

Policy brief

São Tomé and Príncipe to develop offshore artisanal fisheries. Will the EU's SFPA help?

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In this article, the author delves into the impacts of climate change and other challenges for São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) small-scale fishing communities. To develop the sector, the government is looking to develop offshore artisanal fishing. The author examines the factors that need to be considered for the upcoming renewal of the protocol of the EU-STP Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement (SFPA).

Overview

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change¹. São Tomé and Príncipe (STP), the islands country with the smallest economy in Africa², is no exception. In particular, the artisanal fishing communities are on the frontline of the effects of climate change, having to deal with increased flooding, coastal erosion and sea trips becoming ever more perilous. Looming over-exploitation of the coastal resources they depend on is adding to their woes. How will the fishing EU's sustainable fisheries partnership agreement with STP (EU-STP SFPA) with the EU – a new protocol is currently being discussed – impact their situation?

¹ KEO, Kalyan and JO, Yoona, "Snapshot – Small Island developing States (SIDS) - The State of Climate Action", United Nations Development Programme; December 2022. Available at: <https://climatepromise.undp.org/fr/node/654>

² KERBLAT, Yann, "Head above water: São Tomé and Príncipe's path to flood resilience", The World Bank, 4 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.preventionweb.net/news/head-above-water-sao-tome-and-principes-path-flood-resilience>

1. Artisanal fisheries in São Tomé and Príncipe: essential for jobs and food security

According to a recent FAO report³, the artisanal fishing sector in STP is, after cocoa, the most important source of income for low-income families, providing employment to about 30,000 persons – more than 10% of the population –, including more than 4,000 fishers. Fish also plays a key role in the country's food security. More than 50% of the protein consumed locally is coming from fish, mainly coastal pelagics, with the yearly consumption being around 29 kgs of fish per person, more than double than the African average!⁴

The country reserves an exclusive zone of 12 nautical miles for artisanal fishing, where industrial fishing is prohibited (General Regulation on Fisheries, Article 18⁵). However, special authorization⁶ can be granted by the government for industrial vessels to access that zone. The artisanal fishing sector has expanded in recent years, with catches on the rise, feeding a growing population, and a mode of exploitation that has evolved from subsistence to commercial. This has been facilitated by the development of road infrastructure, making it easier to transport fresh fish to the main consumption centers: by 2021, annual catches of coastal pelagics were estimated at nearly 8,500 tons, 80% of which were sold fresh on local markets. Concerns have been raised however about the impact of this increasing coastal pelagic fishing on the sustainability of the resources, biodiversity and ecosystems, which could threaten the future of the sector⁷.

2. Climate change makes offshore fishing dangerous...

Another dark cloud hanging over artisanal fishing communities in STP is climate change. Many projects have been put in place in the last years to help coastal communities deal with its impacts, like rocky structures, and breakwater seawalls to limit coastal erosion.

As overfishing of coastal resources is pushing fishers to look for fish further from the coast in small pirogues, improving safety is critical for them to return home safely. Safety-at-sea kits, that include GPS, lifejackets and training, have been provided to about 3,000 fishers through the International Development Association (IDA) under a regional program⁸ (WACA) managed by the World Bank. In a recent article, a fisher

³ DE LABRA, Gabriel et al., "The coastal pelagics value chain in Sao Tome and Principe: Summary report", FAO, October 2023. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/3/cc8304en/cc8304en.pdf>

⁴ HOLLAND, Jason, "FAO projects a decade of increased fish consumption, but Africa poses concerns", SeafoodSource, 6 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/supply-trade/fao-projects-ten-more-years-of-increased-fish-consumption-but-africa-poses-concerns>

⁵ See "Article 18, General Reglementation on Fisheries", São Tomé e Príncipe - Diário da República nº 45, 22 June 2022. Available at (Portuguese only): <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/sao116981.pdf>

⁶ Belhabib Dyhia et al., "Catching industrial fishing incursions into inshore waters of Africa from space", Fish Fish, 2020. Available at: <https://www.imsehawaii.org/iuuf/ewExternalFiles/Catching%20industrial%20fishing%20incursions%20into%20inshore%20waters%20of%20Africa%20from%20space.pdf>

