Illegal fishing and maritime security: towards a land- and sea-based response to threats in West Africa

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Illegal Fishing and Maritime Security

Towards a Land- and Sea-based Response to Threats in West Africa
Catharina Lewerenz and Judith Vorrath

West African coastal states lose up to $1.5 billion a year as a result of illegal fishing. The effects of overfishing also hit these countries hard. In its Strategy on the Gulf of Guinea, the European Union highlights the threats and risks posed to these coastal states, as well as the connections to Europe as an export market for fishery products and home region of many fishing vessels. Until now, maritime security strategies for West Africa have prioritized the issues of human trafficking, smuggling of migrants, and piracy. In future, however, there should be a stronger focus on the threats posed by illegal fishing, especially when providing advice, training and equipment assistance to improve surveillance and monitoring of West African waters. An integrated approach is required, which should also address the onshore problems associated with the fisheries sector.

European security policy interest in the West African coast has recently intensified. In its Strategy on the Gulf of Guinea, adopted in March 2014, the EU identifies the lack of control over coastal waters and the growth in criminal and terrorist activity as threats to the states of the region and also to the European Union. It is no coincidence that illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is right at the top of the Strategy's list of threats – ahead of trafficking of human beings, narcotics and arms. The criminal exploitation of natural resources – which includes illegal fishing – is also one of three key topics to be addressed by the Roma Lyon Group, G7's forum on counter-terrorism and counter-crime, under the German Presidency. Piracy and armed robbery at sea have hitherto dominated Europe's West Africa agenda. However, in the European Union Maritime Security Strategy (EMSS), also adopted in 2014, the EU advocates for a comprehensive understanding of maritime security. Against this background, illegal fishing, as a form of maritime crime, is still not receiving enough attention.

The threats posed by illegal fishing
Fishing is a key economic factor for many African states. The World Bank estimates that 1.6 million tonnes of fish with a value of $2.5 billion are caught legally in West African waters each year. And according to the OECD, up to seven million people work in the fisheries sector in West Africa alone.

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Illegal fishing by industrial fleets, often accompanied by unreported and unregulated fishing practices (such as false declaration of quantities caught or the use of ships with no vessel identification), causes substantial economic losses for the West African coastal states and deprives them of licence fees and tax revenue. Furthermore, overfishing and degradation of maritime habitats pose a direct threat to local communities' livelihoods, while declining fishing yields are increasingly jeopardizing food security. Potential jobs are lost as well, as many illegal catches are transshipped at sea before being taken to other countries for processing.

High levels of migration from the hinterland to the West African coast exacerbate the problems. Although catch figures are declining, more and more people, mainly young men, are attempting to scratch a living from artisanal fishing. This intensifies the pressure on the sector and, due to the lack of alternative income sources, heightens the risk of social tensions and even unrest. Although outright violence related to illegal industrial fishing is a rare occurrence, there are links to other criminal activities, primarily human trafficking. On many trawlers, crews work under inhuman conditions and, in some cases, are recruited under false pretences in the region's states as forced labour. Links between illegal fishing and the international drug trade are frequently suspected, and while obtaining firm proof of this is extremely difficult, there is at least some evidence that trawlers are being used as cover for smuggling cocaine and other narcotics. Pirate fishing thus poses a threat not only to the coastal states' economies but also to maritime safety and security in a broader sense.

Global approaches, persistent regional threat

The operators' countries of origin and the markets for industrial fishing taking place without the appropriate licences or in des-ignated marine protected areas are, in the main, located outside West Africa. Although some artisanal fishers are engaged in illegal fishing, it is primarily an external stress factor, i.e. it originates outside the region. Since the 1990s, the international community has adopted various global agreements to address the problem. The International Plan of Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IPOA-IUU), adopted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in 2001, should be mentioned in particular. It sets basic standards for the conservation and management of fisheries resources and defines common principles for national and regional initiatives to curb illegal fishing.

Although this type of global approach has established the framework, it is ultimately a matter for the states themselves to implement these agreements and ensure compliance. Illegal fishing is driven by demand – not least from Europe. The EU has therefore adopted a Regulation to prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, which entered into force in 2010. Since then, catch certification and details of origin have been required for imports and exports of fishery products. The EU also maintains an IUU vessel list and a list of non-cooperating countries. In parallel, an initiative announced by President Obama in June 2014 is intended to prevent illegal fishing and seafood fraud in the US market.

Despite all these measures, illegal fishing continues to take a heavy toll, particularly on West African coastal zones. It is mainly vessels from South Korea, China and other Asian countries that engage in illegal fishing on an industrial scale. Very often, they operate under another country's flag in order to evade control or to circumvent the jurisdiction of their home state. Some catches are transshipped several times at sea or mixed with legal catches and brought to market via intermediate ports. As a consequence, illegal fishery products are still reaching the EU.

