

PECHEURS D'ESPOIR AU SENEGAL by Francois Bellec, ed. de l' Atelier (Collection Les Acteurs du Developpement), 12 ave Soeur Rosalie, 75013 Paris, 160p

The battle for fish

The story of the struggle of the Senegalese artisanal fishworkers is movingly narrated in this new book

A new book by Francois Bellec, *Pêcheurs d'espoir au Senegal* (Fishers of Hope in Senegal), has just been published in France. It tells the tale of the struggle of the Senegalese artisanal fishworkers. From a personal point of view, I must emphasize that, in ten years of work as an active fishworkers' supporter, it was the National Collective of Senegalese Artisanal Fishermen (CNPS) which gave me vital inspiration.

The fact that these fishermen decided to organize themselves independent of any governmental volition was crucial to my own commitment. One can work in 'development' jobs with a greater or lesser degree of conviction, but it is the combined efforts of the men and women like those who form part of the CNPS which make it worthwhile. Francois Bellec's book features these men and women, each in his or her place fulfilling a common dream, sharing the faith. Often the individual and collective achievements are far from perfect. *Pêcheurs d'espoir au Senegal* makes no secret of that.

The picture Bellec paints is full of the colours and smells of the narrow streets of St. Louis or Joal, of the humour of characters who spend their lives as part of the throng, apparently just 'getting by'; but these same passersby have time to live and teach us in the West a few lessons in humanity, if we ever get the chance to rub shoulders with them. They are people who have made friendship the basis of an international partnership with their French counterparts. They are also 'warriors', as Bellec's book emphasizes. Indeed, the struggle of the Senegalese

artisanal fishworkers often takes a more poignant collective form, as when women, for instance, are obliged to defend their right to process their fish on a secluded part of the beach, in opposition to the local hotel developers; or when the long-term negotiations on fair fisheries agreements must be sustained at international levels, despite unequal odds.

Overall, it is a historic struggle; a winning one, since time is of the essence. Here, the Muslim Senegalese are well-schooled: there is no rush, but when the job needs to get done, it does—peacefully as a rule, and philosophically.

Often, the book touches on the underlying hostility towards the CNPS in official circles. This is no doubt because the CNPS appears more and more as the real custodian of the Senegalese fishery resources. This is something that most governments can not achieve through public edict or administrative zeal.

There is usually a lack of political will, in the first place, as well as the authority to go with it, more than the mere lack of adequate material means. The trouble is that there are too many vested interests, as well as international pressures, to turn the fish stocks into easy money.

Essential pressure

When a 400,000-strong community decides to reverse this situation to safeguard its present and future livelihood, it can provide essential pressure. Its members are then considered subversive and the 'international community' is quick to close ranks.

This is what happened in 1992 when the socialist coalition in the European parliament backed the socialist president

for re-election by making sure that the grossly extravagant fisheries agreement (worth 32 million ECU at the time), which the CNPS opposed, was once more voted in. The CNPS were declared to be a 'risk to the political stability' of Senegal, and the money arrived just in time for the salaries of the long-suffering Senegalese functionaries.

The so-called 'battle for fish' is a real battle, sometimes fought put at sea, in the media, in offices, research centres and on the international stage. It is a battle which requires considerable courage on the part of the front-liners, because lives are at risk in a background of political uncertainty (not to speak of graft and corruption) extending around the world.

There is evidence that French and other European fleets fished off the coast of Senegal at least from the 16th century onwards. Subsequently, the colonial era laid the foundations of what is today a floundering Franco-Senegalese industrial fishing sector. The international Law of the Sea allows for the right of other countries to exploit and participate in the management of the fish stocks living in the waters of coastal states.

This has become referred to of late as the 'obligation to co-operate' and it is clear how the concept can be used by distant-water fishing nations to impose fishing licences on coastal states. A few years ago, a former Senegalese fisheries minister referred publicly to the "duty of co-operation", which has since become more stringent. More than ever, the international market is imposing its law.


In our view, we are increasingly witness to a new form of colonialism, since the EU is in desperate need of fish for its market, and of jobs for its fishermen (or rather, access to fish stocks for distant-water fleets). This does not prevent the European Commission's functionaries from turning around the accusation by claiming that commercial agreements are untied aid', that is to say, governments which sign fisheries agreements can do what they like with the money the EU dishes out in exchange for the right to fish - even if this money actually harms the local fishing community.

But whose money is it, in the first place? When will we, in Europe, wake up to the realization that it is our money that is being spent in the guise of public sector subsidies for commercial agreements, as well as for development aid?

Consequently, we must claim our right to make the EU accountable for its policies and actions. Let us hope Bellec's book serves to make the CNPS' struggle better known—and thereby underlines the EU's accountability. Also better known should be the partnerships built up with their Breton and Norman counterparts, who are experiencing problems tied to the internationalization of fisheries.

One of the individuals who features prominently in Bellec's book is Dao Gaye, general secretary of the CNPS, fisherman and international negotiator. In August 1993, I accompanied Dao on a visit to England and Ireland. If there is one thing we have retained from that journey, it is the acknowledgement by representatives of the maritime sector there that the CNPS was expressing something worth emulating in Europe. We were not talking to subversives, but to all ranks in the maritime establishment (even, in one case, an admiral). This was yet another indication that the CNPS was setting the pace, not only for the French as natural historical partners, but also for seafarers as a whole, reduced more often than not to a marginal social role.

Honourable struggle

Here was further proof that the CNPS' struggle was also that of the beleaguered fishermen of Europe, if only they would fully realize it. The struggle is also for the very survival of fishery resources for future generations. 

This review is by James Smith, Board Member, Fishing and Development Collective, Lorent, France and a member of ICSF.