

# The Black Hole in the Seas

In terms of human dimensions, illegal fishing in West Africa has several far-ranging implications for small-scale fishers and communities

**F**ishing is among the most unregulated commercial sectors in the world. On the one hand, it is replete with tradition and the promise of a livelihood, food and income, while, on the other, it suffers from a history of fraud, human abuse and trafficking. Fisheries provide a critical source of animal protein for over 3 bn people globally. Over 56.6 mn people earn an income and a livelihood from the ocean. Over 90 per cent of them operate within their adjacent waters and have limited opportunities to access fish.

In West Africa, where about 7 mn people depend directly on fishing as a source of income, this access is increasingly hindered by industrial

This article addresses these questions: What are the labour dimensions of illegal fishing in the region? How do West African fishers react or interact with illegal fishing vessels? How is their income affected?

Nearly 40 per cent of all the fish caught in West Africa originates from illegal fishing. This equates to a loss of US\$2.3 bn. In addition, illegal fishing is estimated to reduce the number of jobs in artisanal sectors by 300,000. Illegal fishing by distant-water fishing fleets is very difficult to assess, and known assessments are hampered by uncertainty. Yet it is increasingly felt that illegal fishing, as a facilitator of transnational crimes, has drastic consequences on fish stocks, economies, and on the livelihoods of fishing communities as a whole. It is often associated with drug trafficking, modern-day slavery, and even murder. Yet, in regions highly dependent upon fish, such as West Africa, illegal fishing vessels often find ways to escape, as they are highly mobile and develop ingenious escape techniques. Moreover, the limited monitoring capacity in the region hinders the ability to catch perpetrators.

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fleets which, often illegally, target areas that are otherwise reserved for small-scale fishers and their communities. Illegal fishing is worth US\$2.3 bn in the waters of six of the seven countries constituting the sub-region of northwest Africa (Mauritania, Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea and Sierra Leone), accounting for up to 20 per cent of the global loss from illegal fishing. It has been estimated that over 300,000 jobs were lost to illegal fishing in the region. Studies have found that poverty is increasingly affecting fishing communities which are responding in various ways to the impacts of illegal fishing and declining fish stocks.

## Policy improvement

Overall, illegal fishing in the West African sub-region has grown due to the increase in the activities of distant-water fishing fleets that are unauthorized to fish in the area (see Figure 1). This increase preceded the implementation of new Fisheries Acts for Senegal and Guinea in 2015, and the ban of all industrial fishing vessels from The Gambia by the end of the same year, a critical

improvement in the policies of the three nations.

Illegal fishing has both direct and indirect effects on the livelihoods of small-scale fishers in West Africa. Illegal vessels reduce the opportunity of artisanal fishers to access fish since these vessels engage in unmonitored—and often unsustainable—fishing of key species that are either of high export value or that contribute greatly to local food security. The end result is overexploitation and over-capacity. Illegal fishing vessels often operate in zones that are reserved exclusively for artisanal fishers. Incursions to prohibited zones rank fourth among over 23 types of offences in the sub-region, constituting 13 per cent of all infractions (see Figure 2). Both direct and indirect impacts on the small-scale fishing sector, which employs over half a million people in the sub-region alone, have drastic labour implications for the small-scale sector.

Illegal fishing fleets are often associated with questionable labour practices and abuses of human rights as witnessed in Thailand, for example, not to mention issues related to safety at sea and collisions with industrial vessels. Also of concern is the impact on incomes of fishermen and the availability of jobs throughout the value chain in fisheries .

