

In Senegal...

THE OCTOPUS SPREADS ITS TENTACLES

In Senegal, Japanese and Korean vessels, called "pick-up ships", take on board a few dozen traditional Senegalese canoes together with their crews—about two hundred artisanal fishermen and ferry them towards the rich fishing grounds off, say, Guinea or Liberia. As soon as they reach their destination, the fishermen and their craft are lowered by crane. The fish, which is usually very high quality, is bought dirt-cheap from the fishermen to be sent to Japanese, American or European markets.

This is just one of the new strategies which the industrialised countries are applying in order to satisfy their populations' increasing demand for fresh fish and highly-appreciated species. Other methods are more insidious, but just as efficient. Aliou SALL, sociologist and fisheries consultant for the Centre for Fisheries Research, Development and Intermediate Technology - Dakar (CREDETIP), examines here how multinationals redeploy their tentacles.

Faced with the international market's ever-increasing demand for fresh, rather than frozen fish (to supply restaurants, hotels, etc.), the market leaders have agents that penetrate right through to the smallest fishing villages. The agents, who are local people born and bred, represent international capital at village level. As I frequently tell my closest friends, the symbol of capitalism should no longer be a skyscraper in Washington or New York, crammed full of high performance computers. For capitalism lives with the fisherman in his home, and shares a cup of tea and even the same bed with him.

The myth of compartmentalisation

The dualistic approach, which theorists, technicians and development administrators have long defended, conceals the interpenetration and even complementarity of two supposedly antagonistic sectors: small-scale (or artisanal) and industrial fisheries. The idea that small-scale fisheries is inferior to the industrial sector no longer stands up to scrutiny. Where fish marketing is concerned, the quantity of fish caught by small-scale fishing vessels that finds its way on to the international market would justify the statement that the industrial sector is now dependent on the small-scale sector.

In Senegal, the myth that held that industrial fishing boats supplied local and international markets

with luxury fish, while the small-scale sector only served the local markets, has been shattered.

The increasing demand for fish—which is becoming more and more of a rare commodity - and the competition between buyers, who are anxious to maintain access to sea produce, compel the latter to enter into contracts with small-scale fishermen to enable them to do so. These contracts are essentially of two kinds, each one involving a different activity in the sector.

The international fish market's involvement in the so-called small-scale sector concerns firstly the initial investment required for the supply of appropriate equipment to ensure a quality product. Nowadays, it is a fact that almost all the fish exporting factories serving the American, European and Asian markets are located in the fishing villages themselves.

In order to bind the fishermen to them, the factories specialising in particular species designate a salaried agent, who may also be on commission, to fulfill the main role as intermediary. It is he who grants the necessary credit to the fishermen for the purchase of their gear, or to pay their running expenses. It is also he who provides the fishermen with polystyrene boxes. These ice-filled boxes are supplied to fishermen who go out to sea for no more than seven hours at a time, on canoes 7 or 8 meters long. They make for a very good quality product, essentially of species which are favoured in Europe, such as sea bream. The fish caught

under such conditions is ready for export because it has already been prepared on board the traditional boat.

Exclusive specialisation

The practices just described developed fast in the villages of Kayar, Yoff, Soumbédioune, Joal and Mbour, among others. The intermediaries have very high profit margins at the expense of the fishermen, who have no idea at what price the fish is sold to the European or Asian consumer. During the visit of a delegation of Senegalese fishermen to Brussels, one of them, who was from St. Louis, was astonished to discover the exorbitant asking price of one single sea bream. As soon as he returned to his village, the factory representatives got a piece of his mind!

In Senegal, agents representing the most modern processing factories, which even have their own fleets, patrol the beaches with their trucks. Of course, this type of small-scale fisheries development is bound to affect the fishermen and the communities they live in. In fact, the contracts between the factory bosses and the fishermen have various kinds of results.

