Sustainable fisheries partnership agreements explained

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Overview of the EU's sustainable fisheries partnership agreements with non-EU countries

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Update

Sustainable fisheries partnership agreements (SFPAs) are tools for financial and technical support by the EU to develop the fisheries sector and improve fisheries governance together with partner countries in exchange for fishing rights in their waters. SFPAs integrate other EU policies including trade, development, environment and external action, thus contributing to blue growth, food security, human rights and regional stability.

Background

Sustainable fisheries partnership agreements (SFPAs) are bilateral agreements between the EU and third countries that aim to enhance sustainable fisheries governance and support development of the fisheries sector. They strengthen the external dimension of the EU's common fisheries policy through engagement and support to regional fisheries management organisations and the SFPA network, and action to curb illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Provisions in Regulation (EU) 2017/2403 on the sustainable management of external fishing fleets apply to SFPAs.

SFPAs serve multiple objectives, including supporting responsible fisheries, optimal use of EU fleet capacity, creation of employment and value addition both in the EU and in third countries, provision of products to the EU processing industry, and contribution to EU market supplies (Caillart et al. 2018).

There are two main types of agreement:

- tuna agreements – allow EU vessels to pursue migrating tuna stocks as they move along the shores of Africa and through the Indian Ocean
- mixed agreements – provide access to a wide range of fish stocks in the partner country's EEZ.

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The EU currently has 13 SFPA protocols in force with third countries:

- nine tuna agreements: Cabo Verde, Cook Islands, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Mauritius, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Seychelles, The Gambia (with a hake component for Senegal and The Gambia)
- four mixed agreements: Greenland, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Morocco.

The EU has also seven "dormant" agreements: Equatorial Guinea, Kiribati, Liberia, Madagascar, Micronesia, Mozambique and Solomon Islands. These countries have a fisheries partnership agreement with the EU that is still in force, but there is no implementing protocol.

Each SFPA is an exclusive agreement. Once in place, EU vessels can only fish under this SFPA, and cannot enter into private agreements with the partner country. The SFPA provides a benchmark for good fisheries governance and sustainable resource management, ensuring a level playing field including provisions prohibiting the granting of favourable conditions to other foreign fleets.

SFPAs are made operational through implementing protocols that contain technical annexes. EU fishing vessels are not allowed to fish in waters under the jurisdiction or sovereignty of third countries with which the EU has an agreement but no protocol in force.

SFPAs consist of three major parts.

- Fisheries agreements set out the scope and basic principles of cooperation, as well as the commitment to cooperate, mainly through committees that are set up jointly to monitor application of the SFPAs.
- Protocols authorise fishing access by EU vessels and specify fishing opportunities, amounts and methods of payment, modalities of cooperation, etc.
- Technical annexes set out implementation and procedural aspects such as the licensing system, electronic catch reporting system, observers, vessel monitoring system, and control and enforcement.

SFPAs also contribute to fighting and eradicating IUU fishing through capacity building (training and advice), monitoring, control and surveillance actions, with the help of vessel monitoring systems. Good governance, traceability and cooperative surveillance also protect fishery-dependent countries in the global fight against IUU fishing.

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What are the major implications for exporting countries?

SFPAs allow EU vessels to fish for surplus stocks in the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of third countries. They aim to ensure equal rules, scientific management and social empowerment, with a focus on environmental sustainability, local growth, human rights and shared accountability.

The benefits to AGRINFO stakeholders are:

- partner countries receive a financial contribution for the EU's access to fisheries resources and support for development of the local fisheries sector
- SFPAs create local employment by developing industries and port facilities
- SFPAs contribute to food security as some fish caught by the EU, in particular small pelagics, are supplied to local markets.

A clause concerning respect for human rights has been included in all protocols to fisheries agreements.

Resources

Caillart, B., Defaux, V., Macfadyen, G. (2018) Ex ante evaluation study of a sustainable fisheries partnership agreement between the European Union and the Republic of The Gambia: Final report. European Commission, Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries.

DG MARE (2020) EU sustainable fisheries partnership agreements. European Commission, Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries.

Sources

Council Decision (EU) 2018/754 Mauritius

Council Decision (EU) 2018/1069 Côte d'Ivoire

Council Decision (EU) 2019/441 Morocco

Council Decision (EU) 2019/951 Cabo Verde

Council Decision (EU) 2019/1088 Guinea-Bissau

Council Decision (EU) 2020/272 Seychelles

Council Decision (EU) 2020/392 The Gambia

Council Decision (EU) 2020/985 São Tomé and Príncipe

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Council Decision (EU) 2020/1786 Senegal

Council Decision (EU) 2021/793 Greenland

Council Decision (EU) 2021/1117 Gabon

Council Decision (EU) 2022/1448 Mauritania

Council Decision (EU) 2022/1449 Cook Islands

Regulation (EU) 2017/2403 on the sustainable management of external fishing fleets

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