

A Spectre that Haunts Fisheries

Individual transferable quotas are prescribed to reduce fleet capacity in the Octopus fishery of Mauritania, but capacity is not structural as in Europe

In May 2006, three years after discussions between key local actors and a panel of international experts from countries like Australia and New Zealand, where fisheries are managed by individual transferable quotas (ITQs), a management plan for the octopus fishery was adopted by Mauritania.

Management of this fishery is more than necessary, given its economic predominance, and the decline in profits in recent decades. The outputs from the international working group of the Mauritanian

of fishery resources, and in maximizing the potential economic benefits of octopus resources.

The Octopus Plan also suggests the introduction of ITQs as the solution to these problems, conditional on the implementation of an impact study, programmed for 2007, but which has yet to be carried out.

Nevertheless, in the “Strategic Fisheries Framework 2008 - 2012” it is stated that for the Octopus Plan, “the aim of regulation and capacity-adjusting measures is, through a system of ITQs, to reduce, in a sustainable way, the fishing capacity targeting octopus so as to attain a balance that assures resource sustainability and the optimization of rent”. So, without going through the planned step of an impact evaluation, the adoption of ITQs has become effective.

The principal objective of the Octopus Plan is to maximize the benefits (in terms of resource rent) extracted from the natural octopus resources, while respecting the constraints of environmental, economic and social sustainability of fisheries activities.

The aim is to reduce the fishing capacity that targets octopus—currently around 40 per cent in excess—to attain a balance that guarantees the sustainability of resources and the optimization of the rent that is extracted.

Strengthening management

To achieve this, a series of steps are envisaged. First of all, to strengthen existing management, a monitoring system and an annual review of the plan are to be put in place, and a

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Institute for Marine and Oceanographic Research (IMROP), corroborated by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Fisheries Committee for the Central Eastern Atlantic (COPACE), show that octopus is increasingly overexploited, with an excess of effort, which rose from 25 per cent in 1998 to 31 per cent in 2002.

According to the Octopus Plan, the government should have tried to curb this overcapacity. However, its attempts have not worked, because they are based on traditional methods of managing fishing effort, which have demonstrably failed wherever they have been used since they are ineffective in curbing overexploitation

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method for fixing fishing possibilities introduced. This is to be based on an evaluation of the allowable catches, undertaken twice yearly during the two regulatory biological rest periods in the octopus fishery (October-November and May-June) and the fixing of the total allowable catch (TAC) for the following season. There are also measures governing the improvement of the system to regulate catches (electronic log books, vessel monitoring systems, compulsory use of landing centres arranged for artisanal fishing) and technical management measures designed to protect juveniles (biological rests, mesh size, zoning, minimum allowable size, etc.).

The plan equally has implications for the different fleets targeting octopus, and for controlling catching capacity. It envisages freezing the capacity of European cephalopod vessels, reconverting excess national capacity to other fisheries that are underexploited such as small pelagics, and freezing capacity in the artisanal fishery.

The plan also has two secondary objectives. The first is to favour the managed development of coastal and artisanal fisheries, by freezing the number of canoes and restricting artisanal activities within an enlarged, but well-defined, coastal area.

The second is to accrue value addition in the country; but this objective is not considered a priority, given the risks of overexploitation that it could provoke and given that the sustainability of production is not guaranteed. It is worth highlighting here that this takes the opposite view to that of 'fishing less, but earning more', where the creation of local added value may compensate for the decline in revenues associated with a voluntary reduction in fishing capacity. Allowing distant markets to extract added value is a model that has shown its limits: distant markets, which control value addition and demand for raw materials, in general, exert greater fishing pressure on resources.

Once this framework is in place, the Octopus Plan foresees the

implementation of several different elements necessary to enable the system to be shifted towards managing catches, based on ITQs. The main advantage of this system, according to its promoters, is that it provides a genuine possibility for controlling product flows. This system should allow "the extraction of resource rent, where an equitable sharing must be guaranteed between public and private sectors", between fishers and the State.

The plan envisaged putting ITQs into place in the second quarter of 2008, beginning with the national industrial sector. For the most part, five years after its adoption, the Octopus Plan has not been implemented, apart from the two biological rest periods. It would, therefore, seem premature to say whether or not the introduction of ITQs for managing this fishery has been positive, given that the first stages of the plan, particularly the provisional evaluation designed to fix the TAC, must take place over four years, and its start date is not yet fixed.

Meanwhile, one can already note several lacunae in the plan, some of which may well prevent its success. In the first place, we must cite the inadequate analysis of key factors, notably, how the national fleet is comprised: its origin, its funding, its management, its crew composition,

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Small-scale octopus pot fishermen fishing at Nouadhibouâ, Mauritania. Artisanal fishing for octopus currently provides 80 per cent of the jobs in the entire fisheries sector

all elements that could provide useful information from the point of view of introducing ITQs.

