45 YEARS OF EUROPE — AFRICA FISHERIES AGREEMENTS

From post-colonial dependence
to economic deadlock

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PRESS KIT



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BLOOM is publishing two scientific articles in the *npj Ocean Sustainability* journal of the prestigious *Nature* journal family:

- The first* retraces **45 years of fishing access agreements between the European Union and some twenty African countries**. These agreements have enabled the industrials operating some of the most powerful fishing vessels in the European fleet to **exploit Africa's fish-rich waters at lower cost, thanks to major public subsidies;**
- The second** focuses on one of the major components of these fisheries agreements and one of the most powerful European lobbies: **tropical tuna fisheries, led by a dozen French and Spanish companies.** We analysed the **'official' economic results,** and then **estimated what these results would have looked like if the companies had had to pay 100% of the cost of the fishing agreements and, above all, 100% of the cost of the fuel** they consume, which is subject to very high tax concessions.

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* Le Manach *et al*. (2025) A 45-year retrospective of the European Union's fishing access agreements with coastal States of the Global South. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1038/s44183-025-00149-y.

** Froment *et al*. (2025) Hidden costs and propped-up profits: unraveling the economics of Europe's purse-seine tuna fishing industry. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1038/s44183-025-00149-y.

Cover picture: the MARGIRIS, a 136 metres long mega-trawler operating under Lithuanian flag but owned by Parlevliet & van der Plas, a company of the 'Big 5', catching sardinellas 30 milles offshore Mauritania thanks to the fishing agreement with the EU (© Pierre Gleizes, 2012).

Back cover picture: sardinellasand other small pelagics found dead in the wake of the AFRIKA, a 126 metres long mega-trawler owned by Parlevliet & van der Plas, a company of the 'Big 5', catching sardinellas 30 milles offshore Mauritania thanks to the fishing agreement with the EU (© Pierre Gleizes, 2012).

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KEY FIGURES AND SUMMARY

AN EXTENSIVE NETWORK OF AGREEMENTS

Since 1979, the EU has woven a network of fisheries agreements with some twenty African countries, with the aim of supporting European industrial fishing and a market that is far from self-sufficient.

These agreements have come at a **significant cost to European taxpayers, to the tune of €4.8 billion over the 45 years of their existence, even though they benefit only a tiny proportion of the European fishing fleet,** and above all the largest and most controversial vessels. Examples include:

- Mega-trawlers catching sardinella and other 'forage fish' off West Africa, including the ANNELIES ILENA (145 metres long) and the MARGIRIS (136 m), two of the largest fishing vessels in the world;
- Or the French and Spanish tuna vessels operating all around Africa, including the ALBATUN DOS (116 m) and the ALBATUN TRES (115 m), belonging to the powerful Spanish company Albacora.

Over the past two decades, these agreements have contracted significantly, and now essentially only cover these tuna vessels, apart from the agreement with Mauritania (currently the most expensive for European taxpayers), which authorises mega-trawlers to operate in its waters.

TUNA FISHING: A STRUCTURALLY UNSUSTAINABLE SYSTEM

Our second study shows that **European tuna fishing, carried out by vessels known as seiners and which accounts for 25% of the combined annual catches of France and Spain — the two major powers in European fishing and key players in the fisheries agreements — is economically, socially and environmentally unsustainable:**

1. Economically, because **it only survives thanks to colossal public subsidies.** This aid **distorts competition, sustains overcapacity, and conceals a structural dependence on** public funds;
2. Socially, because **it is based on a rationale of exploitation** rooted in the former European colonies: **delocalisation of risks, insecurity for seafarers in the South** and the exploitation of fisheries agreements to maintain **access to a cheap and exploitable labour force;**
3. Environmentally, because it fuels the **unacceptable destruction of marine biodiversity.** Industrial tuna fleets play an active role in the **destruction of tropical ecosystems and threatened species,** particularly through the use of FADs.

Seiner

A 'seiner' is a vessel that operates a fishing gear known as a 'purse seine'. This is a vertical net up to 2 km wide and 300 m high that is deployed around schools of tuna. At the end of the encircling process, to prevent fish escaping underneath the net, the net is closed at the bottom using a sliding cable. The animals are trapped and have no chance of escaping. The closed net is then gradually made smaller to capture the fish and transfer them to the vessel, using a large landing net known as a 'brail' or 'dip net' ('salabarde' in French). As well as being extremely effective — several dozen tonnes of fish are hauled up during each operation — this method of fishing has even more serious consequences when combined with the use of fish aggregating devices (FADs; see box below).



ZUBEROA, a 77m-long purse seiner owned by Spanish company Atunsa (© Pierre Gleizes, 2017)

1950–1970

ORIGINS AND TRENDS IN FISHERIES AGREEMENTS, OR THE EMERGENCE OF POST-COLONIAL DEPENDENCY

In the aftermath of the Second World War, European fleets experienced an unprecedented industrial boom, supported by governments against a backdrop of economic reconstruction and a desire for food sovereignty. From the 1950s onwards, the overcapacity of European fleets became apparent: coastal fish stocks in the North-East Atlantic were gradually collapsing, forcing Member States, particularly France and Spain, to look for new fishing grounds in more tropical waters so as not to undermine the growth prospects of booming fish consumption. **This maritime expansion formed part of a continuing colonial relationship with Africa:** African waters, which were rich in fish but only exploited locally for subsistence purposes, were seen as a '**fish basket**',[1] **which could be plundered at low cost to compensate for European over-exploitation.**

The finalisation of international negotiations on the Law of the Sea in the 1970s, culminating in the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982, marked a turning point. By establishing the concept of 'exclusive economic zones' (EEZs), UNCLOS gave coastal States sovereignty over their marine resources, while introducing the possibility of 'leasing' access to their 'surplus' resources to other countries through fisheries agreements. **Thus, in the late 1970s, the European Union initiated a network of fisheries agreements, which were simultaneously diplomatic, economic, and geopolitical instruments, to institutionalise the significant presence of its vessels in the waters of the South.**

Between 1979 (first agreement signed with Senegal) and 1990, the EU signed more than a dozen agreements with African countries:[2] Senegal, Mauritania, Morocco, Guinea-Bissau, Seychelles and Madagascar, among others (see Appendix).