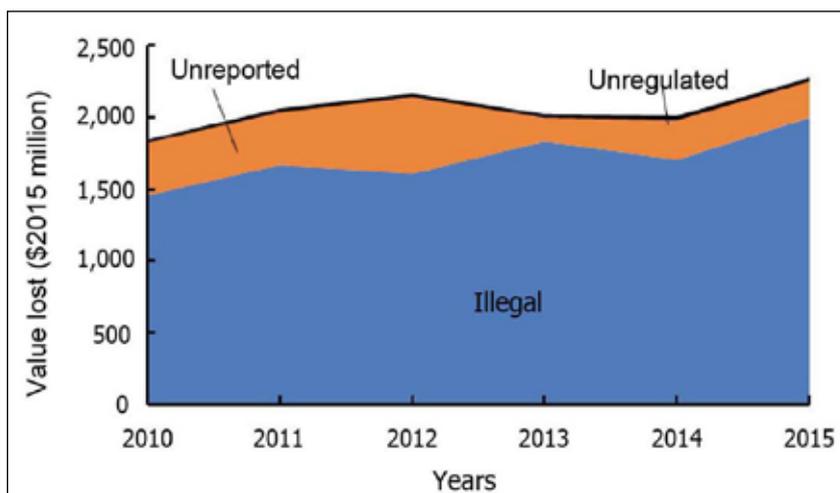


Figure 1. Evolution of illegal catch value from West Africa

Source: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2017.00050/full>

As evidence on the impacts of illegal fishing grows, and the unavailability of data covering the ‘small-scale’ fishing sector becomes striking, questions arise on the shifting geographic range of artisanal vessels. Consider the case of the artisanal Senegalese migrant *pirogue* fleet that has overgrown its traditional range and has quickly started spilling over into neighbouring countries, such as Mauritania, The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and beyond—often reaching as far as Angola in southwest Africa. Evidently, illegal fishing—defined as fishing by foreign fleets in the waters of a nation—is not a myth.

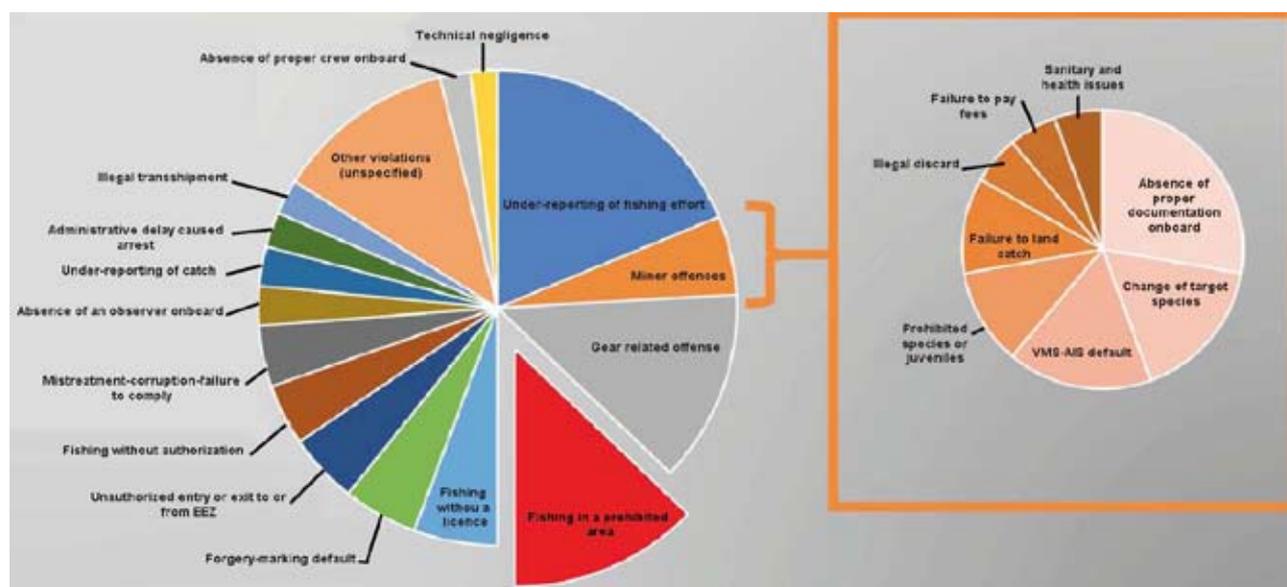


Figure 2. Illegal fishing offences in West Africa showing the types of observed offences