First of all, one finds the specialisation on one export species tends to become exclusive in nature. It may happen that a fisherman who has already contracted a loan from a factory and who had previously used several techniques all year round, will concentrate on the species demanded by the lender (the factory) in order to reimburse the credit. The reimbursement is ensured by a deduction at source: on each kilogramme of fish delivered, a percentage is retained by the lender buyer.

Secondly, access of coastal populations, and of fishermen themselves, to good quality fish becomes very difficult. The good quality fish becomes too expensive for local fishing populations for reasons connected with the way the factories operate. The latter oblige the fishermen to deliver them the fish by paying a higher price for it and by advancing them credit.

This results in fish becoming scarce as a marine resource. In certain fishing areas, credit granted by the factories to the fishermen and the types of contracts drawn up induce the fishermen to catch species which are not part of the eating habits of the coastal population. This is the case with octopus, squid, sole and especially shark whose fins are greatly prized in Asia and are sought after by the fishermen with all the required precision.

Nowadays the fishing season offers the astounding and disturbing sight of fishing communities landing many tons of squid (at Mbour, for example), and of shark (at Kafountine), as a result of a change in

their catching habits. Clearly, a species such as squid cannot be eaten by a Senegalese, unless the habit has been learnt abroad...

Finally, the contracts result in the women traditionally involved in fish marketing being marginalised. Since the fishing gear (shark nets) and other inputs (such as ice kept in polystyrene boxes) are supplied by the factories, the women have difficulty in getting access to capital and find their role in the economy being eroded by the more financially sound newcomers on the economy scene. In fact, the fisherman's wife, who used to be first link (intermediary) in the chain, now finds herself excluded for good from certain areas, being replaced by the factories' agents.

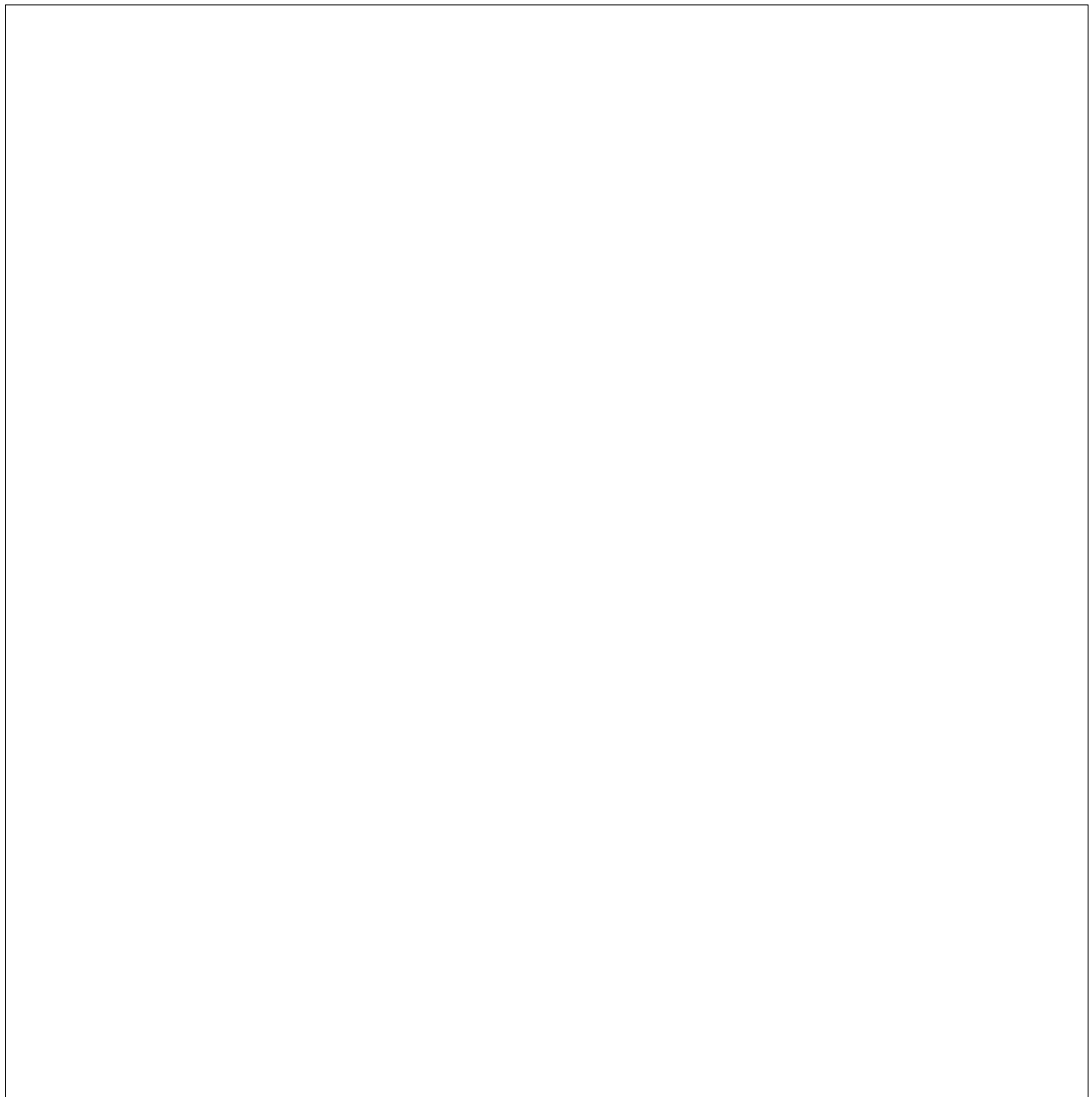
The "pick-up ships" sometimes turn and run