⁷ FISH4ACP, "Sao Tome and Principe is moving to more productive and sustainable coastal pelagic fisheries", FAO, 6 November 2023. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/in-action/fish-4-acp/resource-detail/en/c/1659205/>

⁸ See West Africa Coastal Areas Management Program website. Available at: <https://www.wacaprogram.org/>

testifies “From the beach, the sea may look friendly but when you sail in deep waters it’s dangerous and scary. There are sharks, even whales. It’s easy to lose sight of the land. When I started fishing, I did not have a GPS. I lost many friends. Some got lost, some drifted to foreign countries, and some died. Now that I have a GPS, my family is much less worried.”⁹”

WACA also funded the renovation of eleven lighthouses that had fallen in disrepair and equipped them with more long-lasting, solar-powered technology. New recreational, sanitary, and educational facilities are being built at the communities’ request to complement the investments in coastal infrastructure. Together, these assets create a safer and cleaner living environment for fishing communities.

3. ... but moving offshore is promoted for improving local fish supply and artisanal fisheries sustainability

The issue for artisanal fishers remains to get access to more fish, whilst avoiding over-exploitation of coastal resources. The challenge for the authorities is to be able to satisfy a growing population demand for fish whilst making the sector more profitable and environmentally sustainable. Their plan is to move part of the artisanal fishing effort offshore, as 80% of the resources are found there.

The Sao Tomean government, through its Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries, presented in November 2023 a ten-year strategy¹⁰ to upgrade the coastal pelagics value chain, resulting from a sector-wide dialogue organised by FISH4ACP¹¹, an EU funded project implemented by FAO. These coastal pelagic fisheries are composed of species like flying fish, little tunny, and skipjack tuna.

The strategy includes proposals for a better organization of the sector, and also for improving the fishing equipment and the cold chain; for capacity building of the fishers (in handling techniques, development of new products, safety at sea, boat building) and for more responsible fisheries management, including better stock assessment in order to implement management measures consistently.

A series of targets, identified for the implementation of the strategy, are to be achieved by 2032, including:

- coastal pelagic fishing resources have well-defined ecosystem approach management plans, based on reliable collected and analysed statistical data;
- 90 percent of the artisanal fleet are registered and authorized;
- 25 percent of dugout canoes are replaced by prao-type¹² or fiberglass vessels.
- 75 percent of fishers and 75 percent of fish traders working on the Value Chain are members of a professional functional and representative

⁹ WACA, “A break from crushing waves: building resilience in the tropical islands of São Tomé and Príncipe”. Available at: <https://www.wacaprogram.org/article/break-crushing-waves-building-resilience-tropical-islands-sao-tome-and-principe>

¹⁰ Ngounou, Boris, “São Tomé-et-Príncipe: towards a more sustainable coastal pelagic fishery”, Afrik21, 22 November 2023. Available at: <https://www.afrik21.africa/en/sao-tome-et-principe-towards-a-more-sustainable-coastal-pelagic-fishery/>

¹¹ FAO, “Unlocking the potential of coastal pelagics fisheries in Sao Tome and Principe”, 9 November 2022. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/in-action/fish-4-acp/resource-detail/en/c/1617768/>

¹² Fishconsult, “Artisanal fishery in Sao Tome and Prince (Prao fishing boats)”, 12 September 2012. Available at: <https://fishconsult.org/?p=5665>

organization; have access to appropriate cold storage facilities so they can carry out their work efficiently and maintain food hygiene and safety.

The strategy also comments on external threats that may lead to a decline of the fish resources that will be exploited through the future coastal pelagics value chain, including a general increase in temperature caused by climate change, that will affect the reproductive, feeding and migratory behavior of certain species: *“The capacity for action to deal with these threats is limited to improving the practices of resource management, capture, harvesting, processing and storage that can mitigate the impact of a future decline in resources”*.

4. The opacity of foreign access arrangements to be lifted thanks to the FiTI

This strategy is taking place in a context where São Tomé e Príncipe is striving to improve fisheries governance across the board. Indeed, since December 2023, the country has become a candidate member of the Fisheries Transparency Initiative¹³ (FiTI), thereby committing to increase transparency in its fisheries management through the gradual implementation of the FiTI standard¹⁴.

