



FISH SCARCITY: THE DAYS WHEN OFFICIALS COULD ENVY FISHERMEN ARE OVER



With its 720 km of coastline, Senegal is one of the most fish-rich countries in the world thanks to the phenomenon of rising very nutritious cold waters called upwelling*. Entire generations of artisanal fishermen have grown up with a very generous sea that has long made them happy: sufficient protein intake and substantial income. But in recent years, fish have become scarcer under the combined effect of overfishing and the effects of climate change. The decline in catches is impressive and the future of fishermen is uncertain. The Lebou community, whose destiny is linked to fishing, now envisions the future of future generations with other professional perspectives. Fishing no longer really feeds its man. The time when it was more rewarding to be a fisherman than an outdated civil servant. The descendants of fishermen are well aware of this. Report in the traditional village of Ngor.

In this early afternoon of Tuesday, the beach of Ngor is teeming with people: tents and deckchairs are lined up along the beach. Next to it, braised fish simmers on embers and at times raises a concentrated white smoke that evaporates. A few meters away, young people play football very close to the endless game of waves that rise, fade and start again and again. In this warm weather, this beach is not full of relaxed and enthusiastic bathers. Much further, a hundred meters away, on a quasi-hill, a group of fishermen are installed under a makeshift apatam very slightly covered with a translucent fabric. They are in their thirties, forties, fifties or in their sixties. In short, it is a mixture of generations that rubs shoulders in this place.

Every day, before or after fishing, this makeshift shelter serves as a meeting place for this close-knit community called the lebou. They have been fishermen from father to son and for generations. It is here that we meet Mamadou Guèye Douba, a fisherman-diver known to all the other fishing villages in the Dakar region. Mamadou Douba knows the sea well and all the problems that fishing has been going through for years are not foreign to him.

Aged 50, he started fishing at the age of 12 and at 17 he had his own canoe to fish independently. He experienced good times of fishing in this traditional village of Ngor. Decades earlier, Mamadou Douba remembers how every fisherman easily made a living without much effort. "In the 80s and 90s, there were plenty of fish, this is no longer the case today," regrets this community leader. In those beautiful times, you could find noble fish to catch on the very edge of the beach. There was a net by the beach that was thrown to serve the old people who can't go to sea. But those days are over. Today, we must go further and further without certainty of having fish.

Like many fishermen here, Cheikh Thioune also started fishing at a very young age. Dark black complexion, puny and tapered, sixty well past, he remembers that time when fishermen knew precisely where to go fishing for this or that variety of fish. There was fish in abundance to such an extent that a fisherman has nothing to envy to the official.

When fishing earned more than the public service

Traditionally, all Lébou knows only fishing before any other activity. The school was not in the plans of the young Lebus of the village of Ngor. As a teenager, many gave up school to devote themselves to fishing. A brilliant student, it was against the advice of his father that Pape Oumar Samba had refused school for fishing. And fortunately, at the time fishing was very much in good use. But in recent decades, it has witnessed a continuous scarcity.

«When I started fishing at 17, we were still doing heavy fishing. You could have the agent, party and tell you tomorrow, I will still have fish," recalls Pape Oumar Samba. "You could fish one species, it's not okay, you were going to fish another species. You had a choice," he adds. In any case, this era is now ancient history. "It fell in a serious way. Very serious even. Today, no one has a choice. The fish we did not want is the fish that we are forced to eat," regrets Pape Oumar Samba, surprised by this situation that contrasts the beautiful era he knew. "At the time it worked, we were richer than the civil servants because you sometimes earned in one day 200,000 CFA francs alone. We were partying because we were rich people," he explains. Choosing fish from one species of fish to one would be nonsense and yet it was the case in the past.

«We used to do selective fishing. There were fish everywhere and of all species. If you go out you say, I want carp. Especially you will fish for carp. Sometimes you go out and you say, I want thiof, you're going to fish that you thiof, and so on. Today, you can't even say it anymore. You say I'm going fishing. And everything you encounter, you put to the maximum," testifies Pape Samba. The situation is such that the brilliant student of the time thinks he has done wrong by giving up studies. "It's more than a drop, it's a fall. If I really knew it was going to end like this, I could have

continued my studies to do something else. But suddenly it happened and it surprised us," says Pape Oumar Samba.

The two demons that attacked Senegalese waters

There are two reasons for the drastic drop in fish in Senegalese waters. First, there is the pressure on the resource in recent years. It is the result of both artisanal and industrial fishing. "When I started on the beach, there were about twenty canoes. Today there are 150 canoes. The fishing area where you had a canoe, you have 5 or 6 today for the same loot," says Pape Oumar Samba. We are here in Soumbédioune. It is one of the largest fishing docks in Dakar. It is past 6 p.m. Far from the beach two septuagenarian fishermen exchange warmly. Originally from Saint-Louis, they also started fishing, very young. Asked to explain the reasons for the scarcity of fish, they launch without the slightest hesitation.

