

Policy brief

Mauritania: The EU SFPA can be used to improve fisheries management

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By Ad Corten¹

As the EU is negotiating a new protocol with Mauritania under the existing Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement, concrete steps should be taken to ensure the sustainable exploitation of sardinella in the region, including increased sampling of catches, implementing the advice of the FAO working group and starting consultations with neighbouring countries on joint management of shared stocks.

Overview

The European Union is likely to extend for one year the current protocol with Mauritania to allow more time for the negotiations of the next protocol. As the negotiations are taking place, the EU should take this opportunity to promote improved management of small pelagics in the region, Mauritania being a key actor for the sustainable exploitation of these stocks shared with neighbouring countries. This agreement, which is the largest of all SPFAs the EU has in the world, has been in operation since 1996.

Despite the very large amounts of money paid so far to Mauritania, both as compensation for the fishing opportunities of the EU fleet (access) and for the development of the national fishery (sectoral support), there has been no progress in fisheries management in the country. Still today, government spending on research continues to be insufficient, and hardly any samples are being collected from the huge landings of fish at the fishmeal factories. Due to a lack of data, no assessments for round sardinella have been made during the past five years. All indications show that this species is severely overfished, but no action can be taken as long as there is no scientific advice.

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The new protocol should oblige the Mauritanian government to **(1) drastically increase sampling of pelagic catches, (2) apply the recommendations of the FAO Working Group on the Assessment of Small Pelagic Fish off Northwest Africa, and (3) start consultations with neighbouring Senegal on the joint management of sardinella.** Further to that, **the EU should (4) contribute to regional management efforts by supporting the FAO Working Group** which is currently facing several challenges. In this way, the EU would really be contributing to sustainable fisheries management through its SFPA and regional action.

1. Overfishing of small pelagics in Mauritania

THE FISHMEAL INDUSTRY “CATASTROPHE”

The most important fish species in West Africa in terms of employment and food security is the round sardinella (*Sardinella aurita*). This species constitutes a shared stock between Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia, with the bulk of the catch being taken in Senegal and Mauritania. In Senegal, the species has always been exploited by artisanal fishermen whereas in Mauritania the sardinella was fished until 2012 mainly by foreign trawlers.

Around 2010, Mauritania started to use sardinella to produce fishmeal. In order to reserve all its sardinella for the fishmeal industry, Mauritania in 2012 extended the forbidden coastal zone for trawlers from 13 to 20 miles which made the sardinella inaccessible for the foreign trawlers. In order to catch the sardinella for the fishmeal plants, Senegalese fishermen were brought over to Nouadhibou. The fishmeal industry developed exponentially, especially when after 2016 the Senegalese canoes were replaced by Turkish purse seiners. In 2018, the landings for fishmeal reached a record of 600,000 tonnes. Even though no data are yet available for 2019, it is known that sardinella has become scarcer in the catches, and that the fishmeal industry has now become dependent mainly upon sardine.

CONSERVATION MEASURES: TOO LITTLE AND TOO LATE

Over the past 5 years, the Mauritanian institute IMROP has hardly sampled any of the landings. In 2018, only 19 samples were taken from the 600,000 tons landed for the fishmeal plants, and no samples at all from the 500,000 tons caught by pelagic trawlers. As a result, no quantitative assessments could be made of round sardinella. However, fishery and acoustic surveys indicate that the stock is presently severely overfished. While catches per day in the artisanal fleet have dropped in Mauritania and in Senegal, acoustic surveys in Mauritania indicate that the stock is at its lowest level in history. In local markets, both round and flat sardinella have become scarce and the price had risen strongly. In Senegal, artisanal fishermen are losing their jobs because of low catches, and women engaged in the fish smoking industry have less and less access to the fish.

Following complaints of fishermen about overfishing of sardinella, the Mauritanian government in 2018 introduced restrictive measures for the fishmeal industry. Each factory could only process a maximum of 10,000 tons/year of round sardinella. However, there was no limit on the amount of other species used for fishmeal. The measure had little effect since there was no monitoring of the species composition of catches used for fishmeal.

2. What has the EU done so far?

LACK OF SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH

Given the lack of information on the stocks from which the EU fleet is allowed to catch in Mauritania under the SFPA, it might be expected that the EU would have encouraged Mauritania to improve its data collection. This was not the case. Although the EU paid Mauritania substantial amounts of money for sectoral support, none of this money was used for research, except for the maintenance of the research vessel Al Awam. During the past 5 years, as Mauritania neglected the sampling of landings at the fishmeal plants, the EU did not stimulate the Mauritians to increase their sampling programme. The € 20 million left in the budget for sectoral support were used for the construction of a new fishing port in Tanit instead of improving research and consistent fisheries management.

THE SURPLUS PRINCIPLE

According to its current policy, the EU can only buy fishing rights for stocks for which there is a surplus in the waters of the coastal state. To determine whether a particular stock has a surplus, one requires an accurate assessment of the stock. Such an assessment can only be made if sufficient data are available. The FAO Working Group on the Assessment of Small Pelagic Fish off Northwest Africa has recommended each year that sampling should be increased, but no action was taken by the Mauritanian government. The logical policy in such a case would be to take the precautionary approach and assume that no surplus exists until scientists can demonstrate the opposite.

In practice, however, the burden of proof is reversed. Scientists and managers assume that a surplus exists as long as there is no hard evidence for overfishing. If this approach is taken, there is no incentive for the government to spend more money on research: since it could only lead to the conclusion that the stocks are overfished, there would be no surplus to sell to the EU.

Another problem is that the surplus of shared stocks of small pelagics in Northwest Africa belongs to Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia together. In practice, the EU buys surplus fish only from Mauritania and Morocco, without compensating Senegal and Gambia for the fact that the fish bought by the EU also partially belongs to these countries.

3. How can the SFPA be used to promote sustainable management?

During the negotiations for the new protocol, the EU should demand that sustainable management is a prime condition for a new protocol. This implies that the **Mauritanian government should (1) guarantee that the minimum requirements for sampling of catches are met, (2) apply the recommendations of the FAO Working Group, and (3) initiate consultations with neighbouring Senegal on the joint management of sardinella.**

Mauritania should provide evidence that its fisheries research institute IMROP collects the necessary number of samples from landings at the fishmeal plants and from catches by pelagic trawlers. According to the guidelines of the FAO Working Group, at least one sample of 100 fish should be taken from each 1000 tons of fish caught or landed. This requires that sampling of the landings at fishmeal plants is strongly increased and that catches of pelagic trawlers are adequately sampled by observers at sea.

Mauritania should also start consultations with Senegal on joint conservation measures for sardinella. The countries must agree that they will base these measures on the advice of the FAO working group and they must decide what kind of conservation measures (catch limitation or effort limitation) would be most appropriate for each country.

4. How can the EU contribute to sustainable regional management?

Since fisheries management and research are national responsibilities, the EU should be careful not to take over the funding of national sampling programmes. **What the EU can do, however, is to fund activities that are beyond the means of national governments, such as the international coordination of research.**

Currently, research on pelagic stocks in the area is coordinated by the FAO working group on the Assessment of Small Pelagic Fish off Northwest Africa, which has no means to solve some long-standing problems in stock assessment such as age determination and stock structure of some species. Reports of the meetings are also produced with a delay of at least one year, by which time the assessments and recommendations have become obsolete. It would be useful if the EU could assist FAO in the organisation of the meetings by providing part of the funding. In return, the EU could demand that the reports of the meetings are published not later than one month after the meeting. The EU could also fund the studies on age determination and stock structure that are needed to solve fundamental questions in stock assessment.

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