

Fisheries Partnership Agreements – Rebranding or a real step towards sustainability?

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During the notorious December negotiations of the Common Fisheries Policy, the Commission finally published the long expected communication on Fisheries Access Agreements with third countries. In order to increase socio-economic and biological sustainability, the 'cash for access' agreements are proposed to be replaced by Fisheries Partnerships Agreements (FPAs). Later this year, the Council of Ministers will have to decide on the actual content – WWF suspects that it could be a rebranding exercise, rather than a real move towards sustainability.

The Scene

The earth's fish stocks are declining. Due to fierce competition, the hunt for a share of the limited resource is intensified. African countries – many struggling against poverty and famine - sell out fishing opportunities to the over-capitalised European fleet. Instead of helping to lift the African fisheries sector into progress, the sell-out of fishing rights serves the interests of the heavily subsidized European fleet. Today, agreements exist with 20 countries and correspond to a Community – and European tax-payer - expense of 137 million euros per year.

What is the problem?

Since 1979, the EU has found compensation for declining domestic fishing opportunities by accessing the waters of countries outside the EU. Heavily subsidized, this export of capacity generates harsh and unfair competition, blocks the development of local fisheries, and leads to a heavy pressure on the fish stocks, many of them migrating along the African coasts.

If the world's fish stocks are to be managed within safe limits and if fisheries are to contribute to poverty alleviation and the strengthening of developmental countries in the world economy, the management of global fish stocks will have to plot a new course. Later this year, European fisheries ministers have a unique opportunity to do so!

Fair Fisheries Access Agreements

The Commission Communication was received with cautious approval by critics in both north and south. In contrast to the existing 'cash for access' agreements, the introduction of Fisheries Partnership Agreements (FPA) signals a new objective: To enhance coherence between fisheries and development policy objectives. The welcome remained cautious, however, because there is no indication of how this laudable objective will be reached.

In WWF's point of view, FPAs must contribute to a development towards sustainability, by finding ways to (1) conserve the third countries' resources and (2) to maximise economic and social benefits for the countries. Such contribution towards sustainability should lie within the framework of existing EU-ACP economic partnerships agreements (ACP = African, Carribean and Pacific states). WWF urge the Council of Ministers to agree on a binding framework resolving the following issues:

- Attaining sustainable fisheries is the general objective of future Fisheries Partnership Agreements.
- Coherence between policies towards third countries is strengthened.
- A binding framework for FPAs is adopted no later than 2005.
- FPAs are not concluded without an adequate environmental impact assessment.

- Financial contribution to EU vessels can not contribute to unfair competition with local fleets fishing the same stock.
- Fair access to European markets are granted for fish products from developing coastal states

In order to obtain conservation of marine resources, knowledge on spawning stock biomass, reproductive capacity, migratory routes and main fish mortality parameters are fundamental. Such data is not currently available. For the existing agreements, there is *no* limit on catches (except for some prawn agreements). Additionally, control and enforcement is lacking and there is little incentive to report catches. In the case of tuna, the EU fishermen's own contribution to the access fee is based on amount of tuna caught, which is a clear incentive to under report the catches. Additionally, provisions for taking on observers and report landings are of non-binding character. Improvement of regional scientific assessments and development of proper management plans are paramount. To reach that, a binding framework regarding report of landings and measures to prevent illegal fisheries must be adopted.

To maximise the economic and social benefits for ACP countries, a forum for dialogue between equal partners must be created, which gives room for long-term considerations of development and sustainability. Presently, the negotiators of both ACP countries and the EU are under too strong pressure from short-term interests. The Commission negotiators are under a great pressure from the domestic European producers of fish products and the fishing industry at large. Currently, 60% of fish products consumed in the EU come from outside EU waters, without continued supply the EU producers are threatened by supply deficiency. ACP negotiators on their side, experience that fisheries agreements often become part and parcel of a larger diplomatic package, where reluctance to conclude a fisheries agreement has important consequences in other political fields. Additionally, for many ACP countries, the euros earned by the receiving countries from fisheries agreements with the EU account for a not insignificant part of the national budget. The establishment of fisheries agreements should be based on dialogue on equal terms, based on a shared of obtaining sustainable fisheries in the long-term interest of both parties. Thus, the principles of Economic Partnership Agreements negotiated under the Cotonou Agreement and EU development policies should be the foundation of EU-ACP fishery relations.

A way forward is to relocate the negotiation processes from the bilateral financial forum, to a forum integrating various political sectors; giving voices to a wider selection of interest groups.

Are changes likely to occur?

The long delay of the Commission Communication, presenting the FPA concept, can only be taken as a clear sign of fundamental conflicts between EU policies and strategies. Added to the fact that action points are a glooming hole in the tabled Communication – the suspicion of just another rebranding exercise seems evident.

Finally, it is unfortunately necessary to remind European fisheries ministers of the commitments made by their heads of state or government in Johannesburg: To achieve sustainable fisheries, to restore fishstocks to levels that can provide maximum sustainable yield, and to eliminate subsidies that contribute to overcapacity.

Box 1: Conclusions on existing access agreements, reported by the EU Green Paper on Fisheries
- Due to unsatisfactory control and surveillance procedures the fishing mortality and by-catches generated by the EU fleet is unknown.

- Due to lack of proper biological stock assessment, political circumstances and third country's dependency on financial contribution, the agreements are not based on a sound foundation.
- Due to lack of flexibility the access agreements can not respond quickly to emergency measures.
- Some agreements do not protect the interests of small scale fisheries and coastal communities.

EU Green Paper on Fisheries, 2000

Box 2:

“We still don't see what advantages there might be for us from the agreements signed last June between the Senegalese government and the European Union. However we are not totally opposed to them in principle; but they do have to take into account the rational management of fishery resources, ensuring that when signing agreements with a country, action is taken to preserve fishery resources” (Amadou Wade, FENAGIE, Senegal)

Source: WWF, West African Marine Eco-Region (WAMER).

Box 3:

In Senegal, the first country to have signed a fisheries agreement with the EU in 1979, fisheries is very important: It provides 15% of the national employment, is responsible of 30% exports, and represents 12% of the GDP. Artisanal fisheries provides 60% of the landings.

Source: Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, Beatrice Gorez