

By Dyhia Belhabib



Not a long time ago, we heard about the World Bank Regional Fisheries Project in Sierra Leone shutting down. The reasons behind this were quite clear. First, there were some corruption allegations related to the opening of the artisanal fishing area to industrial vessels. Apparently, somebody accepted a bribe and opened up the artisanal fishing area to a group of industrial vessels. The story has a few variations, but the common version is that it occurred, allegedly. Second, relying on official reported data (which are -not surprisingly- under-reporting the real trends by at least [2.25](#) times), one could say that the number of licensed vessels in Sierra Leone is too high. Indeed as of March 13th last year, there were 144 vessels operating in Sierra Leone.

Some of the vessels licensed to fish in Sierra Leone are over 4,000 gross registered tons, and over 100 m long. That is a soccer stadium (football, if you are reading this from, basically, any place other than North America). The moment you think you can play soccer onboard a foreign vessel fishing in a country where fisheries contribute to a big deal of employment, you know there is a problem. All recommendations converge to ask for a drastic reduction in the number of foreign vessels operating (legally) in Sierra Leone. This is a pretty good recommendation. However, how would that translate in the environment within which Leonian fisheries evolve, notably the monitoring, control, and surveillance environment?

I could obtain the list of licensed vessels, which shows the vessels legally entitled to operate in Sierra Leone waters, their size, and their origin. The reputation of China is maintained as vessels from the country represent the bulk of the fleet with nearly 50% of all the vessels flagged to China (69 vessels). Europe follows with 30% (43 vessels). I could compare the list of licensed vessels to the list of arrested/observed vessels that have committed an infraction anywhere in the world. This list goes beyond the blacklisted vessels, so any vessel that was documented publicly, or for which I could obtain information in confidence, is in the list. This list will be made available through the I-Sea Fisheries platform in the next few months (email [me](#) to know more). The comparison yielded intriguing results (Table 1).

Table 1. Licensed vessels in Sierra Leone, associated with a criminal (violation) past. Company and vessel names not revealed here.

Companies	Vessel	EEZ	Year of infraction
1	Vessel 1	Guinea	2013
	Vessel 1	Guinea	2014
2	Vessel 2	Gambia	2009
	Vessel 3	Sierra Leone	2017
	Vessel 4	Sierra Leone	2017
3	Vessel 5	Liberia	2012
	Vessel 6	Sierra Leone	2017
	Vessel 7	Gabon	2017
	Vessel 8	Sierra Leone	2011
4	Vessel 9	Liberia	2013
	Vessel 10	Sierra Leone	2015
	Vessel 11	Liberia	2017
5	Vessel 12	Sierra Leone	2012
	Vessel 13	Guinea Bissau	2014
	Vessel 14	Guinea Bissau	2014
	Vessel 15	Guinea Bissau	2014
	Vessel 16	Senegal	2012
6	Vessel 17	Sierra Leone	2017
	Vessel 18	Sierra Leone	2016
	Vessel 19	Gambia	2015
7	Vessel 20	Sierra Leone	2012
8	Vessel 21	Sierra Leone	2017
	Vessel 22	Sierra Leone	2017
9	Vessel 23	Sierra Leone	2017
10	Vessel 24	Sierra Leone	2015
	Vessel 24	Sierra Leone	2016
	Vessel 25	Sierra Leone	2016
	Vessel 26	Sierra Leone	2016
	Vessel 27	Sierra Leone	2017

The results show that:

- Of the 144 vessels licensed to operate in Sierra Leone, 28 vessels were associated to a violation during the 2009-2017 time period (one had a weak link). This means that 20% of the fleet licensed to operate in Sierra Leone have been caught at a given time in the recent past committing an offence in the sub-region of West Africa. These numbers are not based on assumptions but are rather a direct result of observed data.
- Of the 14 companies owning/operating the 144 vessels, 11 operated vessels that had a violation history. I must note that the companies are most likely only operating or handling the paperwork, as from my research at least 50% of the vessels were actually owned by companies based abroad.
- Of the 11 companies, each had on average 35% of its fleet associated with a violation of any type.

Now, one would argue that, this is exactly the reason why Sierra Leone should limit the number of licenses because there are too many vessels, which offers them (i.e. the vessels) the opportunity to fish illegally in the country's waters, and obviously the neighboring countries. This somehow presents Sierra Leone as the basis of operations that allows fishing vessels wanting to intrude into neighboring waters to circulate freely in and out of EEZs. However, fact is Guinea Bissau, which is not a dimension far, far

away, has licensed 203 vessels in 2016. I have not yet conducted the same analysis here, but the pattern is awfully close. Would that mean the pattern is rather regional, and has to do with a lack of resources?

I conducted a reverse analysis, for 2017 only this time, and I found that of the 12 vessels arrested for committing an infraction in Sierra Leone, only two **did not** have a fishing license. This means that the authorities in Sierra Leone were most likely to catch vessels that had a fishing license than those who did not.

Indeed, from this very simple analysis (however based on real data and a lot of work), one could argue that it is easier for Sierra Leone to monitor those vessels who fall under the country's legislation because they are licensed, than those who operate in complete opacity. Chances are, and from past experiences and [research](#), that given the weak monitoring capacity in the country - due to the lack of financial and human resources (and in some cases, corruption) - these vessels are likely to fish illegally whether they hold a fishing license or not. This is notably illustrated by the case of [Senegal](#), after the country chased out some 24 so-called Russian vessels from its waters. Later analysis I conducted with colleagues from the Department of Surveillance in Senegal showed that 60% of the illegal catch was by those same Russian vessels, who are still in the business of incursions. Now, one shall note that it is widely known that Senegal, along with Mauritania, have by far the strongest monitoring systems in the sub-region. So from this, I ask the question: *Is limiting the licenses in Sierra Leone crucial?* **Probably**, because stocks are not doing well, and small-scale fishers are struggling. However, *is limiting the licenses within the present framework of monitoring going to help?* **Probably not**, at least not until a far stronger monitoring system exists. I have to add that the legislation in Sierra Leone sanctions licensed vessels who shut down their Automatic Identification System. Vessels shutting off their AIS are given a very limited time to get back to port. Failure to report a malfunctioning AIS, or to report catch data, entry or exit from Sierra Leone waters are all punishable offences. At least licensed vessels would think twice before shutting down the device, and they are hence by far more visible than those that are not licensed.

I would say that the first conclusion is that licensing too many vessels does put a major strain on fish stocks, and it further actually provides illegal fishing activities for crooks with a criminal past. However, revoking licenses from vessels without the means to monitor them – at sea, in particular – may mean transforming an otherwise visible fishery into a ghost fishery.

There is never a definite win in fisheries policy. It truly never stops, even when the ink hits the paper. Understanding an issue is one thing, understanding the environment around the issue is another thing. One has to understand the implications of some policy recommendations, and provide incentives for implementation.

This is completely open to debate and comments.