

Fishing for alternatives

Illegal fishing is threatening the livelihoods of many West African fishing communities. Alhaji Jallow of the FAO Regional Office for Africa believes that the scope of research needs to be broadened to include not just marine resources, but also the people who exploit them.



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When the FAO Regional Office for Africa was set up in Ghana 50 years ago, protecting fisheries was one of its priorities. Is that work still as important today?

Across Africa around 3 million fishers and fish farmers depend directly on fisheries and aquaculture for their livelihoods. A further 7 million men and women depend on the sector through their work as fish handlers, processors and traders. Artisanal fisheries have long been a very important economic sector in West Africa. For the residents of some coastal communities, up to 60% of their animal protein intake comes from fish. And where distribution systems are efficient, inland communities can obtain smoke-dried fish that can be stored for months. Since most of these communities do not have facilities for chilling or freezing food, this makes fish much more important than beef.

Exports of fish and fish products, mostly from artisanal fisheries, are increasing, generating about US\$2.7 billion each year. Note that this does not include most of the regional trade within Africa and the catches of foreign fleets that operate in African waters under different agreements. The African industrial fishing sector has always been weak, and this is reflected in its limited contribution to GDP in most countries.

Well managed fisheries could make greater contributions to the region's economies. Investments in vessels and fishing gear continue to be a challenge because of escalating prices. Banks are reluctant to provide credit for the sector, which they consider more risky than agriculture. Unlike farming, where you can see the crops, the potential of the seas is not obvious to the untrained eye.

What changes have you witnessed over the years?

Perhaps the most disconcerting developments have been the increasing number of bilateral fishing agreements, and the incidence of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which threatens to deplete fish stocks worldwide. It has been estimated that IUU fishing costs sub-Saharan Africa at least US\$1 billion (€0.7 billion) each year. The problem is that governments cannot afford to police their waters to prevent illegal vessels operating within their exclusive economic zones (EEZs).👉

A recent survey by Greenpeace, for example, revealed that out of 92 trawlers observed off the coast of Guinea, 10% had no name or flag, 33% had no licence and 50% were fishing illegally. Of these violators, 66% were Chinese. These illegal

operators take advantage of the fact that African countries are unable to patrol their fishing grounds. They do not pay for licences, observers or other national surveillance systems, so their operating costs are minimal.

All of this is having a heavy toll on traditional fishing communities. In 2008, Ghanaian fishermen mounted widespread protests against Chinese pair trawlers, which drag large nets over the seabed, destroying the habitats of juvenile fish. There are also frequent conflicts between industrial trawlers and artisanal canoes, which sometimes result in fatal collisions and irreparable damage to the locals' fishing gear.

The over-exploitation of West African coastal waters means that local fishermen are compelled to go out for longer periods and to more distant grounds, which increases their operating costs. Their catches are also often smaller, reducing their profitability, and forcing many fishermen into debt.

How could research help this situation?

Effective management and allocation of fisheries resources requires knowledge of the potential of marine resources and would facilitate monitoring, which at present is hampered by the lack of data on fish stocks. Few African countries have specialized research institutes that can conduct surveys, so that governments have to rely on *ad hoc* stock assessments, are still using data from the 1970s.

Without reliable data on the deteriorating state of the EEZs, it is almost impossible to convince politicians that they need to be more cautious about issuing licences to foreign fishing vessels. But governments are desperate for foreign currency, which the licences bring in, and so dismiss the warnings of regional fisheries bodies. If these bodies could provide advice based on objective and reliable data, it would be much harder for decision makers to ignore them.

Africa needs specialized research on fish stocks, especially those that are shared, and on the options for sustainable management. But this would require expensive vessels and research equipment. Foreign donors are contributing, but it is high time that West African governments and national institutions invested more in fisheries research.

And what about the region's fishing communities?

Socio-economic research that assesses the impact of IUU fishing on the livelihoods of fishing communities is urgently needed. I must add that it is not only the illegal fishing that

threatens the livelihoods of fisherfolk. The costs of equipment are prohibitive. As artisanal fishers are forced to travel to more distant fishing grounds, many are motorizing their canoes at a time of rising fuel prices. The increasing price of electricity has also affected the price of ice that some operators use to store their catch while at sea.

On land, deforestation means that the wood that is used to build traditional canoes is becoming scarce and more expensive. Some fishermen have resorted to imported fibreglass canoes, which last longer, but the initial investment and maintenance costs are higher. All of these factors are affecting the profitability of many family businesses. At a time of rising global food prices, they also threaten the food security of entire communities.

The potential impacts of these developments are frightening. As fisherfolk lose their means of earning a livelihood, this could create serious socio-economic problems, particularly in West Africa. Countries will lose their main source of export earnings, and of protein. The fishermen and their families have few alternatives. They do not have the training to become farmers, and if they do, few have the patience to wait for months for a harvest and income. They are used to receiving payment, however small, every day. The daily income affects the expenditure patterns in fishing communities, and most fishermen do not save. They walk away from the beach and spend their money, expecting to earn it again the next day.

Such patterns are not well documented, and there is an urgent need for research that provides a better picture of the livelihoods and their profitability. With adequate information, we can propose alternatives for diversifying their sources of income. Traditionally, fisheries research has focused on the biology of fish. The scope of such research needs to be broadened to include socio-economic studies that can provide the information needed to help in managing the people and the communities who exploit these resources. This has become just as important as managing the fish and fisheries resources of Africa. ■

□ Kraan, M. (2009) *Creating Space for Fishermen's Livelihoods*, Brill/Africa Studies Centre, Leiden.

📖 A longer version can be found at www.thebrokeronline.eu.