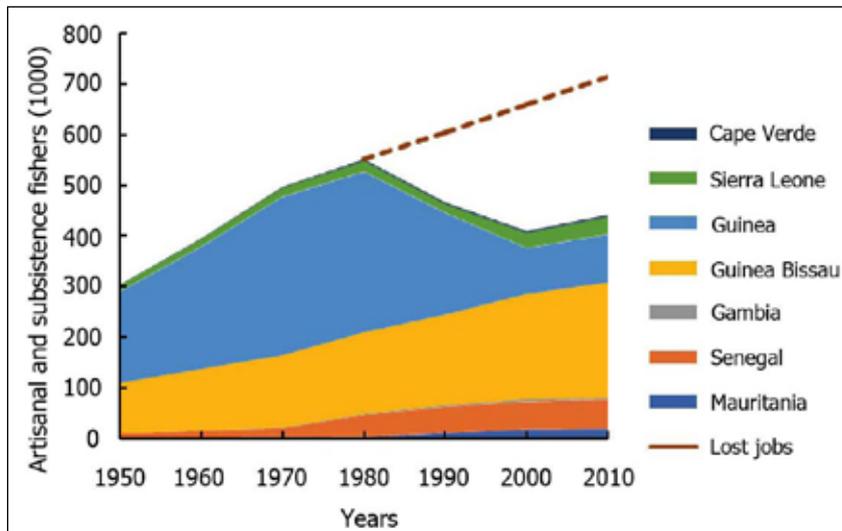


Figure 3. Evolution of the number of fishing jobs in the small-scale fishing sector in West Africa (subsistence and artisanal). Source: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2015.04.010>

As Senegalese fishers engage in increasing international forays, with *pirogues* that can bring in around one-third of the catch of a typical Chinese trawler, their total catch from foreign waters has reached a striking 40 per cent of all artisanal catches landed in the country. Yet, these catches are barely recorded, and never allocated to their rightful exclusive economic zones (EEZs), falling instead under the category of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. It is almost taboo to refer to this vital fishing sector as IUU; fishers believe that, as Senegalese waters are being plundered by foreign fleets—mainly operating illegally, with the exception of the tuna fleet—they are forced to migrate to compensate for the loss of fishing opportunity, as a sort of spillover effect.

The financial gains of illegal fishing, which are often higher than those of a typical *pirogue* operating in Senegal, are, however, offset by the increased risks of loss at sea, in addition to regulations related to host country monitoring and sanctioning. Artisanal fishers find themselves trapped when agreements that allow them to operate within the waters that have become part of their territory, are terminated, as happened in Mauritania in 1989 and 2016. Since the mid-2000s, another phenomenon has come to occupy the waters of West Africa.

Over 20 ‘mother ships’ (also called *ramasseurs*), which can carry on board, or tow, over 40 *pirogues* and 250 fishers have set anchor in Saint Louis, Senegal, from where they would embark with fishers, with often undisclosed and unread contracts, to go fish as far as Angola with no safety guarantees whatsoever. Fishers receive a meagre wage, which is, however, often higher than what they would receive had they stayed back in Senegal, but is much lower than that paid to the non-African crew. The fishers are also at the mercy of local laws—if, or rather when, they get caught fishing with their *pirogues*, they are abandoned to their fate at the hands of local authorities.

The artisanal fishing sector’s contribution to employment increased until the 1980s, after which it declined, driven by a major drop in the number of fishers in Guinea, the country commonly referred to as the “black hole of illegal fishing in West Africa”. The number of illegal fishers rose after the 2000s, due to increased subsistence fishing in Guinea-Bissau. The decline in the number of jobs cannot be directly associated with illegal fishing, as the grounds that were targeted back in the 1980s were not necessarily overlapping. However, as fish species migrate, the decline in fish stocks can be attributed in part to industrial overexploitation which has reduced the availability of fish for small-scale fishers. The expanding range of small-scale fishers (going farther at sea and for longer periods) has created a spatial overlap in addition to that caused by common incursions of industrial fleets into areas legally reserved for small-scale fishers. In addition, recent studies have shown a significant impact of unwanted catches (discards) on small-scale fisheries, whereas artisanal fishers target the species that are discarded by the industrial sector.

### Job losses

In Liberia, this generates a high loss for the artisanal sector while in Ghana, artisanal fishers have adapted their behaviour to benefit

from the discards of the Chinese fleets entering the trawl ban area to catch octopus, in the form of trade. It is estimated that, everything else being equal, if conditions are allowed, the small-scale fisheries sector could have generated an extra 271,800 jobs in the seven countries of the sub-region (see Figure 3), particularly if the fisheries of Guinea sustains the increasing trend while addressing the issue of IUU fishing within the EEZ of the country.

In addition to the loss of jobs, the daily income of fishers, which is already low, has been shrinking for the west coast of the African continent by 33 per cent, from US\$6 per day to US\$4 per day (adapted from Belhabib et al. 2015), hence dangerously approaching the poverty line (see Figure 4). However, in the sub-region of West Africa comprising the seven countries mentioned above, this income—although lower—has almost doubled from US\$2.4 to US\$4.5 per day. This is mainly driven by income increases in Senegal and The Gambia due to the expansion of the artisanal fishing fleet beyond their normal fishing range.