This commitment followed a 2022 FiTI report¹⁵ showing that almost no information was published online: *“This lack of public access to information clearly restricts the ability of all relevant stakeholders to participate in public debates and reforms towards better governance of the sector, and to monitor government decision-making regarding the sustainable management of the country’s marine fisheries sector”*.

Amongst the information not made available by the authorities, according to the FiTI report, are the fishing agreements São Tomé e Príncipe has with foreign fishing vessels, like the STP-EU SFPA¹⁶ and a private agreement, for a dozen of purse seiners, with the Spanish operators’ association AGAC. It needs to be noted that, according to the new Santomean Fisheries Law of 2022 (Article 46)¹⁷, there is an obligation to publish access agreements, both public and private, in the official gazette (Diário da República).

Spanish tuna vessels therefore have access to STP waters both through the bilateral agreement with the EU and through a private agreement. It is unclear what the reason may be for having this *“double entry”*, particularly as, since the conditions of the private agreement signed by the authorities with AGAC in 2017, are, according to the 2019 SFPA evaluation¹⁸ *“based on those of the protocol concluded with the EU”*. The private agreement text with AGAC is not available publicly. Under the 2017 private agreement, these conditions include the payment of an access fee of 54,000€

¹³ See São Tomé and Príncipe's Candidate application to FiTI. Available at: <https://fiti.global/sao-tome-and-principe>

¹⁴ See FiTI Standard. Available at: <https://fiti.global/fiti-standard>

¹⁵ STANDING, Andre, "Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe - 2022 Detailed Assessment Report", FiTI, 2022.

Available at: https://fiti.global/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/FiTI_STP_TaSo_DetailedAssessmentReport_EN_20221221.pdf

¹⁶ See the main features of the EU's SFPA with São Tomé and Príncipe. Available at: https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/fisheries/international-agreements/sustainable-fisheries-partnership-agreements-sfpas/sao-tome-and-principe_en

¹⁷ See "Article 46, Fisheries Law", São Tomé e Príncipe - Diário da República nº 45, 22 June 2022. Available at (Portuguese only): <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/sao211337.pdf>

¹⁸ CAILLART Benoit, TOUS Philippe, LE GRAND Christelle, « Évaluation rétrospective et prospective du protocole à l'accord de partenariat dans le domaine de la pêche durable entre l'Union européenne et São Tomé-et-Príncipe », European Commission, DG-MARE, 2017. Available at (French only): <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b2a08ce7-bac1-11e7-a7f8-01aa75ed71a1/language-fr>

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per vessel, payable in one lump sum. To this amount is added the payment of a fee of 20€ per GRT for auxiliary vessels (i.e. a total of 21,280€ for five auxiliary vessels, with a combined capacity of 1,064 GRT) and a budget of 78,000€ to finance measures to develop the sector. The AGAC vessels also have an obligation to take on board 8 national sailors for a period of three months throughout the fleet. The AGAC vessels also have the obligation to transmit VMS data to Santomean authorities, including catch data.

Early 2017, another fishing agreement was publicly¹⁹ announced between São Tomé and Príncipe and the Fujian Province of China. The SFPAs evaluation comments that *“it seems highly unlikely that the agreement will concern access to coastal resources, given the small area of seabed accessible to bottom gear (trawls, pots, nets). It could nevertheless include access by Chinese tuna vessels (longliners) to the waters of São Tomé e Príncipe”*. However, according to the FiTi report, *“it appears that ultimately, no such agreement has been signed”*.

This example makes the case for increased transparency regarding access arrangements entered into by the country with foreign fishing entities.

In a letter to the FiTi, the São Tomé and Príncipe Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development Francisco Martins dos Ramos acknowledged this need for more transparency, and said his country *“recognized early on that its valuable fisheries resources were being exploited beyond sustainable levels, by national and foreign fleets, and in a non-transparent and non-inclusive manner. Therefore, we seek to create mechanisms to reverse this trend and help regenerate the exploitation of fisheries resources through the development of a sustainable fisheries management system based on fisheries research, fisheries administration and an inspection system”*²⁰.

São Tomé and Príncipe's fisheries are exclusively artisanal and largely focused on small pelagics. Through its involvement with FiTi, the country also plans to involve stakeholders throughout the value chain to remain consistent with FiTi's objectives.