Regulation and monitoring of the fisheries sector are still very lax in many West African coastal states, so they are unable to achieve compliance with international agreements. This applies both to states affected by illegal fishing in their waters and to common flag states such as Liberia and Senegal, which are primarily responsible for enforcing regulations applicable to "their" vessels. Many illegal fishing fleets thus continue to operate with impunity, leading to the consequences described above. But the problems do not just arise at sea. They start onshore, as the example of Guinea shows.

Illegal fishing:
a national challenge for Guinea

Among the West African coastal states, Guinea is particularly affected by illegal fishing, and with more intensive monitoring of the waters of neighbouring Sierra Leone, these problems have recently worsened. Guinea loses an estimated €100−150 million annually − around 10 per cent of its national budget − as a result of illegal fishing. In addition to the value of the illegal catch, the state loses out on revenue from licence fees, taxes and fines. In some cases, foreign − mainly Asian − trawlers fish here without the appropriate licences; in others, several ships are engaged in fishing operations under the same illegally duplicated licence. Some vessels are registered using front companies in Guinea via local middlemen. Although a monitoring body exists, it is poorly resourced and many of its coastal bases barely fulfil their remit. Inspectors appear to be poorly trained and have a reputation for boosting their salaries by passing information to illegal fishing vessels. Former Fisheries Minister Moussa Condé, who owned at least one fishing company himself, was accused of complicity as well. Faced with this scenario, in March 2014 the EU listed Guinea as a non-cooperating country, banning imports of its fishery products into the EU. Only then was the Minister removed from office. However, he was simply transferred to another government post.

Substantial amounts of the catch from Guinea's waters continue to be sold, not only in Asia. They also reach the European market through apparently legal channels via other West African countries such as Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire.

A number of trawlers engaged in illegal fishing in Guinean waters were apprehended in 2014, licence fees were increased, and in August, the new Minister suspended industrial fishing for a two-month period. But despite these measures, Guinea has yet to fulfil the criteria for the lifting of EU sanctions.

Although adversely affected by overfishing, artisanal fishing off the coast of Guinea is part of the problem. In waters off-limits to industrial fishing vessels, small-scale fishermen are now supplying large fishing vessels from Asia, mainly South Korea. Pirogues from neighbouring West African states also engage in unlicensed fishing in Guinea's waters. Efforts to tackle abuses and deficiencies in the sector should therefore not only focus on maritime safety and security but should also address the situation onshore.

Broader maritime security and
a comprehensive approach

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea was long regarded as the principal threat to maritime security in West Africa. By contrast, the EMSS and its action plan adopted in December 2014 directly refer to IUU fishing. They provide a common framework for the EU Member States' maritime security capacity building activities with third countries and regional organizations. An extensive code of conduct on maritime safety and security for Central and West African countries has existed since 2013 as part of the Yaoundé Declaration. Here too, the related measures, such as the establishment of the Inter-regional Coordination Centre for Maritime Safety and Security in the Gulf of Guinea, focus primarily on com-

bating piracy. This and other transnational initiatives should give higher priority to curbing IUU fishing, for the (West) African countries are generally keen to improve their fisheries monitoring, as is evident from the existence of regional cooperation initiatives such as the Partnership for African Fisheries (PAF). At the same time, more effective control of this highly complex sector could contribute significantly to the monitoring and surveillance of coastal waters as a whole. Civil and military capacity building in the maritime sector should therefore include more efforts to curb illegal fishing.

However, as the example of Guinea shows, this depends on the right conditions being in place. Without a clear political commitment, the provision of advice, training and equipment assistance will have little effect. Nonetheless, some selective improvements can be achieved. For example, France and Canada have established the *Préfecture maritime* as a means of supporting the coordination of Guinean authorities, such as the customs service, gendarmerie and fisheries agency, without creating complex institutional structures. Alongside piracy, illegal fishing was the operational priority for 2013.

However, there is a risk that intensified monitoring on a piecemeal basis will simply shift the problem elsewhere, so (trans-) regional approaches and coordination are essential. Moreover, it is not simply a matter of improving monitoring and surveillance systems at sea. Structural reforms are generally required onshore as well, in order to guarantee responsible fisheries management. Both the EU-funded SmartFish Programme in the Indian Ocean and a sector project implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) aim to promote the sustainable use of fishery resources, for example by providing policy advice to relevant authorities at the national and local levels. Such programmes could be better linked with maritime security policies. In this regard, the cross-sectoral, interdepartmental approach

adopted by Germany to address wildlife crime can serve as a model. It combines law enforcement with environmental conservation and development measures along the entire illegal wildlife trafficking chain. Under the German G7 Presidency, the Roma Lyon Group should therefore discuss these and other international models, with a view to applying them to the maritime sector in regions such as West Africa. Moreover, in its cooperation with West Africa, for example on implementing the EMSS action plan, Europe should adopt innovative solutions developed in other regions to combat illegal fishing.