

THE DEADLY ROUTE TO EUROPE

How illegal fishing and overfishing
in Senegal is driving migration

A report by the Environmental Justice Foundation



Protecting People and Planet

The Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) exists to protect the natural world and defend our basic human right to a secure environment.

EJF works internationally to inform policy and drive systemic, durable reforms to protect our environment and defend human rights. We investigate and expose abuses and support environmental defenders, Indigenous peoples, communities and independent journalists on the frontlines of environmental injustice. Our campaigns aim to secure peaceful, equitable and sustainable futures.

EJF is committed to combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing as well as associated human rights abuses in the fishing sector.

Our investigators, researchers, filmmakers and campaigners work with grassroots partners and environmental defenders across the globe.

Our work to secure environmental justice aims to protect our global climate, ocean, forests, wetlands, wildlife and defend the fundamental human right to a secure natural environment, recognising that all other rights are contingent on this.

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Special thanks to all interviewees for their contribution to this report. All views expressed are those of EJF alone, and interviewees do not necessarily share the expressed views and interpretations.

Front cover: © EJF

1. A Spanish-owned, Senegalese-flagged bottom trawler. 2. Fishers returning from sea in Joal-Fadiouth.

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"I get so angry when these nations complain about immigration, because they are the real pirates and what they do is worse than clandestine immigration. We are risking our life to go, but they come here to steal our fish."

Karim Sall, President of AGIRE

© EJF



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Abbreviations

CAOPA	African Confederation of Professional Artisanal Fishing Organizations
CECAF	Fishery Committee for the Eastern Central Atlantic
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IEZ	Inshore exclusion zone
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IUU fishing	Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing
MSY	Maximum sustainable yield
SFPA	Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement



Fisher fixing nets in Fass Boye. © EJF

Glossary of terms

Despite their importance globally, there is no consensus on how to define artisanal and small-scale fisheries.¹ **Artisanal fishing** is generally considered to consist of various small-scale, low-technology, and low-capital fishing practices undertaken by individual fishers.² Under Senegalese law, artisanal fishing is defined as fishing by any undecked vessel that uses non-mechanically operated means of capture and whose only means of preservation is ice or salt.³

Bottom trawling is a fishing method that involves the vessel dragging a weighted cone-shaped net across the seafloor.⁴ Growing evidence suggests that the resulting abrasion of the seabed, coupled with high levels of bycatch, has significant adverse consequences for important marine ecosystems and biodiversity.⁵ More than 90% of Senegal's industrial fishing fleet is comprised of bottom trawlers.⁶

Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing encapsulates a wide variety of fishing activity occurring both on the high seas and within areas under national jurisdiction. Generally speaking, 'illegal fishing' is conducted by vessels operating in waters under the jurisdiction of a State or of a regional fisheries management organisation, without the permission of that State or organisation, or in contravention of applicable laws, regulations, or conservation and management measures. 'Unreported fishing' refers to fishing activities which have not been reported, or have been misreported, in contravention of applicable laws, regulations, or conservation and management measures. 'Unregulated fishing' is typically conducted in areas where there are no applicable conservation and management measures, or by vessels that are not bound by any such measures, in a manner incompatible with the flag state's obligation to conserve marine living resources.⁷

Under Senegalese law, **industrial vessels** are defined as all vessels that do not fall under the definition of an artisanal fishing boat.⁸ Industrial vessels are required to operate under one of four types of licences: 1) coastal demersal fishing (shrimp trawlers, fish and cephalopod trawlers, longliners); 2) deep-sea demersal fishing (shrimp trawlers, fish trawlers, longliners, spiny lobster trap boats); 3) coastal pelagic fishing (purse seiners and trawlers); and 4) offshore pelagic fishing (pole-and-line vessels, purse seiners, tuna and swordfish longliners).⁹

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), **irregular migration** refers to the movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination. Although a universally accepted definition of irregular migration does not exist, the term is generally used to identify persons moving outside regular migration channels.¹⁰

Overfishing occurs when fish are caught at a rate that exceeds the maximum sustainable yield (MSY), which is the largest yield (catch) that can be taken from a specific fish population over an indefinite period under constant environmental conditions. The MSY is a critical concept in fisheries management, as it represents the balance point where fish populations can replenish through natural reproduction at the same rate they are being harvested. When fishing pressure exceeds this level, the fish population is considered overexploited. Over time, this can lead to a decline in the population of the species being fished, reducing their ability to reproduce and sustain their numbers. Overfishing is often linked to poor fisheries management, lack of enforcement of regulations, and IUU fishing activities.¹¹

Pelagic fish are those that typically occupy the midwater and upper layers of the water column, relatively independent of the seabed.¹² **Small pelagic** species, including sardinella, horse mackerel, and bonga shad, play a central role in national food security. Traditionally consumed in smoked/braised and dried form, they support a vibrant artisanal processing sector, but are also increasingly used for industrial fishmeal and fish oil production.¹³



Executive summary

Mbour landing site – the largest in the country, both in terms of landings and the number of canoes that dock there. © EJF

- This report documents the impacts of overfishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in Senegal and how fisheries declines in the country are driving irregular migration to Europe. The findings are informed by interviews conducted across the Canary Islands and Senegal in June and July 2024, EJF's previous report on the environmental and socio-economic impacts of Senegal's bottom trawl industry, and additional desk-based research.
- Fishing is a cornerstone of the Senegalese economy and one of the primary sources of food security for the nation's inhabitants. It is estimated that the fishing sector provides jobs to around 3% of Senegal's workforce. Fish products contribute 7.9% of the population's total protein intake and are central to the Senegalese government's food security policy.
- Despite increasing landings over the past decade, Senegal's fisheries are under severe threat. The destructive and often illegal exploitation of fish populations threatens the economic and social wellbeing of communities that are heavily reliant on fishing for food and livelihoods.
- One of the factors contributing to Senegal's fisheries crisis is the involvement of foreign actors in the industrial fishing fleet, which engage in environmentally damaging practices under the cover of opaque joint venture agreements with domestic companies. Most of the fish caught by the industrial fleet is exported to foreign markets, particularly the EU and increasingly China, leaving local communities with limited access to fish and worsening food insecurity.
- As the crisis deepens, migration has become a vital coping strategy for many families in coastal communities. In 2024, the total number of migrants entering Spain irregularly reached 63,970, more than double the figure from 2022. The majority arrived in the Canary Islands, where arrivals surged by 200% between 2022 and 2024 alone. As local conditions worsen, more people are likely to undertake dangerous journeys in search of better prospects, further destabilising the social and economic fabric of Senegal's coastal communities.
- Detailed recommendations are provided to the Senegalese government, the EU, and the industrial fishing sector that fish in Senegalese waters.

Background

This report's findings are informed by interviews conducted with Senegalese migrants now living in the Canary Islands and with their families and wider fishing communities in coastal Senegal in June and July 2024. Interview data was supplemented by desk-based research and the findings of EJF's 2023 report, *At the tipping point: How bottom trawling is precipitating the collapse of Senegal's artisanal fisheries*. In Senegal, EJF investigators also interviewed local fishing authorities, and experts in Joal-Fadiouth, Thiaroye-Sur-Mer, and Bargny.

The interviews explored how fishery declines exacerbate irregular migration from Senegal to Spain, compounding factors such as unemployment, the longer-term impacts of COVID-19, and the attraction of moving to Europe. Testimonies provide anecdotal evidence, while data from secondary sources illuminates the wider context.

Senegal's fishing sector suffers from a lack of transparency, with limited publicly available information on licensed vessels, vessel ownership, operational conditions, and sanctions imposed for illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Similarly, data on migration along the West African Atlantic route is scarce and incomplete, with no harmonised approach to data collection except for arrivals in the Canary Islands. Little is known about the number of departures and attempted crossings from West African coasts, and many shipwrecks are believed to go unreported.¹⁴ Migrants may disappear without a trace, especially in cases where people are lost at sea or shipwrecks occur with no survivors.¹⁵



Fishers waiting for canoes to unload fish in Fass Boye.
© EJF



Traders and processors collecting catch in Joal-Fadiouth. © EJJ

Introduction: How Senegal's deepening fisheries and migration crises intersect

Fisheries play an essential role in ensuring food security in Senegal,¹⁶ having historically provided as much as 68% of energy intake of animal origin for local households,¹⁷ and sustained an average per capita consumption of fish products of 29 kg per year.¹⁸ However, due to declining market supply and a growing population, this figure has fallen to 17.8 kg per year.¹⁹ Small pelagics, which make up 75% of fish products consumed in Senegal,²⁰ are an important source of omega 3 and other unsaturated fatty acids and essential micronutrients.²¹

Small-scale fisheries also play a key role in supporting the informal sector, which remains the main driver of Senegal's economy, generating 44% of national value added.²² In 2019, the fishing sector provided jobs to an estimated 169,000 people, or about 3.2% of Senegal's workforce,²³ including 75,369 fishers, 45,250 jobs related to fishmongering, 47,500 jobs related to artisanal processing, as well as 800 jobs in carpentry, maintenance and repairs.²⁴

Fish products accounted for 10.7% of Senegal's exports by value in 2023.²⁵ Fishing is also a cultural activity for coastal communities, such as the Lebous and Niomynkas, who have religious ties with fishing.²⁶

The Senegalese fisheries sector has experienced substantial growth in recent decades. According to official government statistics, landings from Senegal's fisheries have increased steadily over the past decade, from a total of 418,886 tonnes in 2010 up to 533,479 tonnes in 2019.²⁷ In parallel, exports have risen, making Senegal Africa's fifth largest exporter of fish products by value.²⁸

Despite their importance to the national economy and food security, Senegalese fisheries are under threat. The proportion of Senegal's fish populations considered as 'collapsed', which designates catches at less than 10% of peak, more than doubled between 2000 and 2019.²⁹ The collapse of fish populations is attributable to the persistent overcapacity in Senegal's fishing fleet and the degradation of marine ecosystems by fishing techniques such as bottom trawling.

