

Perspectives of regional fisheries management in northwest Africa

Ad Corten, 30 September 2021

Attempts to manage fisheries in NW Africa on a regional basis go back a long time in history. The first organisation to be established for this purpose was the Committee for Eastern Central Atlantic Fisheries (CECAF) which was founded as a daughter organisation of FAO in 1967. Current membership of the organisation comprises 35 countries¹. The organisation has been active in coordinating scientific research but its achievements in managing international fish stock so far have been nil.

In 1985 the Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC or CSRP) was established with 7 member States: Cabo Verde, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Senegal and Sierra Leone. Although the number of countries in this organisation was more limited than in CECAF, the organisation so far has not been able either to arrive at binding international management agreements.

The most recently established international organisation for managing West African fisheries resources is COMHAFAT. This intergovernmental organization was founded in 1989 and comprises 22 countries from Morocco to Namibia. Like the two earlier mentioned organisations, COMHAFAT so far has not been able to establish binding international agreements in the fields of international management.

It is discouraging that despite these international efforts over several decades, not a single international management agreement has been concluded in West Africa so far. There are many possible explanations, but the most likely is the absence of political willingness by member states to delegate part of the sovereignty over national fish stock to an international organisation.

There has been no shortage of scientific advice in the area. Especially in northwest Africa, scientific research is relatively advanced, with modern institutes in Morocco and Mauritania. CECAF has been instrumental in coordinating scientific research and providing management advice. The problem, however, is that providing scientific research has little use when nobody is listening to the advice.

So far, West African governments have not been really interested in making efforts to jointly managing international fish stocks. They are not unique in this respect; similar problems were encountered in Europe at the time when the important North Sea herring stock was nearly extinguished in the 1970s. Governments are always reluctant to put restrictions on their fishery in order to preserve the stock for future generations. Conservation means sacrifices at the short term in order to obtain gains in the long run. As the time horizon of governments is no longer than the time to the next election, it is obvious what they will choose.

¹ Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Cabo Verde, Dem. Rep. of the Congo, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, European Union, France, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Greece, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Liberia, Mauritania, Morocco, Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Spain, Togo, United States of America

It is only at the moment when fish stocks have collapsed that sufficient political support arises. This situation now applies in the sardinella fishery in Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia. Here the problems have become so acute that governments realise that something has to be done. However, rebuilding a fish stock from a level of severe overexploitation requires a drastic reduction of effort over a period of several years. This presents major problems in case of an artisanal fishery where ten thousands fishermen are dependent upon the fishery for their daily living. In this case a major support programme is required to re-school the fishermen for other jobs, or help them to bridge the period of 2-3 years until the fishery can be resumed.

Considering the ineffectiveness of present international management organisations in West Africa, we cannot wait for several more decades until these organisations are capable of resolving current problems in sardinella. The best approach would therefore be to start international management on a small scale for this very specific project: the restoration and management of the joint sardinella in Mauritania and Senegal. This could be done by setting up a joint management committee between the two countries that has sufficient power and finances to take appropriate actions. The committee should also set up its own scientific working group independent of the CECAF small pelagics working group. The bilateral sardinella working group should be provided adequate resources to collect information and provide advice. It also should be in constant dialogue with the responsible managers.