The purpose of these agreements is twofold:

- Economically, **by transferring the overcapacity of European fleets to waters that are still rich in fish** (as in the case of 'bottom'[3] and 'pelagic'[4] trawlers) **or by developing new fishing capacity from scratch,** as in the case of tuna seiners, which have never existed in their 'tropical' form (i.e., gigantic, up to 115 m for the largest, and entirely dependent on FADs[5]) in EU waters;
- Politically, **by consolidating European influence over its former colonies through maritime diplomacy disguised as 'cooperation',** as the amounts of 'development aid' linked to fisheries agreements depend on the fishing opportunities offered to the EU, rather than on the real needs of the countries exploited.

These asymmetrical relations in which Europe contributes capital and infrastructure (for its own activities; see box below) in exchange for access rights, reproduce the extractivist rationale of colonialism: African countries benefit from immediate income (but relatively low, except in the case of a few counter-examples), but at the cost of a loss of food sovereignty and an erosion of their fisheries resources.

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[1] Alder and Sumaila (2004) Western Africa: a fish basket of Europe past and present. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F107049650426609 2.

[2] During the 2000s, the EU also set up fisheries agreements with four countries in Oceania: Micronesia, Kiribati, the Solomon Islands and the Cook Islands, which will not be covered here.

[3] For example, to target prawns or hake.

[4] To target 'forage fish' such as sardinella and horse mackerel, mainly with a view to processing them into meal to meet the needs of both marine and land-based aquaculture. See the BLOOM dossier "The dark side of aquaculture", available at: https://www.bloomassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Reduction-fisheries-BLOOMs-report.pdf.

[5] The tuna seiners targeting bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean are much smaller, around 35-48 m, and do not use any FADs. This does not make this fishery virtuous, however, since it is in the hands of four families who own around twenty vessels and around 80% of the French bluefin tuna quota, but that is another story...

SEYCHELLES NERVE CENTRE: A EUROPEAN PROJECT BUILT BY AND FOR INDUSTRY

The birth of the Seychelles tuna 'hub' in the early 1980s is often held up as a model of successful cooperation between the EU and a small island State. In fact, **it illustrates the crucial influence of European industrial interests** in shaping the Indian Ocean fisheries sector: **this project was designed by and for European industrial interests, with massive financial and institutional support** from France and the European Economic Community, the forerunner of the EU. This project was pushed for and facilitated by Cofrépêche, the *Consortium français pour le développement des pêches* (French Consortium for the Development of Fisheries). Now painted as a technical consultancy, Cofrépêche was in fact founded by the main French tropical tuna shipowners and canners, with the participation of financial institutions and Cnexo (which became Ifremer when it merged with ISTPM). Its role was decisive in the growth of European tuna fishing in the Indian Ocean: feasibility studies, economic analyses, logistical planning and the setting up of the first fisheries agreements between the EEC and Seychelles in 1984. Thus, Cofrépêche laid the foundations for the massive deployment of European industrial fleets in the Indian Ocean.

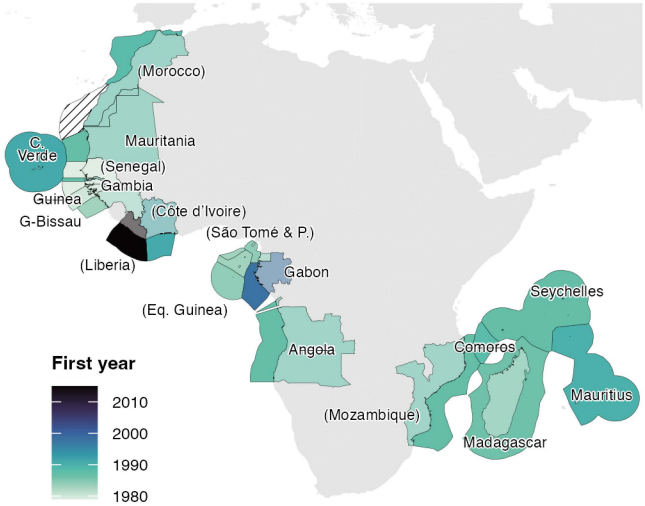
In addition, this project to develop a European tuna fishery in Seychelles benefited from massive support from European and French public funds, in particular from the *Fonds d'intervention et d'organisation des marchés des produits de la pêche* (FIOM, which became OFIMER, then FranceAgriMer), which covered up to two-thirds of the financial risk associated with the first tuna campaigns. In other words, **French and European taxpayers have assumed the costs and risks of an industrial project whose eventual profits have been captured by large private industrial shipowners, whose unacceptable environmental impact and economic non-viability are now clear for all to see.**

The construction of the Victoria cannery in 1986, financed in particular by the *Caisse Centrale de Coopération Economique* (the future French Development Agency, AFD), put the finishing touches to this strategy: French and Spanish shipowners were able to sell and process their catches there, while consolidating their dominant position in the region. The cannery, which was renamed Indian Ocean Tuna (IOT) in 1996 after it was taken over by Heinz (since bought by the Thai giant Thai Union), has established itself as the country's largest industrial employer, but also as the symbol of a structural dependency: that of an island State subordinate to a European extractivist model, based on the over-exploitation of tropical resources and low-cost exports to the EU thanks to a trade agreement allowing European tuna processed in Seychelles to be exported to the EU without any customs duty.

