

Illegal fishing in Guinea: stealing fish, stealing lives

In July 2005, in Guinea, a fisheries inspector died during a nightly encounter with a trawler fishing illegally. A few months earlier, it was the whole crew of an artisanal pirogue that went down through a similar encounter. Of the 4 crew members, only one fisherman survived, clutching on to a few buoys for three days at sea, waiting for help. Illegal fishing in Guinea results not only in stolen fish, but also in lost lives.

Guinea has extensive and valuable shrimp, octopus, demersal and pelagic fisheries. Like the proverbial bees to the honey pot, this attracts all kinds of fishing vessels, including the ones involved in IUU (Illegal Unreported and Unregulated) fishing. In 2001, a Greenpeace report of at sea observations in Guinea's EEZ highlighted that 34 of the 92 vessels (34%) observed were fishing in an prohibited zone, largely taking catch from the area designated for artisanal fisheries, and therefore illegal

These illegal activities, in particular by Korean trawlers fishing for “*otholites*” (type of croaker/grunter), have been denounced for many years, particularly by Guinean artisanal fishermen. Issiaga Daffe, President of the artisanal fishermen's organization UNPAG (Union Nationale des Pêcheurs Artisans de Guinée), explains “*Illegal incursions of trawlers into the Guinean coastal zone are the most damaging practice for fishing resources as well as our coastal communities. These incursions result not only in degradation of our coasts, but also, particularly as they happen mainly at night, in collisions with small scale fishing vessels, incur loss of gears and casualties. Some of our fishermen, who tried to discuss with these illegal boats crew, were often welcomed with gun fire or boiling water being poured on the pirogues*”

In May 2005, a joint field visit was organised by two European NGOs, EJF (Environmental Justice Foundation) and CFFA (Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements), with the collaboration of the Guinean association ADEPEG –CPA. Several ports and bases along the coast of Guinea were visited, where the extent of illegal fishing and the need to support for surveillance programmes were glaringly apparent.

A total of 19 vessels had been arrested during the first six months of 2005 by the Guinean authorities. Eight of them had been charged with fishing without a licence, four for fishing within the 12 nautical mile zone reserved for artisanal fishermen and six for using the wrong size mesh in their trawl. A close examination of the ownership and registration of these vessels showed that many have a history of illegal fishing in Guinean waters and are well known to surveillance authorities. Multiple name and flag changes are common and some vessels even have dual identities – using one name or flag while fishing in Guinea and a different one when using port facilities.

A recent report (by the London based MRAG, July 2005), estimates that the value of illegal fishing in the Guinean, for the 12 month period 2003 – 2004 was around 110 million US dollars.

Tonnage of convenience

If illegal fishing activities at sea are the ones that have the most immediate damaging impacts, they are not the only ones. Fraud is also rife, notably concerning the obligatory landings. Mamayawa Sandouno, the Guinean Fisheries Ministry's Chief Inspector, recently explained: *"Boats fishing in the Guinean zone must land part of their catches according to the pro rata of their total catch and the vessel tonnage (expressed in GRT - gross registered tonnage). But, until very recently, the vessel tonnage references used were called "consensual GRT". These consensual GRT didn't reflect the real tonnage of the boat. To address that problem, the Guinean administration obtained information from the Lloyds Register for boats fishing in Guinea with their true tonnage, and is now using the Lloyds GRT to calculate the obligatory landings. Since these changes have been introduced, and as a direct consequence, landings have risen in volume (by 30 to 40%)."*

Another aspect of fishing activities in Guinea that results in non declared and under declared catches are the activities of three *"collector boats"*. These boats collect the by-catch from industrial vessels and bring them to areas near the coast where pirogues (artisanal vessels) can collect them and bring them ashore. The origin of this by-catch is unknown and there are suspicions that these collector boats are a means to launder the catches made by boats fishing illegally.

Participative surveillance: the success story....

Given the scale of illegal industrial fishing activities occurring in the zone that is normally reserved for artisanal fishermen (12 miles or 20 metre depth), the Guinean authorities, with the support of the SFLP (Sustainable Fisheries Livelihoods Programme) initiated, in 2000, a 2 years pilot project of participative surveillance. Through this pilot project, artisanal fishermen were reporting real time information from their observations at sea, directly to inspectors of CNSP (*Centre National de Surveillance des Pêches*). According to local reports, the end of the pilot project, incursions of trawlers diminished by 60% in the artisanal fishing zone. The system could only be implemented in areas where there were classical surveillance bases, as patrol boats were necessary for the actual arrest and a certain infrastructure was essential for training and supplying the fishermen, but it exploits the fact that illegally-operating fishing vessels are not as suspicious of canoes as they are of official surveillance boats.

...the shocking reality

Despite its success, funding support by foreign donors has stopped in 2003. The impacts did not take long to arrive: with decreased activities and equipment no longer functioning properly. The findings of the EJF/CFFA field visit show that, for example in Kamsar, north of Guinea and close to the border with Guinea-Bissau, the surveillance base is located a few kilometres from the sea. It takes a couple of hours to get the surveillance boat out to sea, which is problematic when urgent intervention is needed. At the time, there were no means of communication or radar on board, and no means for information from land to be transmitted to those at sea, or vice versa. Fishermen do not have radios to

inform the patrol boat or base station of infractions they witness. In the other surveillance base in Bongolon, there is a surveillance boat, but it is in a very degraded state, with its engines broken. Spare parts for the engines are not easy to find, and it is difficult to get fuel: the nearest petrol station is 20 km away. Communication equipment has been damaged by seawater and the base has no functioning radar, so cannot react quickly to information received.

In conclusion

Like many other so-called development projects in developing countries, emphasis in case of the Guinean surveillance project has been placed on providing equipment while maintenance, repairs and training have been neglected.

For surveillance programmes in general, most of the donor and government support has been invested in establishing expensive monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) systems. Despite these investments, in many developing countries, the situation has not noticeably improved; in many cases, it has deteriorated even further.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of such systems, it needs to be taken into account that the efficiency of these MCS technical tools entirely relies upon human competencies. So the whole system will be inefficient if people in charge of its implementation are not sufficiently trained. Remunerations of people in charge of the MCS should also be proportional to the difficulty of the task, in order to make them less vulnerable to the rampant corruption prevalent in administrations, particularly in a sector where economic issues at stake are enormous.