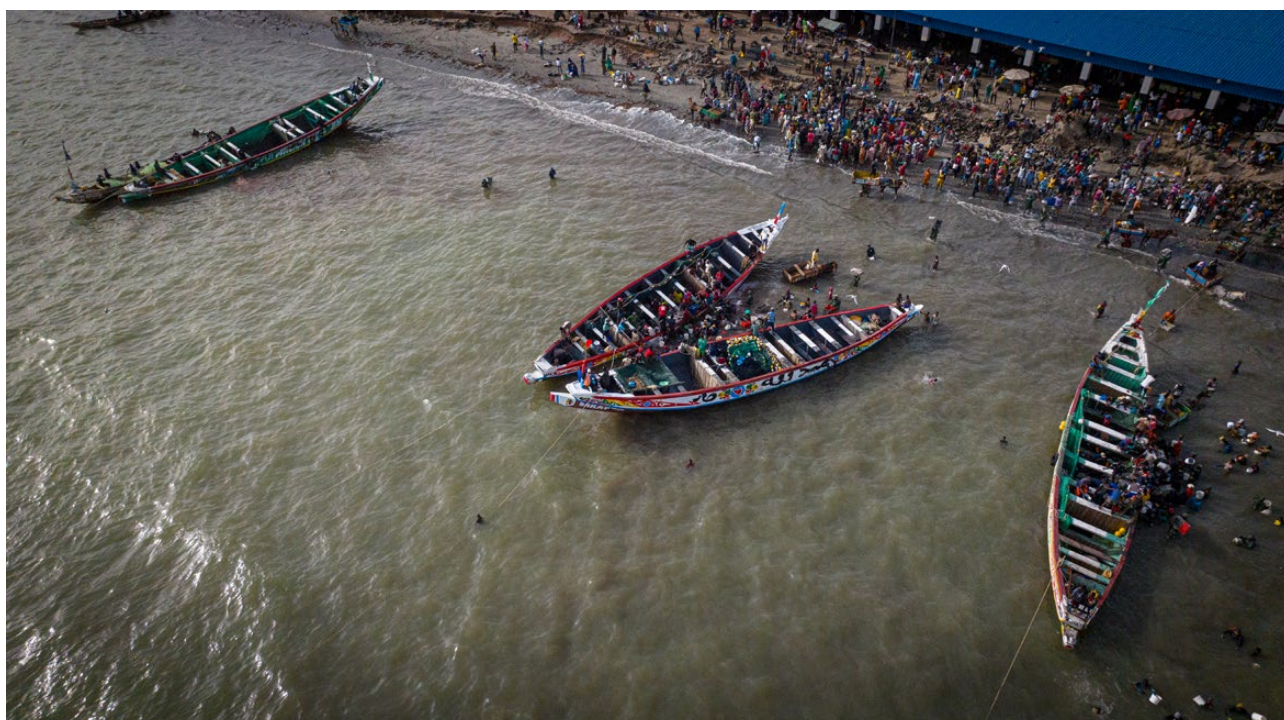
In addition, a substantial part of Senegal's industrial fleet is controlled by foreign interests via joint venture arrangements, which have been heavily criticised for their lack of transparency and environmentally damaging practices.³⁰ Most of the production of the industrial fleet is exported to foreign countries, with only a fraction destined for the local market.³¹ The EU is the top destination by value for Senegal's exports of fish products.³²



Aerial view of Chinese trawlers at the Port of Dakar. © EJF

Continued poor management of fishing resources, as well as the expansion of a largely foreign-owned bottom trawl fleet, is compounding the crisis of the artisanal fishing sector.³³ As Senegal's waters are depleted, productive marine habitats are degraded,

and incomes drop, small-scale fishers are struggling to survive, with increasing poverty, unemployment, social stress, and declining health and well-being reported in local communities.³⁴



Artisanal fishers unload their catch outside a fish market in Joal-Fadiouth. © EJF



Chinese vessels at the entrance of Dakar Port. © EJF

In this context, migration is perceived as the only viable alternative for many families in coastal communities. A total of 63,970 migrants entered Spain irregularly in 2024, more than double the figure from 2022.³⁵ This represents the highest number since 2018. The Canary Islands accounted for the majority of the arrivals, 46,843 — up nearly 200% from 2022.³⁶

The migration route from West Africa to the Canary Islands is the most lethal in the world,³⁷ plagued by frequent shipwrecks and disappearances. According to estimates from Spanish NGO, Caminando

Fronteras, a total of 3,176 migrants lost their lives while attempting the journey from Senegal to the Canary Islands in 2023.³⁸

In August 2023, a wooden boat was found drifting off the coast of Cape Verde, having set sail from Fass Boye, a coastal fishing community in Senegal, a month earlier. Of the 101 people on board, there were only 38 reported survivors.³⁹ Speaking to EJF, a father who lost several family members blamed the 2023 Fass Boye tragedy on the current fishing crisis.

“I lost my sons, nephews, and grandson in this tragedy. I lost my older brother’s son. I can say that I lost almost ten relatives in this shipwreck. It is so heartbreaking... Imagine spending three or four days at sea, and when landing you cannot even get back the fuel costs or any other charges for fishing cannot be covered either. No boats go to sea lately. And that’s the difficulties the young people are dealing with, and it caused this tragic death upon them, and that’s the most heartbreaking thing.”

Modou Boye Seck, resident in Fass Boye



Modou Boye Seck, resident in Fass Boye, laments the tragedy that resulted in the deaths of his family members. © EJF

Tragic cases such as these highlight the urgent need to further investigate the crisis in Senegal's fisheries. This report provides an overview of overfishing and IUU fishing in Senegal, and explores how a chronic lack of transparency allows joint venture companies to operate under opaque corporate structures. The report explains how two key trends in the fishing sector – a rise in exports and a decrease in local consumption – are affecting Senegal's food security.

Using first-hand testimonies and secondary literature, the report discusses the factors that play into the decision to migrate. The final section highlights this decision-making process with two compelling case studies – a son who migrated to the Canary Islands, and his father who stayed behind in Senegal.

Recommendations are provided to the Senegalese government, the EU, and the industrial fishing sector that fish in Senegalese waters.





Joal-Fadiouth's fish market. © EJF

Overfishing and fish population declines

Senegal's fish populations are under threat. Models based on reconstructed catch data suggest that 57% of the fish populations exploited in Senegal are in a state of collapse.⁴⁰ Decades of overfishing by both the industrial and artisanal fleets, as well as increasing export volumes, and the rise of non-food uses such as fishmeal and fish oil, have placed immense pressure on both small pelagic and demersal fish populations. These pressures threaten not only Senegal's food security but also the jobs and livelihoods of those employed in the fisheries sector, including small-scale fishers, fish traders, and processors.

Small pelagics make up 75% of fish products consumed in Senegal.⁴¹ Artisanal processing, a crucial component of Senegal's food security, relies heavily on small pelagics. A preliminary report published in 2024 by the Fishery Committee for the Eastern Central Atlantic (CECAF) indicates that populations of sardinella and bonga shad — the most commonly consumed small pelagics — are currently in a state of 'overexploitation' in the region.⁴² In 2019, the CECAF had advised that a 50% reduction in fishing effort was required for all sardinella species and repeatedly called – along with local community organisations – for 'strong and urgent action.'⁴³

Species	Area	Not fully exploited	Fully exploited	Overexploited
Sardine (<i>Sardina pilchardus</i>)	Zone A+B		√	
	Zone C			√
Round sardinella (<i>Sardinella aurita</i>)	Whole subregion			√
Flat sardinella (<i>Sardinella maderensis</i>)	Whole subregion			√
European horse mackerel (<i>Trachurus trachurus</i>)	Whole subregion			√
Cunene horse mackerel (<i>Trachurus trecae</i>)	Whole subregion		√	
Chub mackerel (<i>Scomber colias</i>)	Whole subregion		√	
Anchovy (<i>Engraulis encrasicolus</i>)	Zone N & Zone A+B		√	
Bonga (<i>Ethmalosa fimbriata</i>)	Mauritania / Senegal / Gambia			√

No assessments for *Caranx rhonchus*. Assessments do not include data from the Canary Islands stocks.

Summary of assessment results of small pelagic fish off Northwest Africa, FAO-CECAF 2024⁴⁴

EJF conducted semi-structured interviews in June 2024 with migrants who had made the journey from Senegal to the Canary Islands ($n = 12$). When asked about trends in fish populations over the past several years, there was a consensus amongst participants that there had been a significant decrease.

"There was a time when fishing was very rewarding. But in recent years, fish have decreased considerably. The only reason pointed out by people is that [the fish decline] is caused by the foreign boats—that these boats are the ones who ruined the sea."

Papa Sady Bieng, migrant and former fisher

"During those times, there were abundant fish... There were not a lot of boats. Fishermen could get what they were looking for. But with the changes of former presidents, the sea was sold, and that's when the Chinese boats started doing super exploitative fishing. When they fish, their nets pick everything, including small and inappropriate fish. They didn't sort out what they wanted or not; they took everything. Then, it caused you to have to go farther from the distance you used to go to catch fish. So, if you used to go 7 km, now you have to pass 30, 40, or 50 km to see fish. Plus, the kind of fish you eventually caught would be of small weight."

Moussa Diop, migrant and former fisher



Moussa Diop. © EJF

In addition to small pelagics, coastal demersal fisheries have long been at overcapacity. According to a 2014 assessment, the industrial coastal demersal fleet had been operating at, on average, 51% overcapacity over an extended period of time.⁴⁵

Abundance indices and biomass for ten key demersal fish populations have respectively declined by as much as 72% and 63% since exploitation began.⁴⁶ According

to scientific reports, seven out of ten assessed demersal fish populations have been 'overexploited' in the past five years.⁴⁷ While factors such as overcapacity in the artisanal fleet and the climate crisis also play a role in the observed changes in fish populations, all indicators suggest that the large-scale exploitation of demersal resources by the industrial fleet has been threatening Senegal's marine life. As a result, the livelihoods of those who depend on the fishing industry are at risk.



