GOLD FROM THE SEA

Although Mauritania, on the north-west coast of Africa, has some of the continent’s most abundant fishing grounds, the profits from fishing have mainly gone to other national fleets. But this is about to change: Mauritania is keen to utilise more of its fishing potential – a move which could create many new jobs.

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At the fish market in the Mauritanian capital Nouakchott, the women traders are busy showing off their wares. In front of them, squid, mackerel, gilthead bream and grouper are displayed in polystyrene boxes on melting layers of ice. The smell of fish assails the senses of the afternoon customers, here to buy for their restaurants, hotels and shops. The traders place the fish on large wooden blocks and fillet them deftly, wielding their long knives with ease. Outside, just a few steps from the market hall, countless boats are pulled up in long rows on the beach. Waves crash on the shore. Fishing boats, large and small, can be seen out on the Atlantic. They’re still fishing and won’t return to Nouakchott until nightfall.

The wage depends on the catch

Today, there’s less fish for sale than usual. Many of the fishermen have had to remain on shore. Djibi Ba is one of them. Most days, he goes out on one of the boats – brightly painted simple wooden pirogues, rather like canoes – so long as the weather holds. But today it’s too windy; the waves are too big, he says. So he and his friends are hanging out around the boats, killing time. Djibi Ba wears tattered light grey jeans, battered flip-flops, and a black T-shirt with a Prada logo. It’s a fake, of course – he doesn’t have the money to buy the genuine article. He’s simply an extra pair of hands on board and he doesn’t earn very much, unless they bring in a particularly large catch. He learned his fishing skills from his older crewmates. He has no navigation skills, he says – he simply provides some muscle power. His dream is to have a boat of his own one day. Tomorrow, the weather should improve, so he’ll be setting out to sea at dawn – with 25 other men, all crammed into the slender boat like sardines. Why so many? It takes a large crew to haul in the nets when they’re full of fish – if they catch anything.

Mauritania’s fishermen face growing competition. Their government has signed fisheries agreements with Japan and China, and there’s also an agreement with the European Union; negotiations on the catch quotas are still ongoing. The local boats look as small as nutshell alongside the large trawlers from the international fishing fleet. Mauritania does not have a long tradition of fishing, and fish has never really formed part of the national diet.

In this north-west African country, average annual per capita fish consumption amounts to around four kilos – compared with 16 kilos in Germany. For centuries, the nomadic tribes depended on livestock. They were never drawn to the sea. It was not until the major drought in the Sahel in the 1970s killed thousands of herds that people moved to the coasts and fishing became something of a growth industry. Mauritania has some of the most abundant fishing grounds in Africa, for the water here is particularly rich in nutrients. But there are signs that stocks of some species, such as octopus, are already overexploited. It’s mainly the local fishermen who catch squid, either with trawl nets or with locally manufactured plastic pots. Since the 1990s, licences have been granted under the fisheries agreement with the EU. However, there was a reduction in the number of licences under the last Protocol, and the new Protocol does not specify any total number of licences.

Satellite surveillance

The Mauritanian coastguard now uses a satellite-based vessel monitoring system (VMS) to ensure that only licensed trawlers operate in waters under Mauritanian jurisdiction. The VMS and its onshore monitoring stations were established with funding from the German development bank KfW.

At a monitoring station, an ochre-coloured two-storey building in Nouakchott, three uniformed men gaze at their screens. A map of the coastline is displayed. Flashing dots appear, with the names and coordinates of the vessels. As Lieutenant Sidi Mohamed Némane explains, illegal fishing is not a problem. With the aid of the technology, he and his colleagues are alerted to vessels that are fishing in prohibited areas. If any of the dots on the digital map looks suspicious, speedboats are sent out to check the vessel in question.

Just one kilometre from the monitoring station and the main fish market, a women’s
cooperative runs a small fish-processing facility. Female workers in white overalls are busy at a long table, gutting gilt-head bream and other types of fish. Forty-five-year-old Nedwa Nech is the director of Mauritanie 2000, a development NGO which runs the fish-processing plant and 11 shops in Nouakchott. The cooperative is so successful that it now operates its own fishing vessels, crewed by male employees. To qualify for support from Mauritanie 2000, women must meet a number of criteria: for example, they must send their children to school. The women have the chance to set up their own businesses: Mauritanie 2000 provides micro-loans for budding female entrepreneurs – with a 100 per cent repayment rate so far, says Nedwa Nech. On some of its projects, Mauritanie 2000 cooperates with other organisations, such as Oxfam and, indeed, GIZ. ‘Without us women, the fish would never get to market,’ says Nedwa Nech. She and some of her colleagues came up with the project idea in response to the dearth of fish in local markets. For years, almost the entire catch was exported. Anyone wanting to buy fish in Nouakchott would usually only get remaining catch that was not fit for export – even though Mauritania’s coastal waters are teeming with fish.

