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A New Mauritania-European Union Fisheries Agreement Protocol

Overexploitation of Mauritania's Cephalopods is up for Auction

The European Union and Mauritania ratified a protocol to renew their fisheries agreement for a five-year period, effective from 1st August 2001 to 31st July 2006.

The number of authorised cephalopod boats, restricted to an average of 42 in the 1996/2001 protocol, has now been increased to 55. According to the European Commission, “*this increase was possible due to the opening up of new cephalopod fishing opportunities following the departure of several Asian vessels that traditionally targeted these species*”...

The EU, however, knows full well that signing the latest fishing agreement is tantamount to signing the death warrant of Mauritania's national fisheries sector. All the available sources of data coincide to highlight the fact that octopus stocks in Mauritanian waters are overexploited.

At least the EU's approach shows the lack of coherence between its actions on the one hand, and its talk about responsible fisheries and the sustainable development of the fisheries sector in ACP countries on the other.

Departure of “Asian boats”: a smokescreen

The new fisheries agreement protocol signed by Mauritania and the EU, flying in the face of all logic, increases substantially (by more than 30%) the fishing opportunities for cephalopods. A stock on which Mauritania's fishing industry depends.

The European Commission justifies this increase by citing the “*departure of the Asian vessels*” that targeted those stocks. These vessels, imported by Mauritanian ship-owners with credit facilities provided by China, were returned in 1999 to their suppliers because the ship-owners had failed to

honour their commitments. Their catches had dwindled due to the overexploitation of the cephalopod and coastal demersal stocks. What then is the scientific basis for the Commission to claim that “*fishing opportunities*” have arisen thanks to this “*departure*”?

As early as 1995, when these boats of Asian origin were operating in the Mauritanian zone, the CNROP were already warning that there was overcapacity for octopus. At the time the EU was one of the most important sources of finance to Mauritania, and was strongly urging a decrease in fishing effort on octopus and a reduction in the catch of juveniles. This was even made a condition for granting some of the monies agreed for STABEX funding. It is true that at the time the

agreement between Mauritania and the EU did not cover access to cephalopods,¹...

The “*departure of the Asian vessels*” has only reduced the surplus capacity in relation to levels that existed before the arrival of the European vessels in 1996. Whilst the departure of these boats may have relieved the pressure on the resources to a certain extent, the problem of over-capacity and declining catches still persists.

Potential Catches

On the basis of past figures, the average catch rate of a European cephalopod boat is about 800 tonnes, of which almost 60% is made up of octopus. This has been used to give a potential catch of 44,000 tonnes for the 55 vessels specified in the new protocol to the agreement, of which 26,000 tonnes are octopus².

According to the CNROP's³ 1998 Working Group, the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) for octopus is 35,000 tonnes. The optimum economic yield is known to be below the MSY and that the closer one gets to this figure the less profitable the fishing activity becomes. It is generally recommended that a figure of 70% of MSY be used, implying, in this context, about 24,500 tonnes of octopus.

The access to 26,000 tonnes granted to the European fleet could alone overshoot this threshold! The same working group established an average catch rate of 20000 tonnes per year for all fleets operating on these stocks, and at that time was recommending a 25% reduction in fishing effort.

¹ *The first agreement which granted Europe access to octopus was signed in 1996.*

² *The latest statistics provided by the ship-owners show a catch composition of 40% cephalopods and 60% fish. This would signify a complete reversal for their fishing strategies. A few doubts remain about this issue due to the way stocks are distributed in the fishing zones, predominated by octopus; the higher market value of cephalopods and fishing methods used. Because of this, the proportion of cephalopods (mainly octopus) in the catches of Spanish vessels is sometimes as high as 70%.*

³ *National Oceanographic and Fisheries Research Centre of Mauritania*

What's left for Mauritania's fishermen?

The very survival of the Mauritanian national sector directly depends on the octopus stocks. In 1993, with around 400 pirogues, Mauritania's artisanal fishery sector alone landed nearly 8,100 tonnes of octopus. Today, more than 1,500 boats engage in octopus fishing, which is triple the 1993 catching capacity! Today, due to the octopus's demise, this fleet lands less than 3,000 tonnes of octopus: about one third of the catch taken by 400 pirogues in 1993!

In addition to the artisanal fishery, Mauritania's cephalopod fleet includes more than a hundred trawling units with a catching capacity of 15,000 to 20,000 tonnes per annum⁴. Extrapolating only from the 1993 artisanal catch to estimate the capacity of the current artisanal fleet, one would arrive at a figure of between 23,000 and 28,000 tonnes!

Given the overcapacity in the octopus fishery, particularly of the European fleet, most of the Mauritanian fishing industry (boats, processing factories etc) are at a standstill. Consequently, octopus exports have dropped by more than 50% since 1993!

If there really are new fishing opportunities for European boats, how can the Mauritanian Government's ban on the purchase of cephalopod trawlers by its own nationals be explained?