Industrial vessels at the Port of Dakar. © EJF

Illegal and destructive fishing practices are widespread

IUU fishing is a serious challenge for Senegal's fishing industry and a significant factor in fisheries declines. Illegal fishing is highly lucrative globally, generating billions of dollars of illicit financial flows every year.⁴⁸ It is often associated with forgery, fraud, and other enabling crimes, as well as forced labour and money laundering.⁴⁹ Illegal operators evade detection by changing vessel names, concealing ownership, switching flags, or removing ships from registers. Fishing licences are often issued without public oversight, making it harder to detect and prevent crimes.

Previous EJF investigations have found that bottom trawl vessels operating in West and Central African waters are routinely involved in a range of illegal activities, including using nets with an illegal mesh size, incursions into the zone reserved for artisanal fishers, fraud (under-reporting of tonnage), fishing without a licence, and tampering with vessel positioning systems.⁵⁰ Illegally modified nets with a small mesh size catch everything in their path, decimating the fish populations upon which artisanal fishers depend for their livelihoods. The illegal incursion of industrial vessels into the zone reserved for artisanal fishing is also a major concern, with the overwhelming majority of Senegalese artisanal fishers interviewed by EJF in 2023 (88%) reporting that they often observed bottom trawlers fishing in or around their fishing grounds.⁵¹

Between January and July 2024, the Senegalese authorities arrested 24 fishing vessels for offences including fishing in prohibited areas, illegal transshipment of fishery products, fishing without authorisation, failure to have a fishing licence on board, and fishing and possession of immature species.⁵²

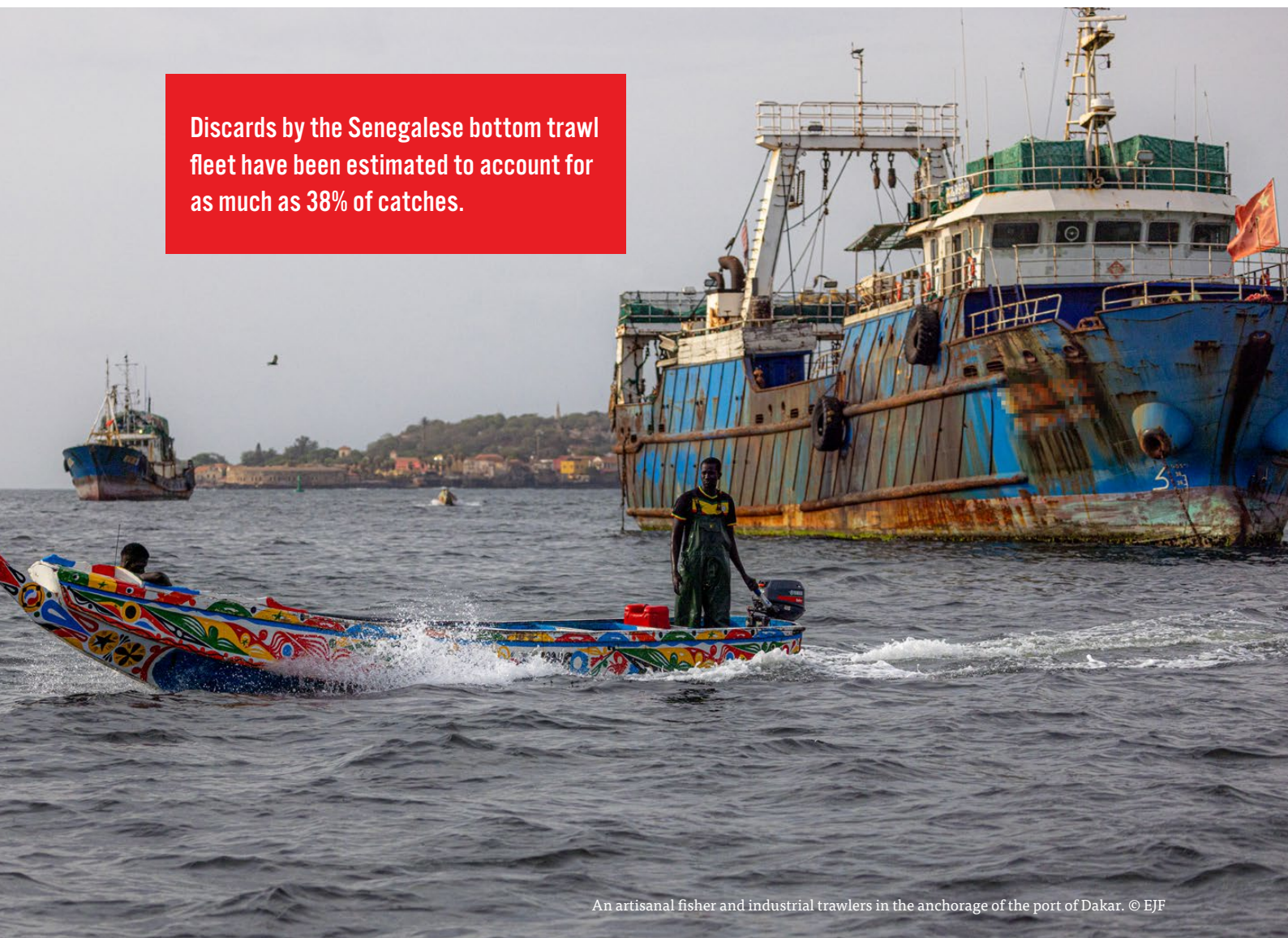
A major portion of fishing vessels licensed to operate in Senegal are controlled by foreign entities. EJF's analysis of available licence data for 2019, 2022 and 2024 found that, on average, 45.3% of licensed vessels were foreign-controlled, with the foreign controlling entities predominantly identified as Spanish and Chinese. While the majority of bottom trawlers with licences to fish are flagged to Senegal, analysis by EJF revealed that at least 41.3% of these vessels are controlled by foreign entities. Foreign control may be even more extensive, as beneficial ownership and/or controlling entities could not be identified for around a quarter of vessels licensed in Senegal.⁵³

A number of foreign companies that hold fishing licences in Senegalese waters have a documented history of IUU fishing. This includes Chinese company CHANGHAI COUNTY ZHANGZIDAO YIFENG AQUATIC PRODUCT CO LTD, whose vessels YI FENG 15 and YI FENG 16, are reported to have fished without authorisation in Gambian waters and tampered with their positioning system;⁵⁴ and Korean company DONG WON, fined by Liberia for fishing without a licence and failing to declare its catches.⁵⁵

*** The EU gives a 'yellow card' to Senegal ***

The European Commission has the power to bar access to the EU market for fish products originating from designated 'non-cooperating third countries' that fail to discharge their duties under international law to take action against IUU fishing. Before designating a country as non-cooperating, the Commission initiates an informal dialogue with the relevant national authorities. Failure to address the proposed measures by the Commission can lead to the country being designated as a 'non-cooperating third country' (known as 'identification' or 'red card').⁵⁶ In May 2024, the EU issued a 'yellow card' to Senegal, requesting that the country step up its fight against IUU fishing.⁵⁷

Discards by the Senegalese bottom trawl fleet have been estimated to account for as much as 38% of catches.



An artisanal fisher and industrial trawlers in the anchorage of the port of Dakar. © EJF

Interviews with migrants conducted by EJJ investigators in 2024 highlight the destruction of fishing gear, collisions, and other incidents of violence between industrial vessels and artisanal boats.

"My most hurtful and heartbreaking experience was when I had an accident at sea... My uncle and his child died in that accident. I and three other people were the only survivors... We anchored [in the sea] in the middle of the night and a boat came and hit us. While our boat was sinking, I succeeded to grip onto the arms of the boat. Both my hands have scars because of that."

"[The Chinese vessels] came to our boats' zones. They came to these zones and picked up every fish there. So, we wouldn't catch anything. Plus, some of these boats hit or hurt fishermen. They got into a collision and hurt the fishermen."

Samba, migrant and former fisher



Samba, 27, arrived in Tenerife in March 2024 and is originally from Podor, Senegal. © EJJ

"Well, the thing about Chinese boats is not only that they fish in our sea, but they cause us harm. They destroyed our fishing materials. Sometimes they drive over our boats and kill some people on board and then run away so that nobody could know who did that. And it's so easy to get in trouble with them. Sometimes, you could get near them to speak to them, and they will throw hot water on you. And you are helpless in front of them because their boats are bigger. They are bigger than us, and they have more material, and we are so defenceless before their boats."

"I was landing when my dad called me to inform me that [my cousin] Abdoulaye got into an accident... it was around 6 a.m. that they were hit by a boat which then drove up on them so that their boat was broken."