Incursions of industrial vessels into artisanal areas constitute the most threatening form of illegal fishing for small-scale fishers. In West Africa, these areas lie between zero and 12 miles off the coast. Vessels entering artisanal areas are often the cause of collisions at sea, the most prevalent form of accidents at sea that cause the greatest number of deaths. At least 250 lives are lost annually in the six countries mentioned above, which is much higher than the global average of 80 fishers for every 100,000 population. The death rate is notably highest in Senegal and Guinea, where artisanal fishers often venture far out. These numbers are believed to be a very conservative estimate, given that data are not properly reported or available.

In addition to the aspect of safety related to the risk of collisions, the other factor is the increasing distance that fishers now travel to access fishing grounds. This is the result

of the scarcity of resources within the traditional fishing range. Additional risks include accidents caused by engine failure, bad weather conditions, and getting lost at sea.

There is also the increased threat of piracy at sea, which may be a direct result of the lack of alternative sources of livelihoods, as is the case of Somalia. Small-scale fishing communities are becoming increasingly vocal about the need for a drastic change at sea, as they see their fisheries resources decline.

Artisanal *pirogues* have overgrown their traditional territories, and where once trips lasted five hours, the fishers now make forays into the waters of neighbouring countries, taking on up to 40 fishers on board a single *pirogue* for trips lasting up to ten days. As resources decline, the fishers are faced with an opportunity to access new fishing grounds and earn an income of up to US\$630 in one fishing trip.

This is in the form of around 20 Portuguese and Korean trawlers converted into mother ships, also commonly called '*ramasseurs*'. These vessels are of around 250 gross registered tonnes (GRT), which is of the size of an average EU or Chinese trawler; they carry on board the *pirogues* or tow them to the destination. Fishers are typically contracted by middlemen to engage in a one- to three-month fishing trip, with fishers and their *pirogues* being deployed in the waters of countries such as Angola and Gabon to fish on behalf of the *ramasseurs*. Though the fishers do earn an income, they often operate under poor conditions.

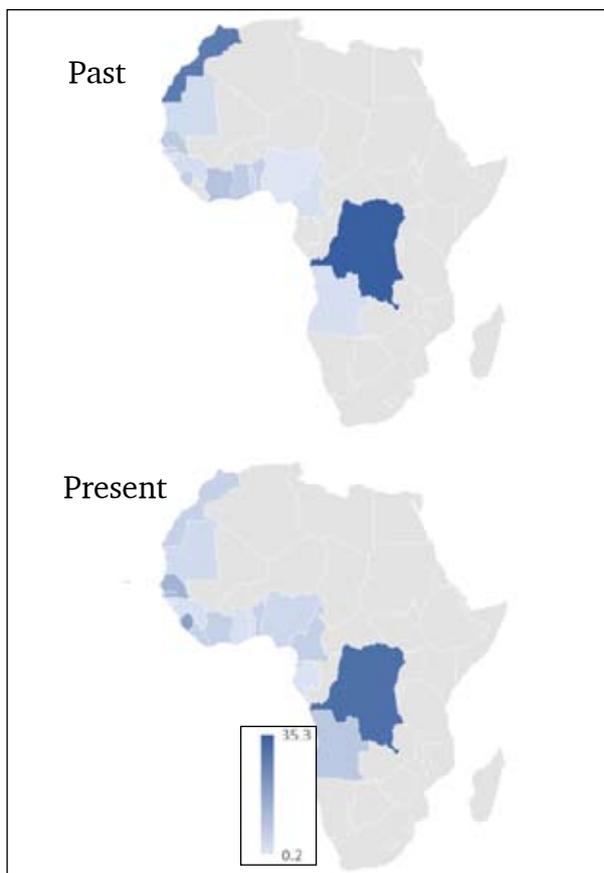


Figure 4. Fishers' daily income in West Africa  
Source: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2015.04.010>

These include:

- non-disclosure of contract and work conditions to fishers;
- long working hours (up to 16 hours daily);
- extremely poor hygiene conditions;
- lack of proper food and nutrition;
- insurance and other costs have to be covered by the fishers for their own *pirogues*;
- poor accommodation conditions on board *ramasseurs* (The sleeping area is one m in height and the fishers often sleep on cardboards.); and
- extremely poor safety conditions. Safety at sea is not of the responsibility of the *ramasseur's* skipper. If a fisher gets caught fishing in prohibited areas, or without an agreement (which is often the case), the skipper bears no responsibility.
- These conditions—particularly related to safety, hygiene and accommodation—call for legal sanctions under the laws of the countries in the sub-region, but the activities of the fishers within the waters of other countries need also be called into question. Not only do the *pirogues* lack legitimacy to operate within these waters in the absence of any agreement, but the identification of the catch, its origin, and its destination, are also often impossible to trace.