Under the guise of cooperation and development, Europe has built an industrial outpost in Seychelles to serve its tuna fleets. Cofrépêche, which is still active and still linked to industrial fishing — Antoine Le Garrec and the eponymous group, the bridgehead of French industrial fishing (and former majority shareholders of CFTO before it was sold to Parlevliet & van der Plas in 2016), are board members — continues to advise the European Commission on fisheries policies and to assess "with complete neutrality" the projects that it has itself helped to shape. **This structural conflict of interest is a perfect illustration of the way in which the EU has outsourced its industrial fishing model, while at the same time financing and strengthening it using funds supposedly intended for cooperation and development.**

1990–2000
THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF FISHERIES AGREEMENTS

In the 1990s, the network of fisheries agreements reached its peak, covering up to **16 countries simultaneously.** While the first agreements covered 'mixed' fisheries targeting numerous species of fish (tuna, hake, sardinella), crustaceans (lobsters, prawns, crabs) and cephalopods (octopus), the model increasingly shifted towards 'large pelagics', in particular the tropical tuna species found in Princes, Saupiquet, Petit Navire, Mareblue and other tins.



Map showing the network of fishing agreements established between the EU and around 20 countries in Africa since 1979 (top); number of active agreements over time (bottom).

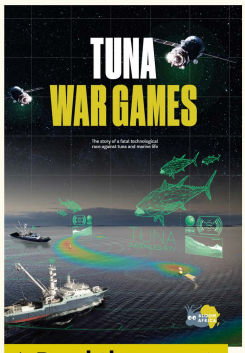
This specialisation can be explained by two factors:

- **The depletion of coastal stocks and increased competition with coastal communities** (for octopus or sardinella, for example);
- At the same time, the commercial value of tuna — which had become the most widely consumed fish in Europe — and the inseparable rise in power of the Spanish and French tuna fleets, supported by technological 'innovations' such as the dreaded 'fish aggregating devices' (FADs; see box below). **Today, these tuna seiners represent the vast majority of the authorisations issued to operate under these agreements** (for Spanish and French tuna vessels, 30% and 21% of all fishing authorisations issued under the fisheries agreements in terms of vessel numbers between 2020 and 2024; 55% and 29% in terms of tonnage).

From the 1990s onwards, these agreements — now pompously called Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs) — began to include social and environmental clauses. In practice, **these clauses remain largely symbolic, as the extractivist rationale still predominates.** In fact European companies have to pay a marginal cost to access water in African countries, for example:

- €85 per tonne of tuna declared, sold for around €1,000-2,500 per tonne, depending on the species;
- €434 per tonnage unit for shrimp vessels;
- €75-140 euros per tonne for 'forage fish' such as sardinella.

Alongside these low costs for industrials, it is European taxpayers who finance the majority of the amount received by the countries being exploited.



→ Read the report:
https://bloomassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/tuna-war-games.pdf

TUNA WAR GAMES

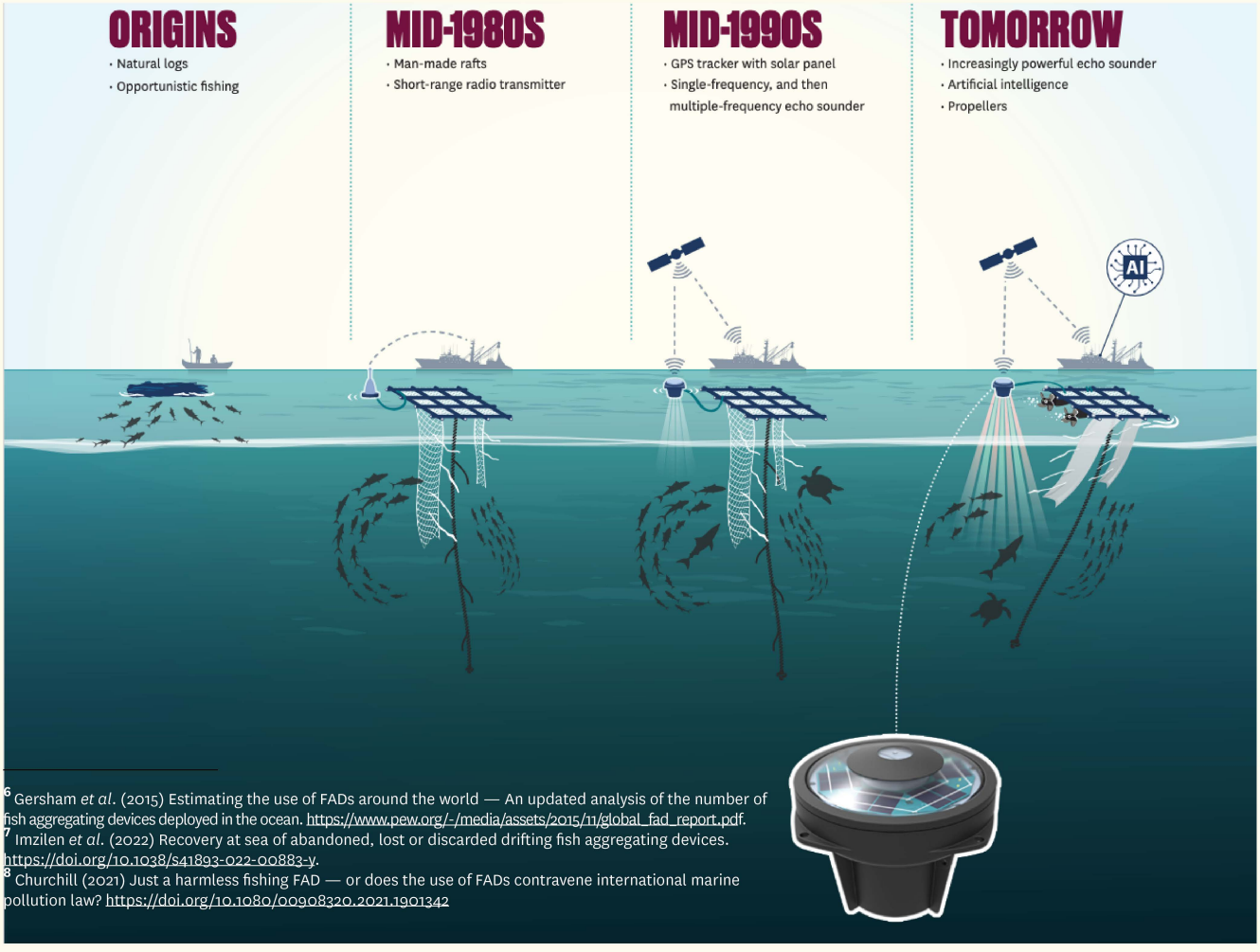
Introduced in the 1980s, fish aggregating devices (FADs) are simple yet high-tech rafts that attract fish very effectively. Industrials love them and their use has got out of hand in recent years.