Souleymane Sady, migrant and former fisher



Souleymane Sady, 27, arrived in Tenerife in November 2020 and is originally from Joal-Fadiouth, Senegal. © EJJ

In addition to the socio-economic consequences, overfishing and IUU fishing are reducing the resilience of fish populations and marine ecosystems, making them more vulnerable to the impacts of climate breakdown.⁵⁸

Key environmental consequences of overfishing and IUU fishing

| Depletion of fish populations - Failure to comply with maximum catch limits can lead to the overexploitation, decline, and ultimate collapse of fish populations. Moreover, in situations where catches are not reported, or misreported, the competent authorities may overestimate the size of the fish population and set the following year's catch quota too high, potentially accelerating overexploitation.

| High levels of bycatch - Bottom trawling is highly unselective meaning it is associated with high levels of bycatch which is often discarded dead or dying back into the ocean. Bycatch includes the non-target fish that are economically undesirable either due to their size, quality or species, and often includes juvenile fish, removing the next generation. Despite the fact that bycatch is often fit for human consumption and/or concerns species that are of local and regional importance, it is often simply dumped overboard in large volumes. Discards by the Senegalese bottom trawl fleet have been estimated to account for as much as 38% of catches.⁵⁹

| Climate change implications - Healthy fish populations and marine ecosystems play a role in carbon sequestration. By damaging these ecosystems, IUU fishing risks reducing the ocean's ability to sequester carbon dioxide, exacerbating the climate crisis.⁶⁰ A preliminary assessment conducted by EJF suggests that trawling of Senegal's seabed may disturb a large volume of sediment, potentially impacting the country's blue carbon stocks.⁶¹

| Disruption of food webs - The harvesting of certain species can in some circumstances disrupt food webs, impacting other marine organisms that depend on those species for food. This can alter ecosystem dynamics, especially when combined with other pressures.⁶²



Fishers carrying catch at Joal-Fadiouth's fish market. © EJF

Lack of transparency in fisheries management

The lack of transparency in Senegal's fisheries management has contributed to the overexploitation of the country's fisheries resources. Senegalese small-scale fishers and civil society alike have expressed concerns regarding opaque practices in the management of industrial fishing vessels.⁶³ Concerns relate to the number of licences issued, the list of authorised vessels, the conditions of access to fishery resources, the process for allocating fishing licences, the imposition of sanctions, the use of fines, resource access agreements and protocols, information on licence fees collected, the status of the fish resources, and the entity mandated to issue licences, quotas, species and seasonal fishing restrictions.⁶⁴

EJF interviewed former fishers who have migrated to the Canary Islands from Senegal, as well as their family members living in Joal-Fadiouth. They expressed concerns regarding the number of fishing licences issued to industrial vessels.

"We have to stop granting these licences freely to industrial boats, because artisanal boats live on small pelagic species."

Abo Sady, fish trader



Abo Sady, fish trader. © EJF

"I think what the government needs to do is reduce the fishing licences. Once they are diminished I think we will notice lots of changes in the sea."

"First, the thing that can lessen the immigration phenomenon is to diminish the fishing licences. So the young people can work, the sea can be stable, and fish will be abundant again. However, as long as the boats are numerous, the sea will never be abundant with fish."

Souleymane Sady, migrant and former fisher

"I want to ask European governments... to lessen the fishing licenses to avoid them becoming too numerous, and to not seek their own interests by signing too many agreements."

Papa Sady, fisher

The 2019–2024 protocol implementing the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement (SFPA) between the EU and Senegal provided for access to 43 EU tuna fishing vessels and 2 EU trawlers. A 2023 study on fisheries agreements published by the European Commission notes that most SFPAs contain a clause requiring the relevant parties to be more transparent.⁶⁵ The only exception was the agreement with Senegal, where there was no such clause. In concrete terms, while the EU made public the identity of its vessels fishing in Senegalese waters, the agreement did not provide for the sharing and publication of information regarding the identity of other vessels authorised to fish in the country's waters. The SFPA between the EU and Senegal expired in November 2024. As part of his reforms, President Bassirou Diomaye Faye has promised to undertake an 'evaluation of fishing agreements and licences' aimed at preserving Senegal's resources and protecting small-scale fisheries.⁶⁶

The establishment of SFPAs can provide a means of promoting sustainable ocean governance and contribute to the global fight against IUU fishing. However, it is essential that these access agreements incorporate a transparency clause, particularly emphasising the requirement for the publication of who fishes what, when, where and how. Public access agreements must allow for meaningful engagement of civil society organisations across



Fish traders carrying catch to Joal-Fadiouth's fish market. © EJF

all phases of their life cycle, and be truly equitable to effectively contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Senegalese legislation limits access to the country's waters for foreign vessels, permitting entry only under an intergovernmental fishing access agreement or through charter arrangements with legal entities established under Senegalese law.⁶⁷ Based on information published by the Senegalese authorities, 132 of the 151 vessels authorised in May 2024 were under the national flag, while the remaining 19 were vessels covered by the SFPAs with the EU.⁶⁸ Despite some weak clauses, the SFPAs between the EU and Senegal maintained transparency through accessible agreement terms, financial details, vessel information, scientific data, and stakeholder consultations. This was notable in a generally opaque context, where, for instance, a public licence list had been unavailable for five years.

The issue of transparency is especially pronounced in relation to joint venture agreements with foreign entities, which allow foreign-controlled vessels to register under the national flag and apply for a local fishing licence. In theory, joint ventures with the involvement of foreign investors are justifiable as they can allow coastal countries that lack capital, infrastructure and markets to develop their own

industrial fishing industries with the support of foreign funds. 'Legitimate' joint ventures are common, with a genuine share of control between the local partner and the foreign investor with a transfer of skills and technology.⁶⁹

However, opaque corporate structures also allow many fictitious joint ventures to be created whereby the local partner acts only as a 'front' or agent for the foreign investor that in reality retains ownership and control of the vessels. Major economic issues have emerged within such arrangements, in particular when local partners are not treated as genuine owners, do not receive any transfer of knowledge or technology and are victims of financial manipulations to avoid receiving their supposed share of genuine profits.⁷⁰

These opaque corporate structures may enable overfishing and IUU fishing to occur. The lack of transparency conceals the identities of beneficial owners, precluding detection and sanction where their vessels engage in illicit activities. Front companies can be used to shield controlling entities and beneficial owners from liability for illegal fishing activities involving vessels officially registered to the front company. It is therefore crucial to identify the true actors and companies behind fishing activities to ensure that sanctions deter future IUU fishing offences.

Rise in exports, decline in local consumption and food security

The Senegalese fisheries sector, traditionally driven by the local consumption of small pelagics, has progressively been shifting towards an export-driven economy. The EU is Senegal's top importer of fish products by value, representing a total of US\$208 million per year on average over the 2019–2022 period.⁷¹ Spain is the largest importer of Senegalese fish products in the EU, with 44% of the EU total (by value).⁷²

Between 2008 and 2018, export volumes of fish products overtook local consumption, increasing from 77,000 tonnes to almost 294,000 tonnes against an average annual supply to the local market estimated at less than 200,000 tonnes.⁷³ This is coupled with a substantial proportion of small pelagic landings being destined for fishmeal production, estimated to amount to over 20,000 tonnes of fish every year.⁷⁴ As Deme et al. (2022) suggest, export

trends of coastal pelagics, combined with the emergence of non-food uses such as the processing of fishmeal, threaten national food security and the sustainability of the small pelagic fishery. The drop in supply to the artisanal processing sector also threatens the employment of thousands of women fish processors and compromises their livelihoods.⁷⁵

As exports have risen, local consumption of fish has followed a downward trend, falling from a historical average of 29 kg per capita⁷⁶ to 17.8 kg in 2021.⁷⁷ EJF investigators conducted semi-structured interviews between September 2022 and May 2023 with artisanal fishers, artisanal fish processors, and fishmongers in the coastal communities of Kayar and Fass Boye. The vast majority of interview participants reported having less fish available for consumption and experiencing more difficulty feeding their household in recent years.⁷⁸



Fishers gather a fishing net in Joal-Fadiouth. © EJF



Artisanal fishers at Joal-Fadiouth. © EJF

The 2024 Global Hunger Index, which measures hunger at the global, regional, and national scales, ranks Senegal 72nd out of 127, with a moderate level of hunger.⁷⁹ According to the FAO, there is a 4% prevalence of severe food insecurity in Senegal, and a 4.6% prevalence of undernourishment, as a three-year average between 2021 and 2023.⁸⁰

Two decades ago, the FAO identified pressures on fish resources and the rush to export high value products, as among the main factors that influence Senegal's food security.⁸¹ Those who are most affected are female processors who traditionally smoke, salt, dry and sell the fish to local markets, artisanal fishers, and coastal communities who depend on fish for their animal protein intake.

The increasing price of fish products also exacerbates food insecurity. Thiao et al. (2018) analysed average monthly prices of four major fish products and a consumer price index from 1998 to 2014 and concluded that it had become more challenging to provide an adequate supply of fish for the Senegalese population.⁸² They suggest that the degradation of fish resources is mainly due to ineffective fisheries management and the failure to regulate the heavy fishing pressure resulting from structural overcapacity.

Consequently, during the last two decades, the main fish products in Senegal have been characterised by rising prices with strong fluctuations.⁸³ The price of fresh sardinella – a small pelagic fish widely consumed across the country – more than doubled from 1998 to 2010. Smoked sardinella, which is relatively more expensive than fresh sardinella, also had a similar pricing pattern.⁸⁴

To sum up, a number of interconnected factors are driving the rise in irregular migration from West Africa to the EU. The country's opaque and poor fisheries management has led to overcapacity in both artisanal and industrial fishing fleets. Overfishing and IUU fishing have depleted fish populations, reducing income for artisanal fishers and threatening Senegal's food security in the longer term. In this context, deteriorating living conditions, lack of alternative livelihoods, and additional factors—such as family and social pressures—contribute to the increase in irregular migration. The following sections delve into the factors influencing migrants' decision-making processes, taking a closer look at recent trends in irregular migration.

Decision to migrate

The decision to migrate is a multi-faceted one, with individual, family, and systemic factors at play. First-hand testimonies from former fishers in the Canary Islands, as well as interviews with their families and local community members, reveal that the current fisheries context is a significant factor in the decision to migrate. This section provides an overview of the interwoven factors, and the relationship between declining fish populations, overfishing, and irregular migration.