5. What should the fishing agreement with EU do?

The EU fishing agreement with São Tomé and Príncipe is part of the network of agreements along the coast of West Africa, providing the legal framework for EU vessels to access tuna species in STP waters. The latest five-year SFPAs protocol will expire in December 2024. The current protocol provided fishing opportunities for up to 28 purse seiners (16 from Spain and 12 from France) and 6 surface longliners (5 from Spain and one from Portugal), for fishing tuna and tuna-like species, with a reference tonnage of 8 000 tons per year.

In terms of fishing zone, the protocol stipulates that EU vessels *“may carry out their activities in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of São Tomé e Príncipe, with the*

¹⁹ POU LO, Fei, "China and São Tomé and Príncipe join hands for a brighter future", Macao, 10 March 2017. Available at: <https://macaomagazine.net/china-and-sao-tome-and-principe-join-hands-for-a-brighter-future/>

²⁰ OIRERE, Shem, "São Tomé and Príncipe becomes member of FiTi", SeafoodSource, 14 January 2022. Available at: <https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/environment-sustainability/s-o-tom-and-pr-ncipe-becomes-member-of-fiti>

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exception of areas reserved for small-scale and semi-industrial fishing". The question arises whether with the ten-year strategy for developing small-scale fisheries offshore, the 12-nautical-mile reserved zone will be sufficient to protect artisanal fishing activities. In any case, any potential increase of the zone reserved for artisanal fisheries following this new offshore development should be duly reflected in all arrangements with industrial fleets of foreign origin, including under the SFPA protocol.

Access of EU vessels should fully take into account the fact that the ten-year strategy to develop offshore artisanal fishing supposes an increased access to species such as skipjack tuna, a fish also targeted by EU vessels. The priority should be to ensure the access needs of the future local offshore artisanal fleet are met, by promoting a sustainable management of these species and an allocation system that gives priority to the local artisanal fishers. In line with the non-discrimination clause, these restrictions on industrial fishing should apply to all vessels of foreign origin.

São Tomé and Príncipe has important challenges to meet in terms of transparency, to make currently unpublished information publicly available, (like on fishing access arrangements), and to address information gaps on small-scale fisheries or beneficial ownership. The fact that São Tomé and Príncipe is now a Candidate Country for the FiTI is an opportunity to reinforce the transparency requirements under any future SFPA protocol, similar to those under the EU-Mauritania SFPA.

The current protocol defines an annual EU contribution of 840,000€, of which 400,000€ represents access rights to Santomean waters, with the remaining 440,000€ dedicated to supporting sustainable management of resources and the development of local fisheries, in particular by improving the monitoring and control of fishing activities, fisheries research and the quality of fisheries products, supporting small-scale fishing and aquaculture, and strengthening international cooperation. In its opinion on the latest protocol, the EP insisted on the need to give "*particular attention to small-scale local fisheries*". This need is still there, in the light of the future artisanal sector development, and should be envisaged in synergy with the FISH4ACP project activities. In particular, appropriate support will be needed for ensuring future increased catches of fish like skipjack – that has important economic and nutritional value but is easily damaged and rotten because of its oily content – can be handled adequately to maintain its value.

For example, the SFPA sectoral support could help to develop, in collaboration with the local artisanal sector, appropriate system for monitoring the national artisanal fleet. This is particularly important as the artisanal fleets will be going further at sea, and monitoring would provide vital localization information to improve safety at sea. The São Tomé and Príncipe EEZ is 160,000 km² – 160 times the archipelagos landmass. This shows the challenge the country faces to ensure proper control of fishing activities of vessels operating in its EEZ. Using SFPA sectoral support to ensure observers are on board foreign vessels remains essential, as well as supporting the development of the fisheries control center (equipment, training), in particular to ensure the treatment of VMS and ERS/electronic logbook information. Inspections at landing ports (Abidjan, Dakar) by Santomean inspectors are also essential to improve MCS, and should be supported.

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The renewal of the EU-STP SFPA protocol provides an opportunity to improve transparency, sustainability of the EU and foreign non-EU vessels operations in STP waters, and to support the development of sustainable artisanal fisheries.

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