It is estimated that there are around 120,000 FADs in service at any one time worldwide.[6] These devices have a harmful effect on several levels:

→ **FADs pose a threat to tuna:** they have a drastic impact on the targeted tuna populations, since the vast majority of catches are juveniles, which have not yet had the opportunity to reproduce. Data from the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) show that 93% of albacore and 99% of bigeye tuna caught using FADs in the Indian Ocean are juveniles, i.e., individuals that have not yet reproduced.

→ **FADs are a major source of pollution:** although manufacturers try to sell the idea of biodegradable FADs with a bamboo structure, in reality FADs are largely made of plastic (buoys), heavy metals (batteries, solar panels, etc.), and other synthetic materials (ropes). It is estimated that 60%[7] to 90%[8] of FADs are abandoned or lost at sea. They eventually run aground or sink, generating a massive source of marine pollution.

→ **FADs are a disaster for biodiversity:** up to 10% of the catches associated with FADs are made up of non-target species, such as vulnerable and fragile species of sharks and turtles. Observers often report the capture of hundreds of sharks in a single fishing operation, virtually all of which die before they can be released back into the ocean. Stranded, they continue to pose a threat to marine life long after they have ceased to be operated. For example, the thousands of FADs washed up along beaches often form impassable barriers for sea turtles, either when they lay their eggs, or when they hatch as the young cannot find their way to the sea. Attached to a coral reef, a FAD, even one made of bamboo, is also a considerable destructive force.



[6] Gersham *et al*. (2015) Estimating the use of FADs around the world — An updated analysis of the number of fish aggregating devices deployed in the ocean. https://www.pew.org/-/media/assets/2015/11/global_fad_report.pdf.
[7] Imzilen *et al*. (2022) Recovery at sea of abandoned, lost or discarded drifting fish aggregating devices. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-022-00883-y.
[8] Churchill (2021) Just a harmless fishing FAD — or does the use of FADs contravene international marine pollution law? https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320.2021.1901342

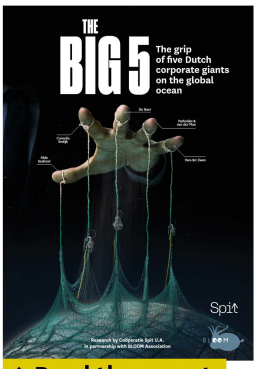
Over the course of 45 years, **the EU has paid around €4.8 billion** to the countries concerned to finance these agreements, thereby reducing the bill for European fishing companies. Although these sums are officially presented, in part, as support for local development, **in reality they constitute a covert subsidy to European industrial fleets** (and see the insert on the Seychelles cannery on p6). Coastal States, on the other hand, receive low income, often well below the real value of the resources extracted.

The distribution of this amount is also extremely uneven, with **73% concentrated in the agreements with Morocco and Mauritania alone.** We cannot fully explain such a concentration rationally, but we can point out that:

- These two agreements are the only ones to propose the exploitation of sardinella and other forage fish, destined to be processed into meal for the needs of European or Asian farming, to the detriment of food security in West Africa, in astronomical quantities: 225,000 tonnes for Mauritania alone since the suspension of the agreement with Morocco (see below).

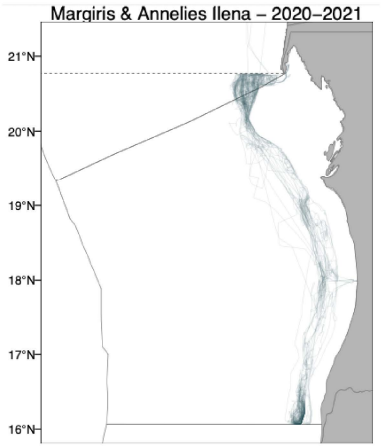
However, neither the volumes fished nor the commercial value of the species targeted can explain the cost associated with these two agreements, compared with the tuna agreements, where the volumes and values fished are comparable (in the order of €1-2/kg);[9]

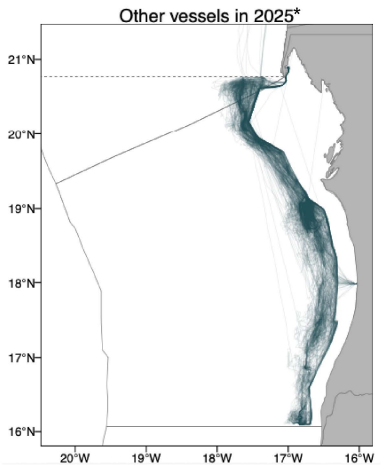
- The main players in these two agreements are the mega-trawlers that we have repeatedly denounced, such as the MARGIRIS (143 metres long) and the ANNELIES ILENA (145 m), both very active in 2020-2021, or the SIMONAS DAUKANTAS (120 m), the IEVA SIMONAITYTE (120 m) and the ALIDA, all three still active in 2025 (see below). Many of these mega-trawlers belong to the 'Big 5', the Dutch oligopoly at the reins of European industrial fishing and which also has interests in tuna fishing (see below).