Under the 1956 UN Supplementary Convention (Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery)—there are six forms of modern-day slavery:

- Forced labour, where people are forced to work against their will and are threatened and punished for not accomplishing their work. This form is encountered in the fishing sector as well, with a hub in Thailand, where human trafficking for fishing businesses is prevalent.
- Debt bondage or bonded labour, which is the most common form of slavery, where people who cannot repay their debt are forced to work to repay it, and then become subject

to predatory practices where the debt increases and they lose control over their work conditions. This is common in the small-scale fishing industry around the lagoons of Ghana.

- Human trafficking, which is common in the industrial fishing business in Southeast Asia, where people are offered contracts to fish, and are recruited and transported, and then face exploitation, abuse, violence, threats, and even murder, if they do not accomplish their tasks, or try to escape;
- Descent-based slavery, which is an old form of slavery that has existed over the centuries, where people are brought into slavery because of their origin, and are usually captured and enslaved;
- Child slavery, which is an extreme form of child labour, and includes all forms that can hinder a child's development and education, with an individual getting all the benefits from exploiting the child. In the fishing sector, this form of slavery transpires through exploiting children on board small-scale fishing boats (particularly in Ghana and other countries in the Gulf of Guinea). This ought not be confused with the cultural practice of children inheriting fishing skills and learning the craft while fishing with their families, as in Africa and elsewhere; and
- Forced and early marriage, which is also a form of slavery that includes all child marriages.

As human lives are threatened, rights abused, and people trafficked into slavery, illegal vessels often remain undetected, and their activities get intensified by the lack of human and financial resources to monitor coastal waters. Surveillance efforts in developing countries are often handicapped by the lack of financial resources. Over 800,000 people are trafficked every year within different sectors internationally, bringing in a profit of over US\$32 bn to traffickers. Though information on the contribution of the fishing sector is scarce, evidence suggests that the



Landing of the catch, Senegal. In West Africa, where about 7 mn people depend directly on fishing as a source of income, access to fish resources is increasingly hindered by industrial fleets

fishing sector alone accounts for 50 per cent of all investigated cases. In 2015 alone, Indonesia rescued and repatriated over 2,000 fishers working on board 388 vessels, which testifies to the scale of the issue, not counting for other labour abuses that happen on board illegal fishing vessels. There has been no sanctions related to human slavery in the last seven years in the sub-region, not including cases of child labour, working to clear off outstanding debts, and sexual abuse.

Sanctions relating to mistreatment, and poor sanitary conditions represent 5 per cent of all sanctioned offences in the sub-region. This does not account for offences by other vessels that escape sanctioning or that are not captured by the monitoring system. Anecdotes show that non-compliant vessels engaged in illegal fishing exercise some form of human-rights abuses. The case of *Apsari-3* caught fishing illegally in Sierra Leone brought to light that the crew were not paid in cash but rather in unwanted fish, which would have been otherwise discarded. This seems to have become a standard practice

for distant-water fishing fleets; the question is how commonly this occurs, and whether it can be considered a violation of labour rights on a commercial scale.

I conclude by suggesting that, just as in Guinea and Senegal, sanctions against illegal fishing should be drastically revised, given the direct and indirect impacts on human lives, livelihoods and food security. Transparency should be increased with regard to both fishing agreements and illegal fishing cases themselves. In addition, transshipment of catches at sea should be banned, as it masks the real trends of fisheries catches, and allows unauthorized vessels to fish undetected. †

#### For more



<http://www.cape-cffa.org/new-blog/2008/12/5/west-african-artisanal-fishing-communities-facing-up-to-the-future>  
**West African Artisanal Fishing Communities: Facing up to the Future**

<https://www.interpol.int/content/download/27590/369574/.../WACS%20EN.pdf>  
**Study on Fisheries Crime in the West African Coastal Region**

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/conl.12360/pdf>  
**Trends in Industrial and Artisanal Catch Per Effort in West African Fisheries**

[https://www.icsf.net/images/reports/pdf/english/issue\\_1/chapter01.pdf](https://www.icsf.net/images/reports/pdf/english/issue_1/chapter01.pdf)  
**Report of the Study on Problems and Prospects of Artisanal Fish Trade in West Africa**

<http://researcherdiaries.com/>  
**Researcher Diaries—Dyhia Belhabib, Research Associate**