For Dame Diop, who started fishing in 1958, it is above all the inappropriate fishing methods of artisanal fishermen that are at the root of the scarcity of fish. "It is our fishermen ourselves who are responsible with the use of sleeper nets, drift nets, rotating nets. For this old man, it is in the order of responsibilities of this situation of unsuitable nets, diving fishing and finally the invasion of foreign boats that have caused the drastic drop in catches at sea. What about the effects of climate change. For the septuagenarian it is potentially the last of the causes. In any case, the idea that climate change is a cause hardly convinces any fisherman. However, some fishermen are also divers who admit to having felt a certain variation in the temperature of the waters over the years. However, it is on the side of scientists that the thesis of climate change is defended. In addition to overfishing, which is perceptible and palpable due to the increase in the number of canoes of artisanal fishermen and especially the irruption of foreign boats within the framework of fisheries agreements. Successive regimes that have succeeded each other at the head of the country grant fishing licenses to foreign fishing companies that literally plunder the waters.

Climate change is not a negligible cause

Overfishing alone cannot be responsible for the scarcity of fish in Senegalese waters. Another sneaky phenomenon participates. These are the effects of climate change. Abdoulaye Sarré is in charge of the assessment of pelagic (high seas) resources at the Senegalese Institute for Agricultural Research (Isra-Crodt). He studied the distribution of the two most consumed and popular sardinellas in Senegal, the round and the flat as part of a thesis. He notes a dangerous migration of round sardinella to the north that he attributes to climate change. "By conducting hydroacoustic campaigns in the sub-region, from southern Senegal to Morocco, we have seen a shift in the coverage of several pelagic fish stocks to the north," he told Reporterre magazine. This displacement is due to a very intense warming of surface waters, a warming that is not homogeneous and is particularly accentuated off the coast of Senegal."

This warming, according to Reporterre, could be the largest of all tropical regions of the world. This is of particular concern, especially since although the flat sardinella adapts rather well to temperature variations, the round sardinella is very sensitive to it. "It is always looking for an

optimal environmental window to flourish," according to Sarré. It has risen about 230 kilometers to the north, in three decades, a displacement roughly corresponding to that of isotherms [lines of the same temperature]. This phenomenon favours Morocco to the detriment of Senegal or Mauritania. This is very problematic," concludes the researcher. Another phenomenon that the researcher describes is a rise of the minimum layer of oxygen. This reduces the habitat of these small pelagics, forced to get closer to the surface to survive. But alas! "It makes it easier for fishermen to catch them, and it reduces their ecological niche," says Abdoulaye Sarré.

It sounds the alarm on the situation of fisheries resources. "If current climate trends are sustained and greenhouse gas emissions, mainly caused by the major powers, are not drastically reduced, there is a strong fear that Senegalese families will be forced to find other solutions to benefit from protein. It would be a significant culture shock." Most of the fishermen surveyed also noted a migration of some areas, a matching of others during the year and cyclically, but they do not necessarily link the phenomenon to the effects of climate change. In any case, there is an urgent need to act. Indeed, fishing is a major issue for the Senegalese economy because it is the first export branch and the second source of foreign exchange inflows into the country with an average of 200 billion FCFA per year. It is also a challenge for food security since 70% of animal proteins come from the species of marine fish. In addition, fishing activity is a guarantee of social stability because between 600,000 and 800,000 people live directly or indirectly from fishing, according to former reports by the NGO Greenpeace.

The very artisanal solution of the fishermen of Ngor

Faced with the increasing decline in catches at sea, the fishermen of Ngor have themselves thought of a community solution: it is the installation of a buoy in the sea to drain fish. "We have found a solution for fish that are on the surface." This buoy has mobilized a variety of fish such as bluefin tuna, yellowfin tuna, blue marlin, sailing swordfish. Most of the villages of like fishing Yoff, Ouakam, Soumbédioune come to fish in the vicinity. Fishermen from generation to generation, the young lebu of Ngor devote themselves more and more to the apprenticeship of various trades because fishing no longer feeds its man.

This conversion is irreversible since the scarcity of fish seems for the moment unstoppable. "Our young people, they understood a little bit. Today, they are training to go to restaurants, hotels. Before what we were doing. But there are many now, they say we will change jobs because now with fishing, you kill yourself and you have nothing. You have fish for 3 months. The rest of the time, you are forced to scratch, force and risk your life. So the mentality of children has changed and fortunately, "rejoices, Pope Samba who gives as an example the case of his children.

In short, the gradual decline in fish in Senegalese waters is not only due to fishing agreements, but also to artisanal fishermen. If foreign boats are wreaking havoc, locally the number of fishermen has also increased.

Fishing has greatly intensified since the 1970s as a result of fishing. In 2028, there are more than 20,000 canoes and some 160 industrial vessels would compete, the 720 kilometers of coastline of Senegal, to meet a globalized and sustained demand, notes Reporterre. But the trend goes beyond Senegal. More than 50% of the stocks monitored in West African waters are said to be overexploited, which is one of the highest rates in the world, reveals the environmental daily.

*Upwelling: a term for the upwelling of deep, nutrient-rich cold waters to the surface of the ocean.

This report is written by Frédéric ATAYODI with the technical assistance of the West African Journalists Association (AJAO) and the Mano River Union Natural Resources Rights and Governance Platform (UFM CSO Platform)

<https://africaglobe.net/peche-lepoque-ou-les-fonctionnaires-enviaient-les-pecheurs-est-revinue/>