→ Read the report:
https://bloomassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Rapport_BIG5_EN.pdf

The hyperinflation of the agreements with Morocco and Mauritania is therefore probably the result of at least three factors: better negotiating skills on the part of these two countries, the political clout of the 'Big 5', and the EU's desire to develop aquaculture.



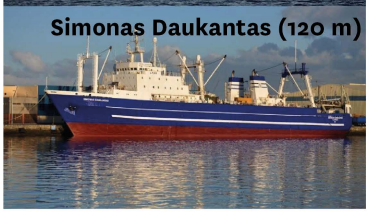






Fishing activities of MARGIRIS and ANNELIES ILENA in 2020–2021, and several other mega-trawlers in 2025, offshore Mauritania et in the contested zone of Western Sahara (dotted triangle at the top), as part of EU fishing agreements.
Teh pictures represent the vessels involved in these activities.









[9] UndercurrentNews data.
* The vessels FISHING SUCCESS (105 m) and FISHING TIDE (105 m) are not illustrated.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EU-MOROCCO AGREEMENT AND THE DISPUTE OVER WESTERN SAHARA

The fisheries agreement between the EU and Morocco has long been one of the most important and strategic. At its peak, between 1995 and 1996, it offered, in return for €127 million per year, a considerable volume of fishing opportunities: some fifty pelagic trawlers targeting nearly 60,000 tonnes of sardinella, and more than 500 vessels targeting numerous bottom species (black hake, cephalopods, shrimp, sponges, etc.). This agreement was then a major pillar of European supply and a central outlet for the Spanish fleet.

Over time, however, the agreement has been severely eroded, both in terms of fishing capacity and strategic importance. In 2023, the last year of activity, the agreement represented only a fraction of its initial scope: despite still substantial quotas for small pelagics (100,000 tonnes for 13 mega-trawlers and a further 85,000 tonnes for around thirty smaller vessels), bottom fishing opportunities collapsed to around sixty of the smallest vessels, with an 18-fold reduction in terms of capacity compared with the mid-1990s. This contraction reflects a combination of political tensions, Morocco's growing will to favour its own fleet, and the depletion of marine resources due to overfishing and climate change.

However, the decisive factor in the current uncertainty is nevertheless legal and geopolitical. For several years, the Polisario Front — the lawful representative of the Saharawi people recognised by the UN — had been challenging the application of the agreement to the waters of Western Sahara, a non-autonomous territory occupied by Morocco, before the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU). **In October 2024, the CJEU handed down a landmark ruling: the agreement was "*in breach of the principle of self-determination*" and therefore illegal, as it included waters belonging to Western Sahara without the consent of the Saharawi people.** This decision resolved a long-running dispute and clarified the legal framework: no future agreement between the EU and Morocco can apply to Western Sahara without a legitimate political process to obtain consent.

The implications are considerable. Saharawi waters were the operational heart of the European fleet targeting small pelagics. Their exclusion strips the agreement of its substance and directly threatens the economic viability of the companies concerned, as industry representatives have already publicly stated.* Without access to Western Saharawi waters, the agreement no longer allows stocks of small pelagics to be exploited, and on top of this, demersal resources have become marginal, and opportunities for tuna are virtually non-existent. Under these conditions, **the EU-Morocco agreement could be definitively terminated, putting an end to what has long been the EU's largest and most costly fisheries agreement.** The fleets concerned would then only have the agreement with Mauritania to operate in the region, which could **profoundly reconfigure the geography of European fishing in North Africa and have a major impact on the economic model of the few companies concerned, particularly those in the 'Big 5'.**



Fishing vessels HELEN MARY (front, 117 m) and MARGIRIS (136 m), two vessels owned by Parlevliet & van der Plas, a company of the 'Big 5', fishing for sardinella off the coast of West Africa (© Pierre Gleizes, 2012).

* https://europeche.chil.me/post/eu-court-annuls-eu-fisheries-agreement-with-morocco-476041.

THE TUNA SECTOR
A STRATEGIC PILLAR AND SYMBOL OF A MODEL ON ITS LAST LEGS

As mentioned above, French and Spanish tuna seiners currently account for the vast majority of the authorisations issued to operate under fisheries agreements.

Consequently, we focused our second study on the economic model of these tuna vessels, as the companies involved are relatively easy to study: their vessels are sedentary and specialist, unlike the pelagic mega-trawlers mentioned above, which can target blue whiting off Scotland, sardinella in West Africa, and horse mackerel off Chile all in the same year.

A POLITICALLY STRATEGIC SECTOR

Tuna plays a central role in European and global consumption: it accounts for **almost 10% of the world's catches**[10] and is the **most consumed fish in Europe.**

Spain and France dominate this sector through a dozen companies such as Albacora and *Compagnie française du thon océanique* (CFTO; a subsidiary of Parlevliet & van der Plas, one of the 'Big 5' multinationals mentioned above), Europe's two biggest tuna fishing companies.