A 2019 research study published by IOM, based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, found that the underlying factors of migration include: the economic situation, environmental degradation (scarcity of fisheries and deforestation), deficiency of means of production, lack of storage, processing and transport facilities, and poor business in fishing and farming.⁸⁵ The 'lack of economic opportunities' factor was confirmed at both the individual and household level. Social pressure caused by networks of family and friends, as well as the positive image associated with migration, were also found to be relevant factors.⁸⁶

IOM found that the decision to migrate was usually made individually, but could also be largely influenced by family and networks of relatives. Out of the migrants who took part in the study, 66% were alone in their migration decision-making process, while 61% already had a relative who attempted international migration.⁸⁷

The scarcity of fish along the West African coast exacerbates a myriad of social and socio-economic issues, including unemployment, poverty, lack of healthcare and educational opportunities, as well as tensions arising as local communities lose their traditional livelihoods.⁸⁸ External shocks in recent years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have also led to rising prices of consumer goods, a decline in purchasing power, and other economic challenges, which have clearly impacted Senegalese dissatisfaction with living conditions.⁸⁹

Politically, Senegal remains one of the most stable countries in Africa, having overcome violent political protests in 2023 and a period of political uncertainty in 2024. After a series of doubts as to whether Senegal's presidential election would take place before the end of President Macky Sall's term in April 2024, the election was held without any major incidents and in a transparent manner.⁹⁰

Economically, however, the World Bank identifies continuing structural challenges, including persistent inflation, low productivity and limited human capital.⁹¹ In surveys conducted in Senegal, unemployment consistently ranks as one of the most pressing and increasingly prevalent concerns for the government to address.⁹² Finding work and escaping economic hardship are the most frequently cited reasons to consider emigrating.⁹³

According to official government statistics, Senegal's unemployment rate has increased markedly in recent years, from an average of 16% in 2016–2019 up to 22.3% in 2020–2024, with an all-time high of 26.1% in the second quarter of 2020.⁹⁴ Senegalese youth are particularly vulnerable, with unemployment impacting 32.5% of young people aged 15 to 34 (40.7% in rural areas) in 2024.⁹⁵

Research has shown that, in the face of unemployment, more and more young people in fishing communities – especially men, the traditional breadwinners – choose to migrate as a last resort.⁹⁶ Interviews conducted by EIJF supported this finding.

"The lack of jobs is the main reason why young people are risking their life by taking a boat, and I am a good example of that. Imagine someone who gets his high school diploma, goes to university, and who decides to risk his life by taking a boat into the unknown. If there were jobs in Senegal, we wouldn't do that."

Moussa Diop, migrant and former fisher

"If young people had work, they would stay in their country and work there. But the issue is you finish your studies and you can't find work to practise your knowledge. Then you get frustrated and decide to leave. That's the reason for the high rate of immigration. It's not about wanting to run away from our country or not loving it."

Souleymane Sady, migrant and former fisher

***"If I was able to gain enough money in fishing,
I would never have come to Europe."***

Memedou Racine Seck, migrant and former fisher

Recently arrived migrant Memedou
Racine Seck, Center Las Raíces
in Tenerife, 2024. © EJF



"At a certain period, it was hard because you went fishing and caught fish but could not earn anything from it because there were lots of charges such as the ice, fuel, and these kinds of things."

"If you cannot have food, you wouldn't want to stay in your home. You will evidently go away. You don't even care about the hardships; you only have to go somewhere else to find jobs or something to do. That's the reason why we made this mission."

Abdou Rakhmane Sow, migrant and former fisher



Recently arrived migrant Abdou Rakhmane Sow sits outside the Centre Las Raíces in Tenerife, Canary Islands, in 2024. © EJF

In addition to unemployment, social and family pressures also factor in the decision-making process. One recurring theme in EJF's interviews was the frustration migrants had felt about not being able to provide for their families due to their low incomes from fishing. This was particularly the case for first-born sons. Observers note that emigration is 'a family mode of adaptation to the economic crisis', with hopes being placed in the success of the migrating son.⁹⁷

"Man, I am so impatient to answer that question because that situation affects me so much every day... I was the bread-earner of my family and they all relied on me. I am the firstborn and I am the only financial support in the household because... our dad is old now and he counts on me... Every day, I think about how they are managing to live. Yes, that weighs heavily on me."

Ibrahima Drame, migrant and former fisher

“We are from a community where helping your parents and families is a necessity. We have to share everything with them.”

Moussa Diop, migrant and former fisher

“There is nothing more frustrating than being a grown young man who has to help his mom, but ends up having to count on his mom to take care of his needs... you have to depend on your mom for your daily expenses. You and your family and [your] mothers's activities only depend on the fish caught at sea, so, how can your mom help you then, if the sea has no fish?”

“Our children used to bring lots of fish and they cannot anymore. They can spend 15 days in a row fishing and catch nothing. They were the ones helping us with the expenses, now we have to help them.”

Nafi Kebé, resident of Bargny and local fish processor



Nafi Kebé, resident of Bargny and local fish processor. © EJF



Fisher bringing in catch in Fass Boye. © EJF

Senegalese youth face a ‘vocation crisis’ whereby they aspire less and less to follow in the footsteps of their fathers and express uncertainties over the future of fishing.⁹⁸ A fisher in Joal-Fadiouth, whose two sons had migrated to the Canary Islands, told EJF:

“They all left because they saw how hard our situation was. I was aware of it, and perhaps they didn’t want to experience the same life I was facing... I first advised them to take the responsibility and take my boat to go fish, but they didn’t want that option. They said I had been doing this for years without being able to change the situation, and as they grew up, they couldn’t accept living in that same difficult situation. They couldn’t live with that, and they said they prayed to God to be able to put me out of that precarious situation.”

Papa Sady, Joal-Fadiouth fisher and father of migrants
Abdoulaye and Souleymane Sady

When asked what was attractive about migrating, migrants said they wanted to build a more stable future and create a business:

“My dream is also to return to my country to invest and build something there. To have my own company there too. Those are the dreams I have deeply in me. To build my own company, to have my own job, to help people in need with my own means.”

Abdoulaye Sady, migrant and former fisher

“Being able to build a house for my own family is something I want to accomplish... a house where you can accommodate the family, your mom, to help them live there. And when you have your own house, no one will disrespect you.”

Papa Sady Bieng, migrant and former fisher



Recently arrived migrant Michael Sene photographed outside Center Las Raíces in Tenerife, in 2024. © EJF

“All my gains were only enough for food, drinking, and daily expenses. And as a young person, when you are working, you want to upgrade. To start a family and to create something on your own. You plan to build something and employ other people... to create a structure where people can come and work.”

“Life is not only about eating and drinking. Every worker wishes to gain something, to start a family, to build a house.”

Michael Sene, migrant and former fisher

Despite this, the idea of migrating to Europe was often framed as a last resort, considered only after not being able to gain enough money in fishing:

“If everything was as it should be in Senegal, I wouldn't have come here personally.”

Mamadou Thiam, migrant and former fisher

“The reason why I left Senegal for Europe is that I have no hope there. We used to go working and take care of our needs, and suddenly we could no longer have some. Even being able to keep a little 1,000 CFA to give the family is an issue. That's what influenced me the most to take a boat to come to Europe.”

Ibrahima Drame, migrant and former fisher



Recently arrived migrant Ibrahima Drame photographed outside Center Las Raíces in Tenerife, in 2024. © EJF



Recently arrived migrant Idrisa Seye stands outside Center Las Raíces in Tenerife, 2024. © EJF

"Imagine someone leaving Senegal despite the fact that Senegal is so good, and leaving your family behind despite how dear they are to you. You leave all that behind, especially your wife, to get here... You used to spend events with your family, and now you left behind all these events just to be able to take care of them."

"I worked as a fisherman for almost 10 years. When I first started, the sea was abundant. But over the years, things became so hard, little by little. As the chief of our families, many people were depending on us, and the sea was not as it used to be. And that's what made us take the risks, and we have hope in [coming] here. That's why we took the risk to leave our family, our wives, and everyone behind by coming here through the sea because of that hope."

Idrisa Seye, migrant and former fisher

In the Canary Islands, there was a consensus amongst participants that the decline in fish populations was a significant reason behind their decision to leave. Several participants cited this as the primary or sole reason. Equally, in Senegal, all interview participants – family members, local artisanal fishing councils, and experts – described the decline in fish populations as a major factor driving the migration of their relatives, friends, and peers.

"The sea is the one thing we have. So all our time is spent there, working frantically day and night, without catching any fish because the [industrial] boats exploit everything. You fail to catch any fish. You always land empty-handed, and sometimes you have to pay back fuel charges. Having to pay debts without catching any fish is hard to deal with. That's the only reason we all want to leave Senegal. Since the government cannot regulate the boats and we cannot work normally, we choose to run away from the country to come here for stability."

Souleymane Sady, migrant and former fisher



Artisanal fishing in Djiffer, a traditional fishing village in Senegal. © EJF

"That's why fishermen who were fishing for 1 or 2 years, noticing they cannot catch what they used to have, saw the clandestine immigration as an opportunity and they took that option. That's the reason for this clandestine immigration."

Alassane Wade, Coordinator of the
Local Artisanal Fishing Council, Bargny

"When there was enough fish, boats were only used for fishing. Now, knowing that putting fuel on a boat, going fishing, landing and not being sure you'll get your money back, [fishers] tried to find an alternative. And that alternative is what? It's to use their boats to take people from Senegal to Europe's nearest coasts."

"I think that if fishermen were able to catch enough fish when they go fishing, they wouldn't venture into taking that road, which is very dangerous and it's the cause of lots of accidents and loss of human life."

Dame Mboup, Programme Manager
of Global Fishing Watch

When asked what was driving the scarcity of fish, most participants cited the involvement of foreign vessels as a major factor. Many believed the Senegalese government to be 'selling off' the sea, and expressed animosity towards foreign vessels who 'came to steal' their fish and 'destroy' the sea.

"Because now, there are lots of boats in the sea. Yes, lots of boats, the big ones, the vessels actually. That's what destroyed [the sea], which is very different from the past."

"[The government] made the decision to sell the sea and we made the decision to go away by the sea."

Abdou Rakhmane Sow, migrant and former fisher

"I dropped out of school and started going to the sea at the age of 12. But the sea started to be destroyed. Because there are lots of boats and they are destroying the sea. The boats are so numerous so there are no fish. That's the reason why most of us rose up and decided to come here."