The arrival of "pick-up ships" provides the second entry point for the penetration of international capital. Faced with problems regarding access to the resource and the viability of investments, large cargo-type ships, called "pick-up ships" take on board about thirty small-scale units each with an average crew of six or eight men. It should be pointed out that these ships do not fish but just ferry the artisanal fishermen towards the rich fishing grounds which the latter are more familiar with.

When they reach the grounds, the fishermen and their craft are lowered by crane so that they can work within a radius of 15km from the anchored ship. The trips generally take the fishermen away from their country for forty days at a time. In fact, some of these ships go as far away as Guinea Conakry, Liberia, and Guinea Bissau, etc.. These practices have similar effects to those produced by contracts between factory owners and small-scale units.

The "pick-up ships" catches are undeclared, thereby depriving the coastal states of some of their fishery resources. This is in addition to their exploitation of the artisanal fishermen who work with them and provide them with very high quality fish dirt-cheap (150 FCFA/kg, or 0.5 of a dollar).

Besides the problems already mentioned, the insecurity of the fishermen working with the "pick-up ships" gives cause for anxiety today. By embarking on these ships without a written contract and without ministerial approval, the fishermen work at their own risk. On many an occasion, having collected the catch, the "pick-up ships" have turned and run. About 6 or 7 months ago, during a trip, some Senegalese fishermen from Kayar found fishing in Liberian waters were arrested and imprisoned by the Liberian navy. As the arrest took place, the ship fled denying all responsibility and leav-



ing the fishermen's families who had remained behind in the village in an extremely worrisome situation.

Doubly exploited on land and at sea, the artisanal fisherman is once again trapped in the infernal spiral of international capitalism and hounded by the unbridled quest for profit. Those responsible for the problem are, of course, numerous.

Among the poorer people of our planet and all the more so among fishworkers, a fundamental problem persists: that of a lack of information about their environment and ignorance of their most basic rights.

It should be recognised that the situation of the West is diametrically opposed to that of Africa. Whereas Africa—and especially its fishermen—remains underinformed, Europe is suffering from a new ailment called “over-information” and finds itself faced with the problem of having to make a choice between all the items of information that come its way. As far as we in Africa, and especially the fishermen, are concerned, development priorities should focus less on a directive approach, as one finds in projects and traditional funding policies, than on ensuring the information and education of fishworkers' communities about their basic rights.