These tuna companies exert a decisive influence on European decisions (see the insert on the next page on the EU's role in negotiations surrounding tuna fisheries in the Indian Ocean) via the **Europêche** lobby at European level, **UAPF** and **Orthongel** at French level, and **OPAGAC** and **ANABAC** at Spanish level. For example, the Chair of Europêche is the Spaniard Javier Garat, an Albacora shareholder and board member. One of the vice-chairs of Europêche is Marc Ghiglia, delegate general of the French industrial companies' representative 'UAPF', whose chair is Xavier Leduc, also chair of Orthongel, which brings together the French tuna fishing companies.

Other key members of Europêche include the Spanish national fisheries committee, CEPESCA, whose chair, Julio Morón, is also chair of OPAGAC, the Spanish counterpart of Orthongel; and the Pelagic Freezer Association (PFA), the Dutch body representing pelagic mega-trawlers, including Parlevliet & van der Plas, which owns the French tuna company CFTO.

Country	Representative	Company	Fleet description	Flags
Spain	ANABAC	Atunsa	7 vessels (52-113 m)	Belize, Spain and Seychelles
		Echebastar	6 vessels (80-104 m)	Spain and Seychelles
		Pevasa	8 vessels (76-87 m)	Belize, Spain and Seychelles
	OPAGAC	Albacora	18 vessels (67-116 m)	Curaçao, Spain, Mauritius, Panama, Seychelles, Tanzania and Ecuador
		Compañia Europea de Tunidos	1 vessels (83-83 m)	Spain
		Grupo Calvo	6 vessels (69-92 m)	Spain and Salvador
		Grupo Garavilla	4 vessels (73-84 m)	Spain and Ecuador
		Inpesca	7 vessels (79-106 m)	Spain, Oman and Seychelles
		Nicra-7	3 vessels (56-82 m)	Curaçao, Spain and Ecuador
France	Orthongel	CFTO	14 vessels (61-84 m) ; 3 sold to Oman	France and Italie
		Sapmer	3 vessels left (89 m)	France
		Via Océan / Saupiquet	Liquidated (4 vessels in the last year 67-78 m)	France

[10] The "tuna and tuna-like species" group represents a wide range of commercially important species: albacore tuna (*Thunnus alalonga*), the three bluefin tunas (*T.thynnus, T. orientalis and T. maccoyii*), bigeye tuna (*T. obesus*), yellowfin tuna (*T. albacares*) and skipjack tuna (*Katsuwonus pelamis*); swordfish (*Xiphias gladius*), as well as numerous species of lesser commercial importance such as king mackerel (*Scomberomorus* spp.) and other Scombridae (mackerel) and Istiophoridae (e.g., marlin).

HOW THE EU SABOTAGED A MAJOR BREAKTHROUGH IN THE INDIAN OCEAN — AND HOW IT IS PURSUING THIS SABOTAGE THROUGH THE COURTS

In February 2023, the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) adopted an historic measure: a 72-day annual ban on the use of drifting FADs (see inset above), a major step forward in the protection of marine ecosystems in this region.

But the EU, under the direct impetus of the European Commission and to the sole benefit of the few French and Spanish tuna companies, has methodically sabotaged this breakthrough. Even before the vote, it exerted diplomatic pressure to such an extent that Kenya, the sponsor of the text, withdrew its proposal, which was fortunately saved by Indonesia and the Maldives, which allowed it to be put to the vote. Surprised by this resolution being adopted, the EU immediately triggered an internal mechanism of the IOTC: objection. By lodging a formal objection, the EU and France — alongside other States closely linked to the European tuna industry, such as Seychelles (see inset above) — have rendered the resolution inapplicable to European-owned vessels, i.e., the only users of FADs and therefore the only ones targeted by the resolution. **This procedure enabled the EU to block a measure that had been democratically adopted by a majority of coastal States, revealing a deplorable double discourse between environmental undertakings and the defence of industrial interests.**

Faced with this downward spiral, BLOOM took the European Commission and France to court, claiming that their objections violated the EU's environmental obligations. In July 2025, the General Court of the European Union (EGC) ruled in favour of BLOOM, asking the European Commission to properly consider our request. This ruling sets a major precedent: it recognises that an international objection decision can be legally reviewed if it runs counter to the EU's environmental objectives.

However, the Commission then went a step further: **rather than complying with the ruling and reviewing its work, it lodged an appeal with the Court of Justice of the European Union** (CJEU) in an attempt to overturn BLOOM's win and maintain its right to torpedo international conservation measures. With this appeal, it is confirming its desire to defend the interests of a handful of industrials rather than the general interest, whatever the cost.

This affair is symptomatic of a deeper problem: the EU using its geopolitical clout to influence multilateral decisions, and then evading their effects when they do not suit its industries. It is fuelling a climate of mistrust among the coastal States of the Indian Ocean and undermining the international credibility of its climate and biodiversity commitments.

By persisting before the CJEU, the Commission is not defending Europe: it is defending a minority of private interests to the detriment of marine ecosystems and coastal populations. The final judgement that will emerge from this legal battle will decide whether the EU remains free to circumvent international rules, or whether environmental law can finally be imposed on its fisheries policy.



A FAD having drifted into a coral reef in Mayotte's Marine Protected Area (https://parc-marin-mayotte.fr/actualites/echouage-dun-dispositif-de-concentration-de-poissons-dcp-derivant-issu-dun-thonier).



A turtle stranded in a Spanish FAD offshore Madagascar. Its left flipper is now just a stump; the scales on its head have been torn off; its body is covered with barnacles, encrusting crustaceans.



