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**History of Mauritanian fisheries: conflicts between
international pressure and aspirations**

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Abstract

The Mauritanian EEZ (West Africa) is famous for the richness of its waters. However, except for a small community of traditional fishers, the Imraguens from the northern part of the coast of the Arguin Bank, Mauritians do not have a maritime tradition. Fisheries activities by Mauritians started only after they gained independence in 1960

The interest of foreign fishing powers in the richness of these waters is however very old. As early as in the 16 century, historical accounts record the presence of the Islenos of the Canary Islands who annually fished for croakers from January to June. Towards the end of the 19th century, French colonial traders specializing in the preparation of salt-dried fish established trading posts in the northern part of the coast. Lobster boats from the Bretagne arrived at the beginning of the last century to exploit pink lobster stocks. After the 2nd World War, large scale high-seas fishing developed with the arrival of a considerable number of international fishing fleets.

At the wake of Mauritanian Independence, the new government – which had the pressing need to establish new institutions and start the development of the country – could not count on more than limited income from the mining sector which was also beginning to develop. The economy of the country was based almost exclusively on livestock farming activities practiced in a nomadic fashion which could not provide the funds that the country badly needed. Thus, the young government attempted to obtain some of the benefits of the country’s rich aquatic resources.

The government thus proceeded to extend its juridical control onto the foreign deep-sea fishing fleets, requiring these to share a part of their profits with Mauritania. At the same time, it geared towards developing a national fishing fleet meant to replace the foreign fishing fleets. This scheme evolved with time under the influence of external and internal factors:

- problems encountered during the building of a national fishing industry ;

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- a weakening of the macroeconomic framework of the country, caused by the adoption of structural adjustments inspired by the Breton Wood and more recently, adoption of the strategic framework of a fight against poverty inspired by the same institutions and supported by foreign funding agencies.

In addition, the government had to harmonize the objectives of its mid and long term policies, based on rational exploitation of the fishery resources to promote the sustainable development of its fishing industry, and its short-term needs for resources to contribute to the macroeconomic internal and external balances of the country and to finance the programs of the strategy against poverty. Among the principal contributors financing these macroeconomic policies, is the European Union, whose fleets are currently dominant among those operating within the Mauritanian EEZ.

Mauritania's economy, weakened by decades of drought, has been further hampered by a large external debt, which has precluded the growth of a national fleet. Hence, Mauritania is presently forced to sacrifice its long-term aspiration and to tolerate foreign fleets whose impact will make these long-term aspirations even more difficult to achieve.