



GULF OF GUINEA MARITIME INSTITUTE

GoGMI – International Maritime Security Working Group Virtual Series Report

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INTERNATIONAL MARITIME SECURITY WORKING GROUP FORUM TO COMMEMORATE INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE FIGHT AGAINST IUU FISHING

**TITLE: IUU AS THE NEW EPICENTRE OF MARITIME
INSECURITY IN THE GULF OF GUINEA**

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BACKGROUND

The Gulf of Guinea is plagued by an extensive array of maritime security threats; however, regional and international debates have often centered on piracy and armed robbery at sea, especially since these criminalities have made the Gulf the most dangerous region for seafarers.

Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing is often considered as a predominantly environmental/conservation concern, as opposed to a maritime security threat. The implications of this conceptualisation of IUU are as extensive as they are problematic. First, it implies that maritime security threat paths are often constructed without consideration of the nexus between illegal fishing and other maritime criminalities in the region. It also implies that IUU fishing more easily provides a grey area within which transnational criminal networks can operate.

It is not surprising then that IUU fishing has recently emerged as Africa's primary maritime security threat. The canker costs Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Mauritania an astonishing \$2.3 billion a year. Moreover, estimates show that close to half a million jobs have been lost to IUU fishing in the West African sub-region alone. In Ghana, overfishing has led small pelagic fish stocks to the brink of collapse.

Beyond the notable facts of the devastation caused by IUU in the West African sub-region, a shift in the IUU narrative to an understanding of the dualistic nature of the threat to both the marine environment and maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea is highly essential to adapting the most effective approaches to tackling the concern.

The paragraphs below provide a summary of the dialogue that took place during the forum and provides highlights of the major recommendations from the panelists.

DISTANT WATER FISHING FLEETS AND IUU IN THE GULF

Reduction in fisheries catch due to impacts of climate change and pressures on fish stocks across different parts of the world has resulted in the globalization of fishing activities – a phenomenon that extends engagement in IUU fishing beyond artisanal fisherfolk to distant water fishing fleets. As a result, West African waters have continued to experience a continual influx of Chinese and European vessels that engage in illegal fishing activities from overfishing to non-reporting of fish stock.

Beyond the significant biodiversity loss from IUU fishing, it has become increasingly evident that illegal fishing activities have broader implications for maritime insecurity in the region, including aggravating incidents of human rights abuses, tax evasion, piracy and drugs, arms, and human trafficking.



SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

From socio-economic perspectives, the depletion of fish stock can lead to food insecurity in more vulnerable populations where fish is a main source of animal protein, which is largely the case across West Africa. In Sierra Leone, for instance, 80 percent of animal protein intake is from fish. However, a recent Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) mission report about Africa revealed that the continent is currently the only place recording a decrease in fish consumption per capita, likely due to depleting stocks and the consequent scarcity of fish in local markets.

Despite being on the brink of collapse, the fishing industry contributes substantially to the GDP of countries in the region. In Mauritania, fishing represents more than 20 percent of export commodities, which is a huge income earner for the country. What remains clear is that in the absence of IUU, the contribution of fisheries to the GDP of African countries is likely to increase marginally. IUU fishing practitioners often compete unfavorably with legal fishers as in the case of tax evasion. Consequently, it has extremely adverse effects on the economies and of developing countries, removing billions of dollars worth of fish every year from the legal trading system.

INTERSECTIONS WITH OTHER FORMS OF TRANSNATIONAL ORGANISED CRIME

IUU can be classified as transnational organised crime because of its cross-jurisdictional implications across flag states, port states or coastal states and the states of its perpetrators. Beyond this, however, visible linkages exist between IUU fishing and other forms of transnational organised crime. As a clear example, there have been reported cases of trawlers flying flags of convenience, which are often used to carry drugs. On 1 April 2022, 5668kg of cocaine was seized onboard a fishing boat in Cabo Verde. The vessel was from Brazil and was intercepted by a joint patrol team involving authorities from Cabo Verde, UK, US and Brazil. Again, fisherfolk from Senegal threatened to engage in acts of piracy as the case of Somalia if foreign vessels don't stop plundering their waters. Thus, in an eminent vicious cycle, fishers who have lost their jobs sometimes end up involved in IUU fishing, maritime piracy, drug trafficking or engaging in smuggling illegal immigrants.



INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS AND RESULTING COMPLEXITIES

Over the past decade, the international community has been actively involved in maritime security interventions in the Gulf of Guinea region, presenting a unique conundrum to addressing competing interests in the region. While interventions have largely focused on addressing piracy and armed robbery at sea, this is seldom the primary concern for several coastal states in the region. What is crucial therefore, is the need to identify overlaps between African interests and the interests of regional partners from the international community.

Many studies have shown that piracy does not happen in the vacuum but rather is a symptom of a much bigger problem. The intricate linkages between criminal activities such as piracy, fuel smuggling, IUU fishing and other maritime criminalities prove why many attempts to solve these issues in isolation have proven futile.

Thankfully, a good number of non-governmental organizations across the region support government agencies by providing expertise on various concrete issues to address specific problems. In many cases, particularly in the fishing sector, partnerships with non-governmental organizations and commercial companies tend to work better than with governments, largely because the former are more likely to address the concrete issues. Moving forward, partnerships toward addressing maritime security challenges should have clearly defined goals that take into consideration the unique dynamics of the region and the interests of the states and coastal communities they intend to support.

THE ROLE OF INTELLIGENCE GATHERING AND INFORMATION SHARING

Maritime security challenges in the region cannot be adequately addressed without intelligence. As far as IUU fishing is concerned, Gulf of Guinea states should have the capability to know who is engaged in illegal activities in their waters. Unfortunately, state authorities have not been able to take pragmatic steps to acquire information and intelligence to support targeted and focused efforts even on a few vessels. It is worth noting, though, that Global Fishing Watch provides an extensive and intensive survey of all exclusive economic zones and adjacent high seas 24 hours a day.

Regarding the practicalities of IUU fishing, efforts against the criminal activity are not well understood at the ministerial level. Until a broad segment of the political elites understand the problems posed by IUU fishing, efforts to address the persistent challenges will largely be unsustainable.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The panel made the following recommendations on what needs to be done at national, regional and/or global levels to ensure that IUU fishing in the Gulf of Guinea is effectively addressed.

1. Sustainable investment that addresses IUU fishing should be encouraged.
2. Marine protected areas should be created to provide safe havens for fishes to recover from overfishing.
3. Regional frameworks like the Yaoundé Code of Conduct should be invested into and implemented efficiently by Gulf of Guinea states to tackle the issues of IUU fishing.
4. Political will should be garnered at national level across African states to develop and promote sustainable fisheries practices.
5. Fisheries authorities should institute and enforce regulations that will enhance transparency in the issuance of fisheries licenses.
6. At the sub-regional and regional level, the two fisheries management commissions based in Senegal and Ghana should be efficiently resourced to improve the technical and human capacities of the two regional maritime security coordination centers; CRESMAO in Abidjan and CRESMAC in Pointe Noire. This would further make the code of Yaoundé Code of Conduct more operational and the utilization of resources a reality.
7. The existence of free remote sensing and monitoring tools like the Global Fish Watch should be accessed by national authorities.
8. At the international level, the European Union should continue to support efforts at combatting maritime insecurity and adopt strong measures against weak governance in the fight against IUU fishing.
9. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and coastal communities should be considered as main actors in the fight against IUU fishing. Members of CSOs in the fishing sector, particularly women and children, should be empowered in the face of the damages caused by IUU fishing. This support should not be limited to advocacy efforts but extended to fish processing and marketing equipment and resources.

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