Souleymane Sady, migrant and former fisher

"The government has sold the whole sea. They sold it to the [industrial] boats. Sometimes, you could be working in a zone and suddenly you are surrounded by 6 or 7 [industrial] boats... they can take away your nets. Every catch you were supposed to have would be taken by these boats... And these boats fish the whole day, day and night. They never stop. So, all the fish we were supposed to catch, they caught in the night. Or if you set your nets at night, you come back to see that they tore them all... They run away with your nets."

Idrisa Seye, migrant and former fisher

"I get so angry when these nations complain about immigration, because they are the real pirates and what they do is worse than clandestine immigration. We are risking our life to go, but they come here to steal our fish."

Karim Sall, President of AGIRE



An artisanal fisher and industrial trawler at the anchorage of the port of Dakar. © EJF

Trends in irregular migration

The number of migrants crossing from West Africa to Spain’s Canary Islands has increased dramatically in recent years, from 425 in 2017 to 46,843 in 2024, more than a hundredfold increase (**Figure 1**).

According to Spanish NGO Caminando Fronteras, the migration route from Senegal to the Canary Islands rose in importance in 2023, claiming an estimated 3,176 lives.⁹⁹ Political and social upheaval led to a surge in irregular migration in 2023, the NGO’s research found, and is directly linked to the impacts of foreign industrial fishing activity on fish stocks and local livelihoods, which sparked protests across the country.¹⁰⁰

The unfolding crisis has prompted the emergence of a new demographic of migrants making the crossing between Senegal and the Canary Islands, with a significant proportion of children and adolescents, aged 8–17, making the journey in 2023 and 2024, as well as women and very young children, including babies.¹⁰¹ In January 2025, a woman was reported to have given birth to a baby girl on a migrant boat off the coast of the Canary Islands. A total of 60 migrants were on board, including 14 women and four children.¹⁰²

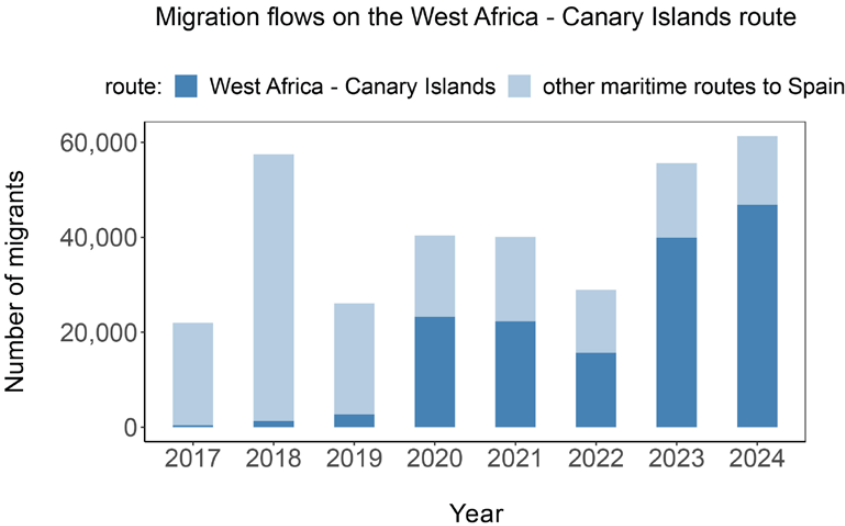


Figure 1: Total number of migrants arriving in Spain including migrants arriving via the West Africa – Canary Islands route (dark blue) (source: Spanish government).

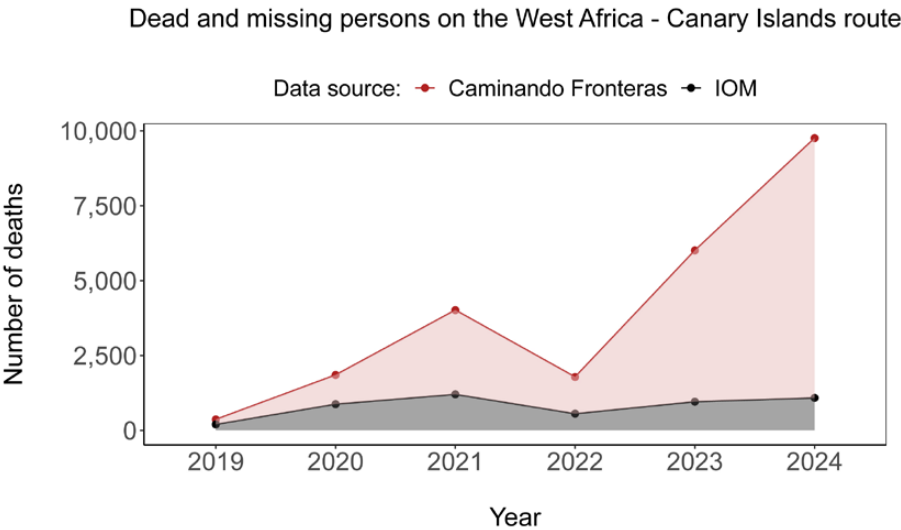
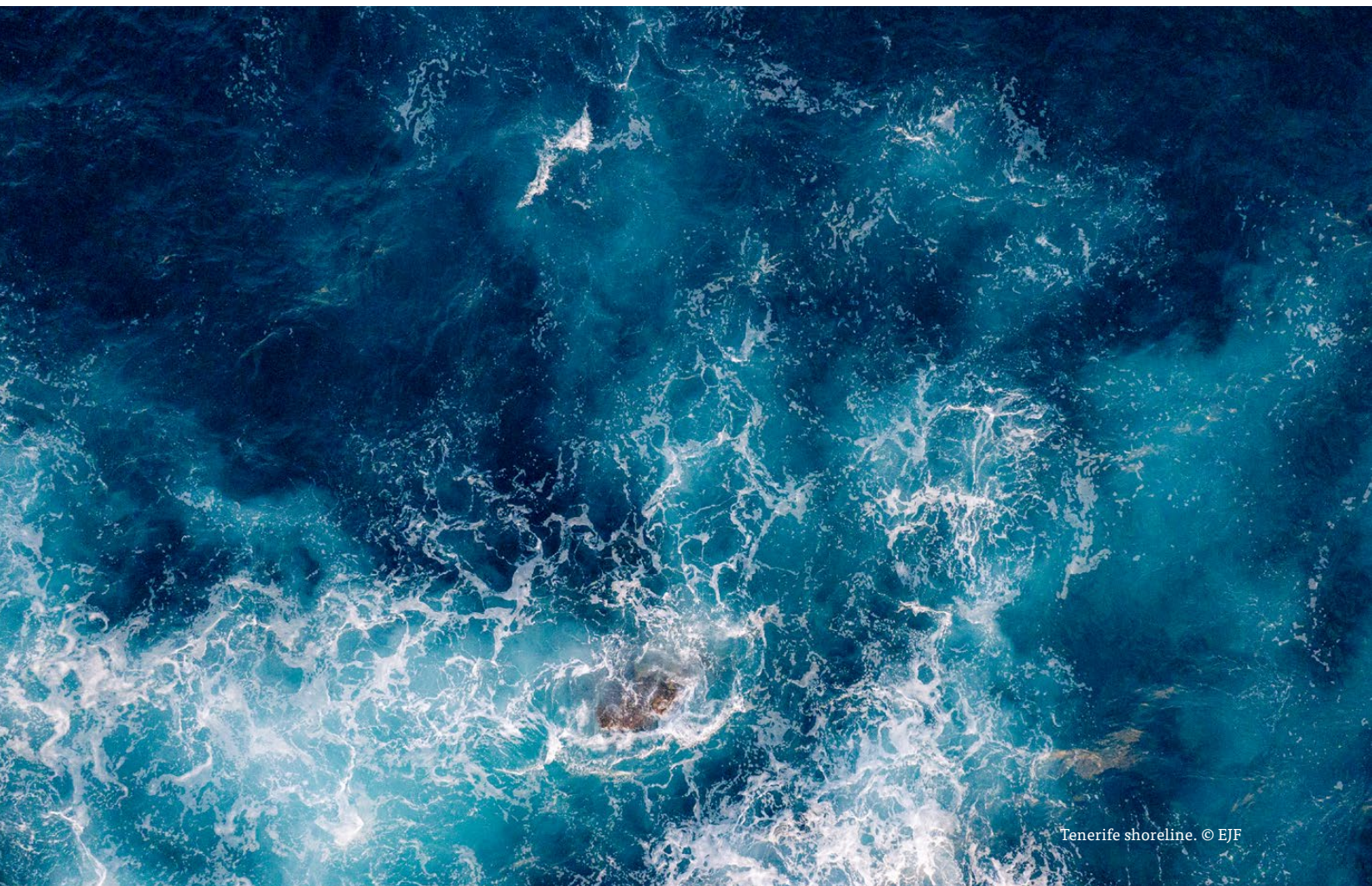


Figure 2: Estimated number of dead and missing migrants on the West Africa – Canary Islands route, according to Caminando Fronteras (red) and the IOM (black).

According to data recorded by the IOM's Missing Migrant Project, there have been a total of 4,888 deaths and disappearances along the West Africa/ Atlantic route to the Canary Islands between 2019 and 2024 (**Figure 2**)¹⁰³ Figures published by Caminando Fronteras are significantly higher, with an estimated 9,757 victims recorded in 2024 alone, of which 22% (2,127 victims) embarked from Senegal and Gambia.¹⁰⁴

The route to the Canary Islands is considered extremely hazardous due in large part to the length of the overseas journey and lack of dedicated search-and-rescue capacity.¹⁰⁵ The distance from Senegal to the Canary Islands ranges from 1,000 km (600 miles) to 2,000 km across the open ocean, depending on the departure point—about 10 times longer than other migrant routes crossing the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁶ Available data on deaths and disappearances among migrants along the West Africa – Canary Islands route is limited and likely to be underestimated, as many shipwrecks remain unreported (**Figure 3**). Little information is known about the profiles of missing migrants, or about the precise location of their death or disappearance.