A whale shark, visibly injured, trapped by a French purse seiner in the Indian Ocean.

ARTIFICIAL PROFITABILITY

Between 2010 and 2023, we estimate that these twelve companies received public subsidies totalling **€2.1 billion,** including:

- **€1.9 billion in tax exemptions on fuel.** Tropical tuna vessels, like all fishing vessels, enjoy tax-free prices at the pump, but these vessels are extremely fuel-hungry, each consuming up to 6.5 million litres of fuel a year!
- **€179 million via fisheries agreements,** financed directly by the EU (see first part).

This aid is indirect, i.e., it is not aid paid directly to companies in the form of a cheque, for the purchase of equipment for example. In the case of fuel tax concessions, this is a loss of revenue for countries that do not collect the tax; in the case of fisheries agreements, it is the compensation paid directly to the countries exploited. In both cases, this indirect aid has a mirror effect: the absence of a substantial financial outlay for the companies concerned, *de facto* reducing their operating costs.

Without this aid, **all European tuna boat companies would be loss-making,** with the exception of two (**Grupo Calvo and Compañía Europea de Tunidos**). The largest companies, such as Albacora (Spain) and CFTO (France), would have posted **net losses in excess of €500 million and €400 million** respectively over the 14 years studied, if they had not benefitted from these indirect public subsidies.

Tropical tuna fishing — which accounts for around 20% of total French and Spanish catches — is therefore an economic aberration that relies solely on public subsidies, in particular the **tax exemption on fuel.** Yes, it does not stop there: we have also identified two other major levers used by the companies concerned to stay afloat:

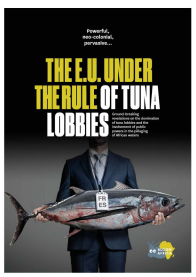
- **Wage cuts and 'social dumping'** with precarious working conditions for crews (e.g., a 30% pay cut at CFTO, massive use of underpaid African seafarers, etc.);
- **Aggressive tax optimization** through the use of flags of convenience and subsidiaries based in tax havens such as Curaçao, Panama and Seychelles.

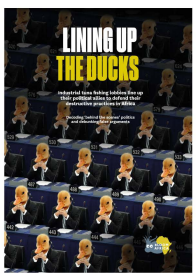
While French and Spanish companies operate in broadly similar ways (same types of vessels, target species, fishing grounds, markets, etc.), our study shows that **the Spanish companies are more financially resilient, in particular because they are the main users of the tax inversion mechanisms** mentioned above. French companies are all on the brink (or have toppled over the edge): **Via Océan/Saupiquet filed for bankruptcy in 2024; Sapmer has retained only three of the nine seiners built between 2009 and 2015** and is now refocusing on its historic business (fishing for toothfish and lobster in the French Southern and Antarctic Lands); **CFTO is also starting to sell its vessels** (including three in 2024 sold to Oman), **while drastically tightening its belt internally.**

MAJOR ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS

By keeping companies that are intrinsically highly loss-making afloat, this economic model, fuelled by public subsidies, increases the pressure on already depleted marine ecosystems — particularly through the uncontrolled use of FADs (see above) — and **facilitates the opacity of financial flows, with all the ensuing consequences in terms of tax evasion, laundering of illegal fishing, social dumping, and even links with international drug trafficking.** On several occasions the press has indeed reported large quantities of drugs found on board fishing vessels, including European tuna vessels.[11] All these mechanisms, which are eminently harmful to the general interest, are facilitated by the abandonment of public policies, which allows the sector to manage itself without any controls. All this is fuelling not only growing mistrust within the European Union towards political decision-makers, and in particular the 'Brussels bubble' and its collusion with industrial lobbies, but also mistrust within African coastal States, which are increasingly turning to China and Russia as new trading partners. To continue in this direction would be nothing other than a major geopolitical strategic error.







→ Find our reports 'TunaGate':

https://www.bloomassociation.org/en/our-actions/our-themes/fisheries-in-africa/our-reports/

[11] For example, CFTO's vessel DRENNEC was involved in transporting cannabis resin on two occasions in 2023 and 2024: https://defimedia.info/decouverte-de-167-m-de-haschisch-bord-du-mv-drennec-ladsu-soupconne-un-vaste-narcotrafic-regional. It is also becoming clear that industrial fishing is increasingly linked to international drug trafficking, for example: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/spanish-police-seize-75-tonnes-cocaine-hidden-frozen-tuna-fish-2023-12-12/ or https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2025/08/20/dans-la-manche-les-pecheurs-de-cocaine-allies-precieux-du-crime-organise_6632180_3224.html.

RETHINKING COOPERATION LEAVING INDUSTRIAL DEPENDENCE BEHIND

The European Union's network of fishing agreements, inherited from the 1970s, illustrates the **continuity of a post-colonial extractivist model,** in which Europe outsources its environmental and social impacts to African countries.

