A View from the West: Illegal Fishing in West Africa: A Symptom of a Wider Problem

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Increased incidents of piracy off West Africa have shifted international attention from the Gulf of Aden to the Gulf of Guinea. Although piracy is of significant international concern, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is arguably of greater concern to West Africans. For countries that are incapable of effectively patrolling their own waters, illegal fishing is a systemic problem that can affect land-based state authority and threaten economic and social stability. Therefore, by building upon efforts undertaken to curb shipping piracy in West Africa, the international community can expand state capacities to counter illegal foreign fishing.

As with any illegal activity, the impact of IUU fishing is difficult to gauge. However, the estimated global economic loss from illegal fishing is likely as high as USD $23.5 billion annually.¹ This figure represents 26 million tonnes of fish or roughly one-quarter of the world catch. With large profits to be made and minimal threat of legal repercussions – due to the lack of state capacities – the incentive to fish illegally in West African waters is high. As a result, West Africa has the highest level of IUU fishing in the world with 37% of the region’s catch being caught illegally by fishermen from countries like Taiwan, Thailand, South Korea and Russia.² This level of exploitation hampers the sustainable management of marine ecosystems severely, while compromising food security and the livelihoods of West African populations.

Senegal, one of the most stable countries in Africa, is a particular example of the scope of the illegal fishing challenge. Senegal’s fisheries are among the largest and most productive in West Africa, yet they are affected significantly by IUU fishing. The abundance of marine resources has attracted foreign vessels, operating on an industrial scale, and this has led to conflict between foreign and artisanal fishermen, with accusations that the foreign vessels are exploiting Senegal’s marine resources by fishing illegally. It was not until recently, however, that Senegal began to voice complaints about IUU fishing vessels depleting the region’s fish stocks. These complaints call into question the security of Senegal’s once thriving and dependable fishing industry.

The social consequences of IUU fishing are particularly damaging to Senegalese coastal communities but also to the country at large. Senegal’s fishing industry employs some 600,000 people, 15% of the working population, and contributes significantly to the country’s food security as fish accounts for 75% of the population’s protein intake.³ However, since one large trawler can catch as much as 250 tonnes of fish per day – roughly what 50 artisanal boats might catch in a year – Senegalese fishermen are having to work harder in their waters, while also having to venture further offshore. The effect of illegal fishing extends beyond the coastal areas. Senegal’s rural population is heavily dependent on agriculture but during droughts and periods of low agricultural productivity, many farmers migrate to the coast in search of employment in the fisheries sector.⁴ Since fish stocks are declining, many coastal people are forced to migrate to urban areas in search of work. This trend has led to food, employment and health insecurity across the country. Without better monitoring and control, Senegal’s declining maritime resources will continue to endanger the health and livelihoods of the population as a whole.

Senegalese fishermen say their catches are dwindling year after year.

Senegal has a limited maritime patrol and law enforcement capability. This is unfortunate given the economy’s heavy dependence on fisheries for export revenue. Although fish is the country’s fifth leading export commodity, the region’s demersal fish stocks are over-exploited and this reduces the actual and potential export earnings of these commodities. Furthermore, IUU fishing fleets take their catch to ports far from West Africa, which results in Senegal losing tax, port and service revenues. These losses are estimated to amount to $312 million per

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year, a situation that further weakens state capabilities by robbing the Senegalese government of an important source of revenue.\textsuperscript{5}

The Senegalese Navy is the primary authority monitoring fisheries and waterways, but it is not well-equipped. Even though it receives training, equipment and support from the United States and France and relies on France to conduct aerial patrols, the navy is only 900 strong with seven patrol craft, three landing craft and no combat craft.\textsuperscript{6} It does not have the capability to deter foreign vessels from threatening the country’s maritime and economic security. Illegal fishing is one of many issues of maritime security in the region, including illegal migration and drug trafficking, with which the navy must cope. Unlike some other countries in the region, Senegal does have the legal structure needed to combat IUU fishing but due to its limited patrol and interdiction capabilities, the maritime fishing code remains largely unenforced.

The solution lies in building up state capacity in Senegal and other West African countries. The mechanisms that have been established to curb piracy and other maritime security concerns can also be used to counter IUU fishing. Efforts have been made by US Africa Command (AFRICOM) and US Naval Forces Africa (NAVAF) to help West African states maintain maritime security effectively within their territorial waters. However, increased international involvement is required. International efforts can build state capabilities by increasing the monitoring presence at sea. For instance, international partners can donate patrol ships, as has been done in Gambia, to increase the size of small navy fleets. Increased aerial patrols and an effective coastal radar system are also necessary.

In order to establish state capacities on land, international partners can build upon AFRICOM and NAVAF’s efforts by training maritime professionals and helping to build maritime infrastructure. Moreover, as seen in Benin, the international community can provide artisanal fisher-men with very high frequency (VHF) radio equipment to enable them to assist with intelligence reports on the location of vessels fishing illegally. These efforts should boost Senegal’s monitoring, control and surveillance capability. Additionally, penalties for violating regulations should be significantly increased since currently fines represent only a fraction of an illegal vessel’s operational costs and do not act as a deterrent. If sustained, proper implementation of these mechanisms could play a major role in the ability of West African coastal states to develop their maritime sectors and safeguard the livelihoods of their communities.

Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing off the coast of West Africa is a longstanding security issue which has been difficult to counter as many coastal states do not have the capacity to patrol their own waters. However, an increased focus on the Gulf of Guinea presents an opportunity for greater international involvement. In order to enhance the well-being of West Africans, the international community should build upon efforts used to curb other issues of maritime insecurity in the region by increasing the naval capabilities of the coastal states.\textsuperscript{7}

Notes


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