

Criminal fisheries practices and their perverse effects in West Africa

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Enforcing sustainable use of natural resources is a challenging task for developing countries, although modern earth observation technologies can help. Exploitation of marine living resources is a very demanding show-case for lessons about the problem as well as for insights into possible remedies. The extent of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing reaches very high proportions in West Africa and accounts for approximately half of total extractions according to most recent independent research results by the Sea Around Us Project. Based on field research in Senegal and neighbouring countries, we argue that the scale of illegal practices, needs to be classified as criminal and no longer as a fisheries management problem. The perpetrators are mostly international industrial fleets operating across borders alternating between organised crime and activities within legitimate agreements. This makes persecution particularly difficult for under-resourced authorities in developing countries with insufficient means for monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) and little capacity to use earth observation technology to track exploitation patterns. The net results are firstly significant financial losses for the countries, estimated elsewhere for West African countries except Namibia at US\$ 1.7 billion for the period 2000 to 2010. The perverse social, institutional and environmental effects may even turn out to be more far-reaching. Among these are the reduction of women entrepreneurs in the dynamic local small-scale fishing industry to low-paid labour in industrial processing plants, break down of traditional solidarity chains within the small-scale sector under excessive economic pressure from industrial competition, corruption and other forms of delegitimisation of public institutions and degradation of the marine ecosystems with serious effects on local food security. We discuss these effects in the light of field research carried out mostly in Senegal and recommend that such practices be addressed at several levels: systematic prosecution by national and international anti-crime procedures, increase of public awareness and change in perceptions, including through more critical engagement of scientists, and capacity strengthening of both public institutions and humans suffering the consequences. The Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission of seven Northwest African states has seized the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in 2014 seeking advice on the obligations and responsibilities of coastal states and flag states of vessels involved in IUU fishing in order to start addressing institutional dimensions while different initiatives mostly by big international NGOs produce encouraging results of tracking fisheries operations from space, which should be better connected to in-country MCS and law enforcement and flanked by consistent policies in favour of decent jobs in local industries.