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Africa

Overfishing is plundering waters in Africa

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The scarcity of fish resources on the African coasts comes from climate change and especially from overfishing for the benefit of agri-food multinationals in rich countries. The testimonies of artisanal fishers converge: catches are decreasing and so is the size of the fish. According to experts, the 51 species inhabiting African waters — an essential source of food for the population — are now threatened with extinction. In Senegal, in just five years, the number of sardinella has fallen by 80%. This small, very inexpensive pelagic fish is at the heart of the popular diet and is used in the composition of the national dish: *thieboudien*.

The scarcity of fish products is a source of deep concern for many Africans. In several coastal countries, fish accounts for nearly half of animal protein intake. According to economists, small-scale fisheries employ about 12 million people in Africa — fishers, fishmongers, smokers, vendors.

Climate change and overfishing

The two main factors in the decline in resources are climate change and overfishing. Rising temperatures are not only affecting the earth: the oceans are also warming, disrupting complex ecosystems. The consequences are varied: the disappearance of corals, the migration of coastal species to colder waters, the destruction of mangroves — a phenomenon of particular concern for Africa. Often compared to nurseries for fish, these areas provide them with shelter from predators until adulthood. They are also suitable for rice cultivation.

Overfishing is also linked to the increase in the number of artisanal fishers. Faced with massive unemployment among young people, many are trying their luck in this sector. In Sierra Leone, a small country in West Africa, their number has doubled in twenty years, from 75,000 to 150,000.

Deleterious industrial fishing

But this reality should not mask the main cause of resource depletion: industrial fishing. veritable factory ships crisscross the African coasts all year round. With their giant nets, they scrape the seabed, capturing all the fauna and causing considerable ecological damage.

The rules governing fishing in exclusive economic zones vary from country to country, but they are considered insufficient and poorly respected, both by artisanal professionals and by environmental activists. In Sierra Leone, a fishing license costs between 15,000 and 20,000 euros depending on the tonnage of the boat, and allows fishing all year round. Circumvention practices are frequent: the use of local nominees allows industrial vessels to obtain fishing rights near the coast while benefiting from exemptions on fuel and aid for administrative and port costs.

The rise of flour factories

IUU (illegal, unreported and unregulated) fishing thrives thanks to the lack of maritime means of African states, which

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are unable to monitor and board offending vessels. Industrial fishing is progressing not only to meet Western demand, but also to supply the many oil and fishmeal production plants. About sixty factories of this type have been set up in recent years on the West African coast. As a result, fish resources are diverted from local consumption. Greenpeace estimates that every year, 500,000 tonnes of fish – enough to feed 33 million people in Africa – are processed into flour. This meal is used to fatten farmed fish (tuna, salmon) for the European and Chinese markets, or to feed industrial pig farms.

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