The application of a method to make catch forecasts (CNROP, 1995) indicates, for the present post-agreement situation, a total potential catching capacity of 36,000 tonnes of octopus per year for the trawlers. In addition to this, the catching capacity of the artisanal sector (about 8,000 tonnes) must also be reckoned with. This represents a total of around 44,000 tonnes of octopus per year, well above the MSY of 35,000 tonnes!

Planning the Elimination of Mauritania's fisheries

In July 2001, while negotiations between Mauritania and the EU were underway, the FNP (*Fédération Nationale de Pêche*) of Mauritania had sent an official statement to Brussels. This recognised that “*the large-scale introduction of the EU's demersal fishing vessels in 1996 had plunged this national fishing sector into an unprecedented*

⁴ *on the basis of about 150-200 tonnes of octopus/unit/year*

crisis.” The FNP had therefore requested that cephalopod fishing be exclusively reserved for the national fleet from then on, and for the other types of fishing activities a fishing zone of at least 6 nautical miles be established.

An EU press release states that *«the fishing zone in which EU vessels are authorised has been moved further off the Mauritania's coastline so as to provide better protection for the local boats involved in local small-scale fisheries»*. But the “local small-scale fishery” depends mainly on the octopus and the new zoning scheme does not meet with its demands to put a stop to the access provided for octopus.

In spite of the new zoning, the new protocol of the agreement allows European fishing vessels to operate in the same fishing zone as the Mauritanian cephalopod vessels: from outside of 9 miles from the base line North of Cape Timiris; to outside 6 miles in the South.

The reality is that, given current returns and thanks to strong political and financial support, it is only the European vessels that can continue their operations. Mauritania's fishermen are thus being gradually eliminated.

Under these circumstances it is quite cynical for the European Commission to talk about the “sustainable development of the Mauritanian fishery”.

Squandering public funds?

The increase in the financial compensation seems spectacular at first sight: 430 million ecus spread over a period of five years (against the 267 million granted under the previous agreement). But, as stated in the Mauritanian newspaper, “L’Eveil”, at current exchange rates ($1\text{Ecu}=0.87\text{USD}$), this amounts to 374.5 million dollars whereas in 1996 the 267 million ecus provided under the previous agreement were worth 331 million USD ($1\text{Ecu}=1.24\text{USD}$). In dollar terms, therefore, this is only an increase of 43.5 million USD over 5 years (an average increase of 8.7 million per annum). Linked to this is a significant increase in fishing effort on octopus, with many negative consequences for the Mauritanian fishery: closure of national companies, sacrificing added value and thousands of jobs.

By signing this protocol, Mauritania risks compromising the long-term potential of the sector. This will reduce the rent the sector provides to financial compensation alone. Experts have estimated that, given good stock management, the

rent generated could be 100 million dollars annually for cephalopods alone!

The subsidies allocated by the EU to maintain a fleet that would not otherwise be profitable (given the depletion of the resource) also represent a waste of European public funds.

It is hard to accept that such a fleet, which would otherwise have no future, be kept “*on a life support system*”, especially because it implies the wiping out of the fisheries sector of one of the poorest countries of the planet.

It is important to remember that this fleet of European cephalopod trawlers has suffered quite a few setbacks in recent times, notably due to the non-renewal (announced in 1995!) of the EU-Morocco agreement. The additional demands of European ship-owners are not linked to new fishing opportunities in Mauritania but to the loss of the opportunities they enjoyed in Morocco.

Specific measures

“In order to guarantee sustainable fisheries” says the European Commission, “new provisions have been added to the protocol. Thus the state of Mauritania's marine resources will be monitored at regular intervals. Concerning cephalopods, a scientific meeting will be organised each year in conjunction with the National Centre for Oceanographic and Fisheries Research (CNROP). If required the fishing opportunities will be reviewed keeping in mind the opinion of the scientists consulted.” Given the remarkable consistency with which the EU has ignored CNROP's recommendations, this new provision is hardly going to reassure the sector.

Surveillance measures are going to be improved as well. This is a positive development but as one of the ambassadors of an EU member country put it, *“there is no point supporting surveillance if the pillaging of resources is allowed through legal means”*.

Lastly, a financial package has been earmarked for the artisanal fisheries sector. But is that what the sector really needs? In fact, thanks to BADE (African Development Bank) and AFD (French Development Agency), this sub sector is already over-funded!

Its problem is the scarcity of octopus, which is responsible for its bad performance and accumulation of debts. This has placed the local organisations that had pre-financed the pirogues and the fishing operations in difficulties!

To conclude, it can be said that this new protocol goes against all the international commitments of the parties concerned with respect to responsible fisheries and developmental aid. It shows that lofty principles carry very little weight in the face of the immediate interests of the European ship-owners.

There is reason to fear that Mauritania has allowed itself to be caught in a trap from which it will find it difficult to extricate itself.

Mauritania has signed away the future of her cephalopod and coastal demersal stocks. Given the state of over-exploitation of these resources, only the heavily subsidised EU vessels can continue their activities. This will lead inexorably to the disappearance of the national fleet. Mauritania will then be at the mercy of the EU for the exploitation of its resources. What bargaining chips will it then be left with?

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