The typical boat used for crossing is a pirogue, or 'cayuco' in Spanish. These are long, narrow wooden boats, commonly just 10–20 metres long, hand-carved from large logs or constructed using hardwood planks. Pirogues are designed for fishing with shallow drafts to move through shallow and open waters. Being open to the elements, they are not designed to carry passengers and endure extended sea crossings in rough open waters and challenging wind conditions. The route involves strong and unpredictable currents that can push the boat off course, making navigation difficult, especially in the open ocean where there are no landmarks. The region is affected by the northeast trade winds, which can help propel boats toward the Canary Islands, but which can also bring rough seas and strong waves that make the journey perilous. Sudden changes in weather – including storms – can occur, with strong winds, heavy rain, and reduced visibility causing disastrous and deadly conditions. Migrants may be at sea for days to weeks, and boats are often insufficiently supplied with food and water. Many migrants are believed to have lost their lives due to starvation, dehydration and hypothermia while at sea.¹⁰⁷



Tenerife shoreline. © EJF

***"Taking a boat to travel by sea is... it's like
risking your life. But we didn't have a choice.
That was the only means to escape."***

Mamadou Thiam, migrant and former fisher



Interviews conducted by EJF reveal the hardships faced by migrants on the journey to Spain. Migrants interviewed mentioned individuals becoming gravely ill or dying during the crossing. Others described running out of food and water.

"It was very hard because we registered thirteen deaths on board. Thirteen people died on our way here."

Memedou Racine Seck, migrant and former fisher

"On the ninth to tenth day, some fishermen started getting worried because we were not sure if we would land safely, because there was no fuel, no food and no water on board. People started getting sick. Some died. May their souls go to paradise. Some of them had the same dream and purpose that I did. But they never arrived."

Abdoulaye Sady, migrant and former fisher



Abdoulaye Sady migrated to the Canary Islands from Senegal in November 2020. © EJF



Tenerife in the Canary Islands. © EJJF

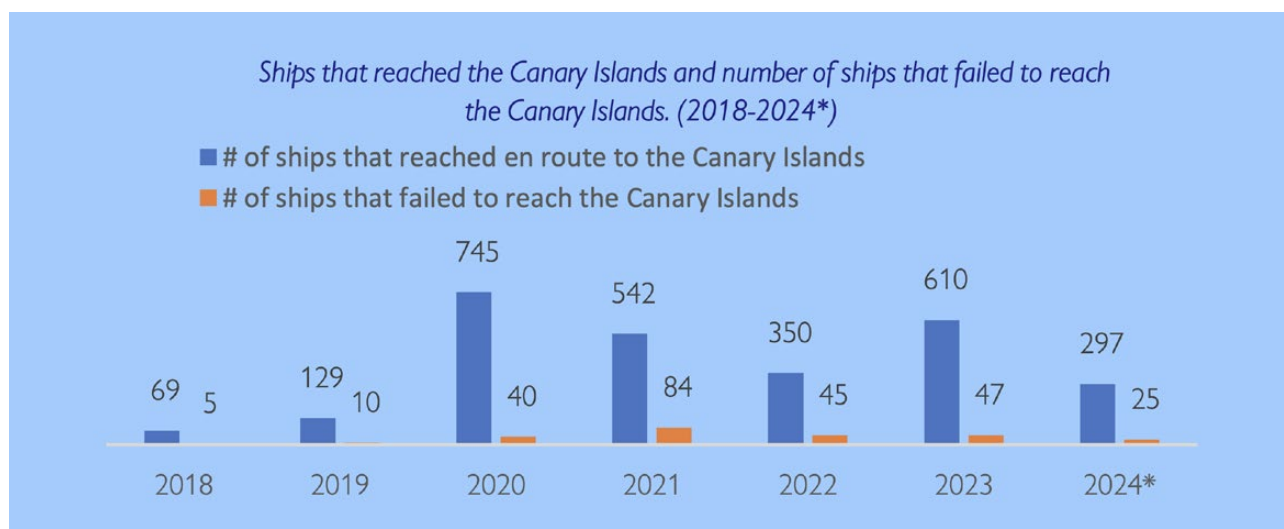


Figure 3: Number of boats that reached the Canary Islands and number of boats that failed to reach the Canary Islands (2018–2024) (source: IOM, 2024 data covering the period up to 30 June 2024). Data are likely to under-estimate the actual number of boats as there is little data available on the number of departures and attempts from West African coasts, while shipwrecks are often not reported.¹⁰⁸

According to an IOM study, 42% of migrants reported to be fully aware of the risks associated with crossing by boat.¹⁰⁹ The sea was considered to be the quickest and cheapest route. Of those who had undertaken the dangerous journey and were forced to return, 48% planned to leave Senegal again, although via a different route.¹¹⁰

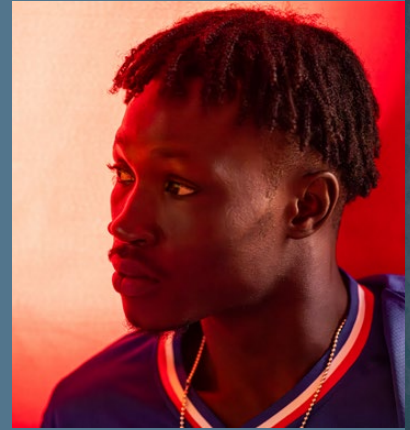
The next section will discuss two in-depth case studies: (i) a former fisher and student who departed Senegal for the Canary Islands; and (ii) his father, a current fisher, who stayed behind.

CASE STUDIES

Abdoulaye Sady's story

Abdoulaye 'Abdou' Sady was born in 1998 in Joal-Fadiouth, a fishing town in the Thiès region of Senegal, south-east of Dakar. He migrated to the Canary Islands on November 7th, 2020, after spending approximately fourteen days at sea.

Abdou comes from a long line of fishers. His father, uncle, siblings, cousins, and extended family all work in the artisanal fishing sector. In Senegal, he alternated between pursuing his studies in Dakar and helping his family out with fishing in Joal. Occasionally, Abdou made extra money as a hairstylist. When he first arrived in the Canary Islands, he earned money by working in a juvenile immigration detention centre on the island of El Hierro, later taking odd jobs at a hardware store and at a hair salon. Currently, Abdou is undergoing overnight training as a pastry chef, and occasionally works as a Spanish-Wolof translator.



Abdou, Tenerife, 2024. © EJF

Abdou's household consists of other migrants from his hometown, including his brother and cousin, who arrived with him on the same boat. Only one of his housemates, Mamadou, came from a different town (Bargny) and had arrived a couple of days before him. All of them are in their twenties. Abdou described his home environment as 'peaceful... No issues because we live in harmony here. The vibe is good.' If a conflict ever did happen, he said, his friends would 'try to find peaceful solutions' because 'a house full of men can be tough.'



Abdou gives his housemate a haircut on his terrace in Tenerife. © EJF

When asked about growing up in Senegal, Abdou identified the periods 2005–2007, and 2010–2012, as times when the sea was ‘abundant’ and people ‘came from every area in Senegal to Joal to work in fishing activities.’ Starting in 2015–2016, however, and especially in 2020, fishers ‘started suffering.’ According to Abdou, this was because the President of Senegal had allowed Chinese and European vessels to fish in Senegal. ‘Since the arrival of these foreign boats’, he stressed, ‘fishermen couldn’t catch fish. In the past, we only had to go past 5, 7 or 10 km to catch lots of fish. Now, we were obliged to go deep to 30 or 40 km.’

As a result, Abdou’s friends and family who depended on the sea for work could no longer sustain their livelihoods. ‘In the past, we used to catch beautiful and big fish, but now we [find] nothing. We only [find] unhealthy and small fish in the markets... Now, if you go to the markets for fish, you end up being hungry because not only [are there no] fish, but the ones available are bad quality.’ When asked how this affected people, Abdou explained: ‘My family suffered a lot because of that... Everybody whose activities [are] related to the sea [were] affected by those changes.’

Abdou’s father, Papa Sady, works as a fisher and ‘caught lots of fish’, especially around 2006. ‘Everybody knows him as a very good fisherman... in Elinkine, in Casamance and Ziguinchor’, said Abdou. But the changes in fish populations affected his father’s mental health. ‘If you go to sea and you catch no fish, one time, two times, the whole month, it will affect you mentally in the long run. You are obligated to borrow money to live. When you go to sea, the only thing you have in mind when catching fish is your debts.’

‘That’s when the clandestine boats started’, he explained. ‘If these changes hadn’t happened, the clandestine trips [wouldn’t have gotten] like this. If the sea was [as] abundant as it used to be, I can say this immigration situation [wouldn’t] be like this.’ Back in 2006, ‘fishermen didn’t think about going to Europe.’

When asked what he felt should change, Abdou identified the process of obtaining fishing licences as a major issue in fisheries management. ‘As a Senegalese, [you] cannot easily have a fishing licence. [But] if you are a foreigner, getting a fishing licence is as easy as saying “hi”. He also felt that industrial vessels were in direct competition with artisanal fishers. ‘[When the industrial vessels] no longer operate in the sea, things will improve and get better. Our boats will catch fish as they used to. However, if these boats continue operating in the sea, I can tell that the issues won’t change.’

Abdou’s dream is to ‘help people in need with my own means. I want every clandestine immigrant landing here to find good conditions and support and not stay in these camps. That’s what I am fighting for and that’s what I want to accomplish.’ He added: ‘and I don’t want my guys coming here.’

When asked what he most missed about home, Abdou replied: ‘What I miss about Senegal is mostly my family, my friends left behind. I miss my whole family so much. My dad is still there. My little sister too. My friends also, the one I grew up with and [with whom] I spent all my childhood. They are all in Senegal and I miss them so much.’

Papa Sady's story

Papa Sady, Abdou's father, is from Joal-Fadiouth. A fisher since 1985, Papa remembers a time when 'the work was fruitful. The sea was very abundant and there were lots of fish.' Now, he says, 'we go fishing but we cannot catch any fish. You spend lots of money fishing and you end up catching nothing... The sea is almost damaged.'

