

A sea change

Negotiations between Senegal and the European Union on a new fisheries agreement have hit a deadlock

Over the last few years, fishing has become the most important primary economic sector in Senegal, ahead of phosphates and groundnuts. In 2000, according to OEPS, the Economic Observatory for Fishing in Senegal, some 330,000 tonnes of fish were caught, of which the artisanal sector contributed 85 per cent.

The 1997 census indicated that more than 44,000 artisanal fishers were operating from around 7,600 seagoing *pirogues*, 90 per cent of which were motorized, according to the Directorate of Oceanography and Marine Fisheries and the Dakar Thiaroye Centre for Oceanographic Research (CRODT).

This situation is the result of the numerous changes taking place within the artisanal fishery, which has been able to adapt its gear and strategies to the new requirements of the sector, notwithstanding ever-increasing constraints due to, *inter alia*, growing resource scarcity.

For five years, finding GPSs (global positioning systems), echo sounders and mobile phones on board *pirogues* has no longer been unusual! What was a pioneering exercise at the start of the 1990s is now common practice, even on small 8-10 m units like the liners from Kayar, an important artisanal fishing centre situated 30 km to the north of Dakar, or from Soumbédioune, one of the artisanal fishing ports in the capital's centre. Fish is scarce, and accuracy and speed are essential to economize on time, but, above all, on outboard motor fuel, which has become the most important item in the artisanal fishermen's daily expenses.

"Today each 18-20 m ice-carrying *pirogue* is highly equipped, because their trips last

5-10 days, sometimes going as far as Guinea Conakry or Sierra Leone. Precise navigation is, therefore, very important," explains Kabou Laye, a navigation equipment salesman. GPS and echo sounders have become part of the basic equipment needed to reach these distant fishing zones. GPS co-ordinates for good fishing positions can be sold for between 300,000 and 500,000 CFA francs (456 to 760 euro). It's well worth it, as a 40-kg box of *tioff* (white grouper) may sell for as much as 100,000 CFA francs (152 euro) on Hann beach, near Dakar's central market.

Sixty per cent of the seafood exported to European and Asian markets from Senegal comes from the artisanal fishing sector. In order to respond to the demands of the local fish merchants specializing in high-value fish, artisanal fishermen have rapidly integrated and adapted certain techniques that enable them to respond to this demand for quality. As soon as fish is caught, it is sorted by species, graded and packed with ice in small 8-kg polystyrene boxes. These are only opened after a buyer is found in Dakar, or else in the shoreside shops of local fishmongers, who verify the contents and weight of the produce. The fish is then repacked and sent by plane to Europe.

Small units that make day trips have also incorporated the use of ice onboard. Thus, fish caught by Senegalese artisanal fishermen is found in perfect condition on the markets in Rungis, Paris or other European centres, sometimes within 24 hours of it being caught.

Quality reputation

"The reputation for the quality of our fish is most important. It is the catch of the day," says Bassirou Mbaye of the Kayar Fishermen's Committee, which brings together 600 longline fishermen. "Today

we have to conserve and manage our resources in a better way,” he adds.

With pressure mounting on resources, conflicts between sectors are more common, sometimes developing into inter-communal strife. In Kayar, some fishermen from St Louis, who fish exclusively with nets, have left after they were excluded from several fishing zones by the longliners of the village.

In Soubedioune, a landing site in the heart of Dakar, it is the Kayar fishermen who are the target of criticism. They use drifting longlines, a technique considered too efficient by the local fishermen. “Large landings upset the market, and the selling price of fish drops,” argue the local fishermen, who prefer to fish less but sell their catch at higher prices.

With the help of the fisheries administration, some communities have taken the initiative to establish management rules to control fishing effort in order to prevent these kinds of situations.

The example set by the fishermen of Kayar speaks for itself. They have elaborated ‘Codes of Good Practice’ for different fishing techniques. Thus, the seiners, which mainly target sardines, can only make one trip in 24 hours if they find fish, explains Dao Gaye of the National Collective of Senegalese Fishermen. Longliners that go after high-value species are limited to three polystyrene boxes per trip. What’s more, they are forbidden to go to sea before five in the morning. This not only allows them to limit effort by the time fished but also promotes safety at the crossing of the bar.

Women processors are not passive actors when faced with changing demands in different markets. What’s more, some groups of women processors who produce traditionally prepared products like *guedj* (dried fermented fish) or *kétiakh* (cooked, salted and dried sardinella) are taking up production processes that allow them to respond to the demands of specific markets in the subregion. The production methods differ for smoked catfish in Gambia, on the one hand, and *saly* (dried, salted fish) for Ghana or

Benin, on the other, but the women know well that they must respond to consumer demands.

They are even developing new products like *saly* shark filets. “These are appetisers to go with beer. We’ll see if it interests our clients from Benin,” explains Fatim Diop, President of the Yoff Group at a landing centre close to Dakar airport.

With the support of development programmes, some GIES (Economic Interest Groups) have considerably improved their installations and established processing activities that take into account current needs of hygiene and quality. The women processors are also looking to export to the European Union (EU), where there is a demand from communities of West African origin for the seafood products needed for their traditional dishes.

As *SAMUDRA Report* goes to press, the fisheries agreement negotiations with the EU are reportedly still deadlocked, after the eighth round of negotiations reached a stalemate in Brussels. Renewal of the fisheries agreement has been held up for almost 12 months since April 2001. The Senegalese authorities once again face a delicate choice: how to maintain the dynamism of the national artisanal subsector and take into account the recommendations of the research organizations without having to refuse any kind of fisheries agreement, as Morocco did. Or should they cave in to pressure to benefit from financial compensation?

Happily, the Senegalese authorities are defending their fisheries wealth. They are demanding the establishment of a two-month closed season to protect sensitive fishing zones such as those close to the Kayar trench, where the artisanal fishermen have taken the initiative to improve the management of their resources. But these demands do not suit the European boatowners, who argue that any resource management linked to a biological rest period for the subregion’s straddling stocks will be difficult.

New hopes

Though the negotiations are blocked, the representatives of the Senegalese fishing



sector are hopeful because they know their claims are justified. We must hope that the decisionmakers in Brussels will set an example and assist their Southern partners, like Senegal, to establish responsible fishing practices. 🇸🇳

This piece has been written by Alexis Fossi (fossi@ip.pt), a fisheries biologist who has been working with communities of artisanal fishermen in Europe and West Africa for the past 15 years