The creators of the Octopus Plan are wrong in describing the problem of overcapacity, derived from a comparison with what is happening in Europe, as a structural phenomenon which the Mauritanian government had tried, without success, to get rid of. In Mauritania foreign vessels are authorized to fish despite the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which oblige foreign fleets to fish only the surplus resources that cannot be exploited locally.

The problem of overcapacity in Mauritania is a direct consequence of the financial requirements of the government, linked to structural adjustment programmes. The government sees the financial compensation associated with the fisheries agreement with the European Union (EU), which allows a fleet of Spanish cephalopod vessels to fish in Mauritania, as a rapid way to respond to these financial needs, and the interests of the European fishing fleet

has its limits. Due to lobbying pressure from industrial fisheries, TACs are often set at levels above what can be caught. Another aspect is that operators tend to discard into the sea species for which they have already fished their quota: in fact, the quotas only apply to the volumes landed, and so have absolutely no limiting effect on the quantities caught and then discarded.

Finally, one of the most important questions is how to share the quotas amongst the different users. An allocation based on poor research could skew competition between sectors and compromise the priority for developing coastal and artisanal fishing. Artisanal and coastal fishing for octopus currently provides 80 per cent of the 40,000 jobs in the entire fisheries sector, and supplies work for around 40 factories and 15 small workshops producing canoes and fishing gear.

The artisanal octopus fishery also provides the best quality products for export and is recognized as the most apt for maximizing the resource rent. It has proven its competitiveness compared to industrial fleets, and it accounts for more than half of the octopus production.

However, it has failed to expand due to an arbitrary and premature distribution of TACs. In fact, in 2006, on the basis of 'historic catch records' over the period 2000-05, it had been envisaged to reserve only 4,000 tonnes of octopus out of a total TAC of 30-35,000 tonnes. On the basis of the share-out proposed, the industrial trawler owners, despite their harmful impact on resources and the marine environment (destruction of undersea hills and rocks around Cap Blanc, huge quantities of rejected fish and marine animals), get the lion's share.

Early development

The lesson to draw from this is that, in a general sense, in a fisheries sector which is still in the early stages of its development, the introduction of ITQs could constitute a hurdle to the natural development of different segments, notably the

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override the imperative of managing the octopus resources sustainably. The question, therefore, arises as to whether the introduction of ITQs will bolster this foreign overcapacity to remain in Mauritanian waters, thanks to the possibility of acquiring quotas, to the detriment of a managed development of the local coastal and artisanal fleet.

Another weak point is the fact that, essentially, the Octopus Plan is constructed around the annual fixation of the TACs by species and fishing zones, and through quotas. As has been shown in many fisheries that use this system, notably in Europe, the TAC and quota system



Industrial fishing vessels anchored off Nouadhibou harbour, Mauritania. Overcapacity in Mauritania's fisheries is a direct consequence of the financial requirements of the government

artisanal fishing sector, by fixing them in their current state.

Another problem with the national trawler fleet, which is of foreign origin (Chinese and European), targeting octopus is the huge opacity that prevails in the sector. This opacity is not new. In 1988, the fraudulent registration of 30 Spanish cephalopod vessels was discovered, which led to the imprisonment of two ministers (responsible for fisheries and finance) and the Governor of the Central Bank.

In 2005, a study financed by German Co-operation (GTZ) found that the status of 100 cephalopod vessels was irregular. Up to now, no strong measures have been taken, and the registry and ownership of the 130 national cephalopod vessels are still hazy. Often derelict, these trawlers have been acquired secondhand by some businessmen who obtained 'acquisition permits' from their friends in high places, and for whom fishing is not a way of life, but a tool for speculation.

If the registration of vessels and the provision of licences and the conditions set for catching octopus by these trawlers are not made transparent, there is no doubt that the introduction of ITQs will only serve to favour such speculation, to the detriment of establishing sustainable fishing.

These questions, prompted by the eventual future introduction of ITQs in the Mauritanian octopus fishery, point to the need for, above all else, the planned impact study, with the

participation of all the actors in the sector.

The Octopus Plan consultative technical working group, in its final synthesis report of 2004, concludes, amongst other things: "The system of user rights which is currently enjoying the most success worldwide is the ITQ system, but this system is not always feasible... experts conclude that, given the characteristics of the Mauritanian fishery, such a system is feasible if the Government decides on it (and if the actions envisaged in the first part of the plan are undertaken). It is, therefore, advisable to deepen discussions and studies so as to identify the system which is best suited to Mauritania."

For more



www.imcsnet.org/imcs/docs/mauritania_fishery_profile_apr08.pdf

Mauritania fisheries profile

www.odinafrica.org/learn-about-odinafrica/74-mauritania

IMROP

firms.fao.org/firms/resource/10132/en

Marine Resource Fact Sheet: Octopus Mauritania