Despite being called Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs), these agreements are neither 'partnerships' nor 'sustainable', whether they involve mega-trawlers or purse seiners. In particular, the tuna sector, the industrial flagship and political symbol of this strategy of fisheries agreements, is now in crisis: it is **unable to survive without subsidies, destroys biodiversity, and is socially unjust.**

In view of this failure, BLOOM urges the EU to:

- **Decouple fishing opportunities from development aid.** In other words, **the signing of a fisheries agreement between the EU and an African country should not determine the amount of development aid,** and above all, **the industry should bear 100% of the costs associated with accessing and exploiting African waters**;
- **Guarantee a halt to fishing activities carried out by fleets under European capital that target overexploited stocks in non-Community waters,** in particular by **banning industrial fishing and the use of fishmeal from this practice** to provide food to marine and land-based aquaculture;
- **Ban FADs in a full and definitive manner**, as it is a crucial condition for the environmental and economic sustainability of tuna fishing. As so clearly put by Mr. Adrien de Chomereau, CEO of French tuna company Sapmer: "*As few FADs as possible is the path of virtue. But it is economic suicide*".[12] **But using FADs is no fatality, as French fishers perfectly know how to do without**;
- **Withdraw its appeal to the CJEU (see p. 12) in the dispute between the European Commission and BLOOM, and withdraw its objection to IOTC Resolution 23/02**;
- Rapidly implement a proactive policy aimed at **reducing dependence on fossil fuels, in particular by abolishing tax concessions on fuel as part of the revision of its Energy Taxation Directive (ETD),** but also by supporting such a demand at international level, in particular in the context of the negotiations on harmful subsidies at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and in the context of reducing emissions from the sector through the International Maritime Organisation (IMO);
- **Plan a transition for the sector by redirecting these subsidies,** by including mechanisms in the next Multiannual Financial Framework that **prohibit direct or indirect subsidies for fishing activities or fishing agreements that encourage overfishing, use destructive fishing methods, or destroy African and European jobs by favouring industrial players at the expense of small-scale coastal fishing**.

As the EU has embarked on a frantic race towards deregulation, through its series of 'Omnibus' regulations in order to align with Trump, and as the common fisheries policy is now threatened with dismantling, **it is urgent that Europe recognise that its industrial fishing industry — particularly a handful of tuna seiners and mega-trawlers — is based on the destruction of coastal ecosystems and economies, tax evasion, fraud and the subjugation of the South**. A profound overhaul of its external fisheries policy, based on ecological justice and fair cooperation, is necessary.

[12] https://lemarinblog.wordpress.com/2016/09/22/la-reunion-les-voyants-sont-au-vert/.

Find the '20 points' of the Ocean Coalition for more details

https://www.oceancoalition.org



CONTACT

→ **Frédéric Le Manach**

fredericlemanach@bloomassociation.org

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APPENDIX
SUMMARY OF EU-AFRICA FISHING ACCESS AGREEMENTS

Target species[a]	Partner countries[b]	Main EU countries[c]	Years covered	Status (Jan. 2025)
Large pelagics only	Cape Verde	Other species: Portugal (75.3%) and Undet. (24.7%) Spain (55.1%) and France (42.2%)	1991–[...]	Active
	Comoros	Spain (50.1%) and France (47.4%)	1988–2016	Denounced
	Côte d'Ivoire	Other species: Spain (100.0%) Spain (55.8%) and France (43.0%)	1991–2024	Expired
	Gabon	Other species: Spain (84.7%) Spain (53.6%) and France (45.3%)	1998–2011, 2013–2016 and 2021–[...]	Active
	Liberia	Spain (58.1%) and France (41.9%)	2015–2020	Expired
	Madagascar	Other species: Undet. (50.7%) and France (49.3%) Spain (50.6%) and France (44.2%)	1986–2018 and 2023–[...]	Active
	Mauritius	Other species: Undet. (62.0%) and France (38.0%) Spain (50.4%) and France (42.8%)	1990–2007 and 2014–[...]	Active
	Mozambique	Other species: Spain (55.0%) Spain (50.3%) and France (47.7%)	1987–1993 and 2004–2015	Expired
	Sao Tomé and Principe	Other species: Portugal (60.0%) and Spain (40.0%) Spain (51.8%) and France (47.1%)	1983–2024	Expired
	Seychelles	Spain (52.4%) and France (43.9%)	1987–[...]	Active
	Gambia	Other species: Spain (83.3%) Large pelagics: Spain (58.7%) and France (41.3%)	1987–1996 and 2019–[...]	Active
	Guinea	Other species: Spain (40.4%), Italie (24.7%) and Grèce (22.7%) Large pelagics: France (53.5%) and Spain (45.2%)	1983–2012	Denounced
Large pelagics & demersal species	Eq. Guinea	Other species: Undet. (100.0%) Large pelagics: France (62.7%) and Spain (33.4%)	1984–1992 and 1994–2001	Expired
	Guinea-Bissau	Other species: Italie (37.8%), Spain (36.5%) and Portugal (23.3%) Large pelagics: Spain (51.0%) and France (43.9%) Small pelagics: Latvia (33.3%), Lithuania (33.3%) and Spain (22.3%)	1980–2012 and 2015–[...]	Active
	Senegal	Other species: Greece (37.9%), Spain (36.7%) and Italie (22.5%) Large pelagics: Spain (50.1%) and France (49.2%)	1979–2006 and 2014–2024	Expired
	Angola	Other species: Spain (89.5%) Large pelagics: France (76.7%) and Spain (21.9%) Small pelagics: Ireland (87.9%)	1987–2004	Denounced
Large pelagics, demersal species & Small pelagics	Morocco	Other species: Spain (89.1%) Large pelagics: Spain (75.4%) and France (24.6%) Small pelagics: Netherlands (24.6%) and Lithuania (20.4%)	1988–1999, 2007–2011 and 2014–2023	Expired
	Mauritania	Other species: Spain (83.7%) Large pelagics: Spain (57.2%) and France (41.6%) Small pelagics: Netherlands (30.7%) and Lithuania (22.9%)	1987–[...]	Active

[a] Species accounting for less than 5% of the overall agreement's tonnage (in GRT) are not considered as 'target species'.
[b] See summaries on the European Commission's website, at: https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/fisheries/international-agreements/sustainable-fisheries-partnership-agreements-sfpas_en.
[c] Countries accounting for less than 20% of the overall agreement's tonnage (in GRT), for each species category, are not shown.