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“Small but Ambitious”

Artisanal Sole fishery improvement and certification initiative in The Gambia, West Africa.

Key Highlights

1. Sole fish is a highly commercialized fish in The Gambia and employs more than 5000 people with an annual landing of close to 2000 Metric tons.
2. Management of Sole fishery is through a co-management system led by the National Sole Co-Management (NASCOM). The country is one of the first in West Africa to have such a fishery management structure its Fishery Act of 2007.
3. The Gambian Sole fishery is the first small-scale fishery in Africa to have attempted the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) blue eco-label pre-assessment through the support of several transnational and local actors.
4. The sole fishery is now part of the MSC-Fishery improvement projects (FIP) to help the fishery move towards sustainability and MSC certification after TWO failed MSC pre-assessments in 2007 and 2015.

Introduction

The Gambia is one of the smallest countries in Africa with a total population of about 2.1million. Artisanal fishing is a significant economic activity and livelihood with many men and women employed in the sector. The country has seven major fishing landing sites along the River Gambia and its Atlantic Ocean coast (Fatajo, Tobey & Drammeh, 2010). Fish is an integral part of Gambian protein dietary intake and contributes to more than 40% of their protein supply (Ragusa, 2015). Amongst fish species, two dominate sole fish species - black sole (*Synaptura cadenati*), and red sole (*Cynoglossus senegalensis*) is highly commercialized fish contributing to an annual total fish

landing of about 2000 Metric tons. With an international market focus, the fishery's sustainability is crucial, with transnational and business actors supporting local efforts through training and technological advancements and improvements.



Figure 1: Map of the Gambia with landing sites. Retrieved from Gambia – Senegal USAID/BaNafaa project, 2013.

Towards Sustainability and Eco-certification: Sole fishery progress & issues

- The Gambia Fishery Act of 2007 establishes a **co-management system** for small-scale fisheries in the country. Sections 14 & 15 of the Act provides the Minister of Fisheries the power to assigned Special Management Areas and Community Fisheries Centres, which promotes community-based management for artisanal fisheries in the country. However, the Act's implementation was weak and not operational (Government of Gambia, 2012).
- Through a USAID / *BaNafaa* Project led by the Coastal Resource Center at the University of Rhodes Island and upon request by the Department of Fisheries (DoF) of The Gambia in 2009, **improvements** were made to the Fishery Act and the co-management of Sole fishery in particular (Coastal Resources Center-University of Rhodes Island, 2014).
- Before these improvements' efforts for the management of the Sole fishery, GAMFIDA (Gambia Artisanal Fisheries Development Agency), in 2007, invited experts accredited to the Marine Stewardship Council to do a pre-assessment of the Sole fishery. They aimed to see if the fishery could go into a full assessment and possibly obtain the MSC ecolabel. **Unfortunately**, the fishery failed to pass the MSC pre-assessment, scoring below the required sustainability standards.
- With a failed MSC pre-assessment in 2007, the improvement of the fishery Act in 2009, incorporated exclusive management option for the Sole fishery to help address some of the challenges identified. Through assistance from the USAID / *BaNafaa* Project, they establishment a **Fishery Improvement Project** (FIP) to support the improvement and management of The Gambian Sole fishery (CRC-URI, 2014).
- Unlike most other FIPs management, the Sole fishery has a separate and independent co-management system, with the creation of the **National Sole Fishery Co-Management Committee** (NASCOM). Together with other stakeholders such as government departments, industry (Atlantic Seafood Company Ltd) and its basket of supporting partners and international research institutions. They are all engaged in ensuring the fishery meets sustainability standards and possibly becomes MSC certified.
- Following the FIP guidelines and with multiple actors and stakeholders' engagement and support (both technical and financial), the fishery has undergone improvements and other MSC pre-assessments in 2015. **Sadly**, they were unable to pass or meet all the standards set by the MSC to obtain its blue ecolabel (Keus, Medley & Sieben, 2015).
- Despite such frustration, NASCOM, and its promoters are using the findings and recommendations of the 2015 MSC pre-assessment and various other supports, to continue improvements through the FIP and the Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions (CASS) guidelines. The Gambian Sole fishery **FIP will run up to 2022** with specific internal evaluation timeframes to achieve sustainability and certification ambitions (fisheryprogress.org, 2020).

Challenges/Drawbacks

The Gambia Sole Fishery has multi-stakeholders, both locally and internationally. These include: **Local** - NASCOM (FIP Lead), Department of Fisheries (DoF), GAMFIDA, Atlantic Seafood Company Limited, and **International** - USAID- CRC, Kaufland Company, Rockefeller Foundation, World Wide Fund/International Union for the Conservation of Nature and The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). Some challenges include:

Funding: Most of the financing for the Gambia Sole fishery's improvement and certification are from external donors. The cost of the MSC pre-assessment remains high, costing the sole fishery more than \$30, 000 USD (Keus et al., 2015). The FIP process is currently inactive due to lack of funding, as most of the projects supporting the fishery came to an end.

Fishery Closures: For better improvements, the fishery needs at least a six-month close season for fish stock recovery and reproduction. However, with over-dependency on the resource for local livelihood and meeting international market demands, complete closures are very difficult or impossible.

Privatization: The presence of foreign fishing vessels on the Gambia seas makes sustainability or improvement efforts very difficult as individuals or companies with fishing licenses are hard to control or have their fishing activities monitored and challenged in part by limited infrastructures.

Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported fishing: Due to inadequate monitoring and surveillance systems in the country, illegal fishing is very rampant, coupled with the issuance of many commercial fishing licenses (Oirere, 2019). The country has no proper system of regulating fishing activities or enforcing sustainable practices. All these challenges are difficult to account for when assessing the fishery against the MSC standards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ The challenges of small-scale fisheries sustainability are the lack of environmental awareness, stewardship, and the resources and interest to engage in certification and improvement activities.
- ❖ Fishery sustainability and certification activities for these fisheries are dependent on external donors and actors, with the problem of continuous improvement activities without support.
- ❖ Capacity building is important to enhance local expertise, knowledge exchange and understanding of the fishery social-ecological systems to successful improvements.
- ❖ To help promote and encouraged small-scale fisheries to attain sustainability standards and possibly MSC certification, there is a need for the MSC to redesign its assessment criteria and to score for small-scale fisheries and its high cost of certification.
- ❖ Finally, understanding the difference in fisheries management for small-scale fisheries to other fisheries is essential for sustainability assessments and certification initiatives.

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