Rich in resources

‘The country is incredibly rich in resources,’ says Ulf Löwenberg. A fisheries expert for GIZ, he works for the ‘Sustainable management of fishery resources’ project, commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). His task is to advise Mauritania’s Ministry of Fisheries and several of its subordinate authorities on issues such as the development of management plans and the installation of a fisheries information system. The aim is to make fishing more sustainable and safeguard transparency in the granting of access rights.

Ulf Löwenberg has worked in fisheries for decades. He studied marine biology in Hamburg, writing his dissertation on eel populations in the North Sea. But afterwards, he was drawn to more distant waters. He worked in the Seychelles for many years, and also in Mauritania on a previous occasion, from 1993 to 1998, when he was seconded to the Ministry of Fisheries. He has a good network of contacts around the country. He knows the fishermen, the officials in the ports and the markets, as well as the business people who are setting up an oyster farm with GIZ’s support.

Modern fishing vessels are floating factories. The catch is often processed on board, or prepared for use in the food industry in Asia, Europe and Africa before it is landed. ‘Processing and the generation of value-added don’t take place here in Mauritania,’ says Löwenberg.

Sustainable management of fisheries

Project: Sustainable management of fishery resources
Commissioned by: German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Partner: Ministry of Fisheries and Maritime Economy of Mauritania
Overall term: 2010 to 2013

The fishing industry is a major employer in Mauritania. However, national and international fishing fleets are overexploiting the fishing grounds, jeopardising marine ecosystems and, above all, economic development. With international support, Mauritania has developed a sustainable management strategy for its coastal waters with the aim of achieving a better balance between the conservation and use of its resources. On behalf of BMZ, GIZ is advising the Government of Mauritania on drafting management plans that stipulate quotas and when and where each species can be fished, and establish closed seasons to protect the most important and endangered species. A database has been set up to network all the available information, and a national advisory council promotes dialogue between fisheries authorities, companies and private individuals engaged in fishing.

In addition, the German development bank KfW is funding a satellite-based vessel monitoring system (VMS) with patrol boats and radar stations to enforce no-fishing zones and catch quotas. By using its fish stocks sustainably, Mauritania can secure around 40,000 jobs for the long term, including jobs in artisanal fishing, thus helping to reduce poverty.
There are very few canneries, and ready-meal manufacturers are also in short supply. At present, the fishing industry provides around 40,000 jobs, but this could increase if more of the catch were processed in Mauritania itself. Under the new Protocol with the EU, all foreign bottom trawlers must land their catch at Nouadhibou, where the fish are sorted and placed on ice. This will give Mauritania more opportunity to check whether international partners are keeping to the catch quotas and should create more jobs in Mauritania itself.

In Iwik, a few hours’ drive from Nouadhibou, almost all the local people depend on fishing. The village, located in Banc d’Arguin National Park, enjoys a special privilege: only local people are permitted to fish here in the Park, and the number of boats is restricted. Overfishing shouldn’t be a problem.

A small fishing fleet sets out from Iwik. As the wind fills the sails, Iveco Mohammed stands on deck and turns his face to the breeze. Fishing is his life. He has worked on large fishing vessels, but he also has the skills needed to fish with small nets in the National Park. The 52-year-old worked on fishing boats in the GDR and was employed on the French and Spanish fleets. Now he works for the Park. A young fisherman makes tea. Another fries some dried fish on a charcoal grill. The smell of the barbecued fish wafts across the boat. As soon as it’s ready, Iveco Mohammed hands the plate around. Gold from the National Park, he calls it. ‘Once you’ve tasted it,’ he says, biting into the white flesh, ‘you can’t get enough of it.’ And that doesn’t just apply to the Park’s visitors. The busy fish market in Nouakchott where some of the catch from Iwik lands, with its hustle and bustle and the haggling between traders and customers, and the hundreds of fishermen waiting for their next voyage are clear signs that the Mauritanians are starting to value their gold from the sea.

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Local business people have set up an oyster farm. Satellite-based monitoring ensures that only licensed trawlers operate in waters under Mauritanian jurisdiction. Fish is now far more readily available in local markets, like this one in the capital Nouakchott.