Papa believes that the scarcity of fish is a systemic issue, and that his friends and family are all suffering because of it. 'Every time we meet, finding solutions is our only topic. We all talk about how to catch fish, but we still fail to catch [any].' When asked how this affected him financially, he responded: 'You cannot even pay your electricity bill, you cannot pay your water bill... Your family will get in trouble too because your children will get sick and you cannot take them to the hospital. So, what will you do in these situations?'



Papa Sady, a fisher, repairs fishing nets outside his home in Joal-Fadiouth. © EJF

When asked what he thought was causing the scarcity, Papa said: 'The cause is the high number of [industrial vessels]. If there were fewer boats at sea, I think that the sea would recover and be abundant again.' He added: 'The quantity of fish we catch in a year is caught by the vessels in a week. That's the main issue.'

Papa engaged in a range of short-term employment opportunities in Spain in the early 2010s. The revenue he accrued, however, ended up being 'less beneficial' than what he had been earning in Senegal – so he decided to return home. Upon returning, Papa bought a boat, an engine, and fishing materials, hoping to make a sizable profit. However, this was not the case, and he lost the modest savings he had accumulated. He eventually regretted his decision to come back, he said, since 'things are getting harder and harder.'

When asked about the motivations behind Abdou and his brother's departure, Papa responded: 'They all left because they saw how hard our situation was... perhaps they didn't want to experience the same life I was facing.' He added: 'My heart couldn't stand them leaving like that because I was so scared. My heart couldn't stand knowing they wanted to travel by boat. I was feeling worried. As far as they were under my authority, the only thing I could do was to advise them to stay here. However, the final decision was upon them. They prepared everything, and suddenly, you became aware of their absence.'



Abdou and his family Facetime from across the ocean. © EJF

‘The days following [their departure], I wasn’t feeling good’, he said. ‘I couldn’t work or do anything because my heart was so heavy... For almost ten days in a row, I couldn’t sleep. I was waking up in the middle of the night... If they announced to me that they died at sea, what was I going to do? And these thoughts kept coming repeatedly to my mind the whole time. That’s why when I got their calls telling me they arrived safely, I did thank God. I said ‘praise be to God, the Almighty’.’

When asked what message he had for the government, Papa stressed that it was important to reduce the number of fishing licences. ‘We just want the government to help us get rid of everything that stops us from catching fish. If they can do that, everything will be great for us. We don’t want to leave; we don’t like travelling. We would prefer to stay in our homes with our families... Staying in Senegal and living around your family members is the best life.’



Papa and his brother Abo enjoy a plate of thieboudienne in their home. © EJF



Conclusion and recommendations

Fish traders resting at the waterfront in Joal-Fadiouth. © EJJF

Overfishing and IUU fishing are putting Senegal's coastal communities under threat. Despite being a critical sector for the Senegalese socio-economic fabric, fisheries are in a state of crisis. The current scarcity is having detrimental effects on fishers' well-being, food security and livelihoods. Small-scale fishers often find themselves in direct competition with industrial vessels. As a result of deteriorating living conditions, lack of alternative livelihoods, and other contributing factors, Senegal is experiencing an increased trend in irregular migration overseas.

This report has sought to better illuminate the impacts of overfishing and IUU fishing on irregular migration. Overfishing and IUU fishing are the main factors contributing to the current shortage of fish caught by small-scale fishers; the bottom trawl industry is also responsible for the frequent destruction of nets, imposing significant costs on artisanal fishers, and for the indiscriminate capture of non-target and juvenile fish, further aggravating the fisheries crisis.

In recent years, EU Member States have been significant stakeholders within Senegal's fishing industry — both in terms of capital investment into fishing operations and as a destination for seafood caught in Senegalese waters. A significant Chinese presence is also evident within the industry. The opacity of industrial fishing operations and vessel licensing, the weakness of the management system and the limited understanding of which vessels operate in the country, provide the conditions for IUU fishing and overfishing to proliferate.

As EJJF CEO and Founder Steve Trent notes, 'the clear commitments¹¹¹ made during the election campaign, such as promoting transparency, reviewing which vessels can fish under the Senegalese flag, assessing the conditions of access to Senegalese waters, protecting small-scale fisheries and strengthening national fisheries management systems and the fight against IUU fishing, were a strong start.' Since taking office, the current administration has taken steps in the right direction, with the publication of licence lists and consolidated information on fines imposed with respect to fisheries offences,¹¹² and a commitment to revising the Maritime Fisheries Code.¹¹³

However, there is more work to be done. Recently, the Fisheries Transparency Initiative's International Board revoked Senegal's status as a committed country, citing a lack of progress towards finalising mandatory sign-up steps.¹¹⁴

Fitting the vision of His Excellency the President of the Republic, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, EJJF expresses its determination and commitment to work with the Senegalese authorities in achieving the sustainable and transparent management of the country's fisheries resources, and addressing the root causes and key drivers of irregular migration.

To the Senegalese government

- Prioritise restoring fish populations, eradicating illegal fishing, and protecting artisanal fisheries, affected communities, and wildlife to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. In this context, ensure that all fishing activities in Senegalese waters are conducted in a sustainable, legal, and ethical manner.
- Adopt the Global Charter for Fisheries Transparency¹¹⁵ as a low or no cost measure with high utility in the eradication of illegal and unsustainable fishing and the improvement of fisheries management. These ten transparency principles are suitable for every country and can be immediately adopted. The priority for the Senegalese government should be to institutionalise regular and accessible publication of vessel licence lists, including information on beneficial ownership, the mandating of IMO numbers for all fishing vessels operating under the Senegalese flag, and strengthened measures against the use of flags of convenience.
- Within the framework of any future governmental fishing agreements, establish transparency as a guiding principle and avoid concluding any fishing agreement that is not genuinely equitable.
- Expand and strengthen the zone reserved for small-scale fishing activities to support and protect the livelihoods of Senegal's coastal communities and wildlife from the interference of industrial fishing and destructive fishing practices.
- Ensure that the boundary of these zones is fully enforced and incursions are punished with effective, proportionate and dissuasive sanctions.
- Provide for effective remedies for victims of damage caused at sea by industrial fishing vessels, including adequate compensation.
- Promote the meaningful and effective participation of small-scale fishing communities in the documentation and reporting of illicit fishing activities through participatory surveillance.
- Enhance the financial and resource capacity of the competent agencies to effectively monitor and enforce fishing regulations and combat IUU fishing and associated abuses, including through participatory surveillance.

- Strengthen co-management institutions where government and small-scale fishers share the responsibility and authority for the management of Senegal's fisheries, based on collaboration between themselves and relevant stakeholders.
- Conduct further research into the interconnected impacts of environmental degradation, IUU fishing, global heating and socioeconomic conditions on the decision to migrate.

To the industrial fishing sector that fish in Senegalese waters

- Only operate in designated legal areas, avoiding sensitive ecosystems and exclusion zones in compliance with local laws to prevent environmental degradation and protect marine biodiversity.
- Implement measures to promote sustainable fisheries management by respecting fish population recovery efforts, ensuring compliance with applicable laws and management measures, and protecting artisanal fisheries and affected coastal communities.
- Refrain from interfering with zones reserved for small-scale fishing, and collaborate with the Senegalese authorities to ensure that these areas are fully enforced.
- Provide compensation for any damage caused to local fishers by industrial vessels.
- Engage in collaborative fisheries management systems and support participatory surveillance by local communities to help document and report IUU fishing activities.
- Ensure all vessels are registered with IMO numbers to improve transparency, traceability, and accountability, and share this data with relevant authorities.

To the European Union

- Strengthen the partnership with Africa to address the root causes and key drivers of irregular migration, and work with Senegal and other relevant coastal countries to prioritise sustainable, legal, and ethical fisheries in areas of intervention.
- Mindful of the impact of EU-flagged or owned fishing vessels on African coastal communities—whose activities in Senegal and the broader region must be conducted sustainably, legally, and ethically, within a transparent framework—consider organising fisheries and oceans dialogues with African stakeholders to listen to their views and help design the EU strategic approach to its fisheries external action.
- Support the development of down-stream processing in non-EU coastal partner countries to allow for new economic opportunities, particularly for local communities making a living from marine resources.
- Promote cooperation among EU and local economic operators to encourage the establishment of an environment favourable to the development of mutually beneficial opportunities that will genuinely ensure in-country localisation of value.
- To comply with laws, protect marine ecosystems, and maintain sustainable fisheries, continue supporting monitoring, control and surveillance in West Africa and beyond through programmes like the West Africa Sustainable Ocean Programme (WASOP).
- Collect and disclose information on EU nationals (citizens and companies) that own, directly or indirectly, including as beneficial owners, fishing vessels flagged to Senegal. This is an essential step to ensure the proper implementation and enforceability of current obligations of Member States regarding nationals who support or engage in IUU fishing under non-EU flags.
- As relations between the EU and Senegal evolve with the end of the protocol implementing the SFPA and Senegal's pre-identification as a non-cooperating country against IUU fishing, ensure that the IUU dialogue provides a more effective platform for policy engagement to supporting Senegal in effectively implementing essential fisheries transparency and governance reforms than that the SFPA offered and failed to achieve.
- Maintain the long-standing EU policy of not negotiating fisheries agreements with countries pre-identified as non-cooperating in the fight against IUU fishing.
- Demand that third countries, such as China, whose nationals own and operate vessels in Senegal and the West African region ensure that fishing activities are conducted sustainably, legally, and ethically, within a transparent framework. Achieve this through existing dialogue forums and, when necessary, by using autonomous trade instruments.
- Continue to actively promote and be ready to support the establishment of a new regional fisheries management organisation in West Africa to ensure the sustainable management of shared stocks, such as small pelagic and relevant demersal species, which are largely overexploited and lack harmonised management rules, despite being transboundary.



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