) declares: *“Generally, a firm policy on fishing effort must be adopted, which should be constantly adapted according to the potential of fish stocks. The current and future possibilities for expanding small-scale fishing must be borne in mind when addressing the issue of priority access to the resource as stipulated in fishery development plans; this also implies that the determination of the surplus to be provided to foreign vessels takes account of these factors. In the case of Mauritanian octopus, which is overexploited, there is no surplus resource to offer European fleets.”*

Conserving octopus stocks for the benefit of a small-scale fleet which uses passive and selective fishing equipment is central to development and to combat poverty in Mauritania. This message has, until now, fallen in deaf officials’ ears...

Béatrice Gorez
CFFA coordinator