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FISHING IN THE DARK

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**EFFECTS OF SUBSIDISED DISTANT WATER FLEETS
ON THE MARINE ENVIRONMENT AND LOCAL PEOPLE
IN WESTERN AFRICA**

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Introduction

These last years, while addressing marine conservation problems in Western Africa, 3 major issues were generally raised by our local partners:

-Most of the distant water fleets fishing in the coastal waters of other countries do not often abide by the international standards of responsible fishing;

-The number of distant water fleets is steadily increasing in the Exclusive Economic Areas of developing countries;

-These fleets have tremendous ecological and economic consequences, which resulted in a crisis of fishery management.

Yet it is thanks to fishing agreements that distant water fleets have legal access to the fish resources of developing coastal countries. More important: it is thanks to subsidies that the behaviours of distant water fleets have such damaging and economic consequences.

This presentation expresses the fact that “**subsidies regimes should be reviewed and improved in order to protect marine environment and to promote the living conditions of local people**”.

1) **Some Views on distant water fleets and fishing agreements**

During a recent survey conducted by the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Senegal (1999) on the fishing agreements between European Union and Senegal, both artisanal and industrial fishermen, fish factorymen, researchers, conservationists, and public service technicians were asked the following question: what do you think of fishing agreements and distant water fleets ? What benefit do you derive from it?

1.1. One **artisanal fisherman** expressed an opinion representative of that of his peers: “*We are against fishing agreements and distant water fleets. We have few advantages but numerous disadvantages:*

- i. Foreign fleets are competing with us for the resources.*
- ii. Some foreign boats enter our fishing area by night, damaging our fishing gear and sometimes causing deadly accidents.*
- iii. Little compensation from the fishing agreements accrue to us and what is more, we can hardly get the payment provided for us in the agreements.*
- iv. Europeans are now interested in small sardines on which poor people feed in our countries; what will we feed on when they have taken everything”.*

1.2. The answer of **the industrial fisherman** was:

“Foreign fleets are competing with us for the resources and the market. Yet, they have an edge on us because of their more advanced technology and the subsidies they receive from the European union. We cannot therefore be in favour of the fishing agreements”.

1.3. The **factoryman** had an opposite view on fishing agreements. Here is his opinion:

“The catch landing by foreign fleets keep our factory up and running. There is however a bottleneck: they usually land in our factory catches which have no outlet in the European market”.

1.4. A **conservationist** from a local NGO said:

- i. *Distant water fleets destroy the fishing habitats.*
- ii. *Some of them squander our resources by throwing back into the sea large quantities of unwanted catch.*

1.5. One **researcher** asserted that:

“fishing agreements are financially beneficial. They are a source of foreign currency for most of our countries and contribute to solving their financial problems. Besides, research work into fishing is mainly supported by fishing agreements compensation fund. Putting an end to the fishing agreements or foreign fleets operations at this point and time will seriously be detrimental to fish research in our countries”.

1.5. One **civil servant** expressed the most positive view on fishing agreements: *“Fishing agreements should be regarded as a management step. Part of the fishing resources which cannot be exploited by local fishermen are given to foreign fleets in exchange for financial compensation. Furthermore, the fishing agreements supply foreign currency and contribute to the training of some civil servants and researchers. They also financially support research, the operation of fishing department, investments, and provide job opportunities”.*

An analysis of these opinions reveals that fishing agreements are above all beneficial to governments, civil services and research institutes. These stakeholders would therefore like to have the agreements prolonged.

They are currently the only actors present at the negotiations with the officials of the distant water fleets countries. Yet, we are witnessing an increasing mobilisation of civil society movements claiming better involvement in fishing agreement negotiation process.

II. GOVERNANCE OF FISHERIES IN WESTERN AFRICA

2.1. Negotiations of fishing agreements

Several factors place West African countries in a disadvantageous position during negotiations of fishing agreements :

- These countries usually negotiate on an individual basis and at different times with European Union. Each country taken alone has a negligible weight in front of the giant EU. In addition, the EU puts to good account the different negotiations schedules and gains from one country what she loses to another.
- The EU has a greater command of fishing datas than the african countries.
- Since most of our countries have serious financial burdens, they take discordant steps during fishing agreements negotiations. Compensation funds are even taken in consideration in the preparation of national budgets long before the signature of the agreements.
- Moreover, the negotiation of fishing agreement goes far beyond the fishing sector. There is a Damoclès sword hanging over the heads of developing countries negotiators. There

is some disguised blackmailing: if you do not sign the agreement, your project in this or that field will not have the chance of benefiting from EU financial assistance.

One fundamental question remains: how could countries in the sub-region better manage their fish resources while deriving maximum benefit from fishing agreements. Another question relates to how to protect the interests of local fisheries especially artisanal ones.

2.2. Actions of NGOs

As underscored above, the present type of agreements are of benefit to the government, civil service and research. One key objective of WWF in general is to help develop the capacity of civil society organizations in order that they may become powerful in advocacy and lobbying capable of influencing the attitude of governments during negotiations.

Some attention should also be paid to fostering consultation within the Sub-Regional Fishing Commission (CSRP), between the various coastal countries and developing a common mechanism of access to fishing. We should also think of how to link up eco-labelling with fishing agreements.

Lobbying and awareness-raising activities should also be carried out so that the interests of local fisheries and especially those of artisanal ones are effectively taken into consideration in fishing agreements.

CONCLUSION

- The international fishing area should be an area where existing species are not species mainly targeted by local fishermen.
- Distant water fleets should not fish off a given coast on which artisanal fishermen depend for their subsistence.
- Special emphasis should be laid on deep-water species and other species which do not have a local market or whose exploitation requires some processing or fishing gear not locally available.
- If the quality of some species exploited by local fleets and meant for exportation negatively affect the prices, catches from this resource can therefore be shared with distant water fleets.

These 4 major recommendations cannot be implemented as long as distant water fleets are under a poor regime of subsidies.

As we share together the only earth, we want to advise strongly EU institutions “to improve fisheries subsidies regime in order to protect our marine environment and our local people depending on marine resources”.