



Regional Meeting on Sustainable Fisheries Development in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, 5-6 November 2024, PERSAG HQ, Jeddah

Working Paper (1): Enhancing regional efforts to manage IUU fishing, fish SPAGs and Bycatch problems

Background:

1. Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing practices are globally reported to have severe impacts on marine ecosystems and fisheries, causing significant economic loss. International initiatives and efforts are intended to end overfishing, IUU fishing and destructive fishing practices through the implementation of science-based management plans. The aim of such plans is to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics. This requires that measures to control IUU fishing, including through the certification of international trade, are an integral part of fisheries management.
2. Comprehensive evidence-based data on the status of IUU fishing in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden are lacking. However, some reports and anecdotal information indicate a range of issues, such as fishing without a license or out of season, harvesting prohibited species, using banned fishing gears, unreported or misreported catches, etc. In addition, pirate fishing through incursion and trespassing, and by foreign fleets in RSGA waters also occurs, especially off the Gulf of Aden, where fishing grounds are rich with high value demersal and pelagic species.
3. Fishery Bycatch (unwanted/non-target catch) pose several environmental and economic impacts. Protected species, such as marine mammals, turtles, seabirds and sharks may be discarded dead, or injured, contributing to population decline and impeding recovery. Bycatch of species like corals and sponges can damage important fish habitat. Catching non-target fish and invertebrates contribute to overfishing and slow efforts to rebuild fish stocks, due to negative impacts on productivity and food chains.
4. Coral reef fish species (especially, the snappers and groupers) are the most significant food and commercially valuable species in the catches of the region. However, these species are very vulnerable to overfishing, because they form Spawning Aggregations (SPAGs) during their breeding season. These aggregations are easy targets for fishers to take large catches. Whilst protection may be afforded within Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) this may be limited. In addition, many of these species may migrate out of the MPAs to spawn where there is even less protection due to inadequate information, enforcement and awareness. In some countries of the region, regulations prohibit fishing during the spawning season.

However, even where the regulations exist, effective compliance is hampered due to weak awareness and lack of stakeholder positive support and participation. Also, effective compliance is further limited by the high costs of intense monitoring and surveillance, and the lack of necessary coordination nationally and among the neighboring countries for protection of SPAGs in the region.

5. Fishery management efforts to address IUU fishing, fish SPAGs and Bycatch problems in the PERSGA region need to overcome the constraints identified above. Recognizing this, the SFISH project focused one of its key interventions to strengthen regional cooperative efforts to tackle these priority issues, including:
 - Develop technical guidelines and standard methods for IUU status assessment (achieved)
 - Joint status assessment to provide baseline information and gap analysis to guide Action Plans, using the regional standard methods (achieved).
 - Seven national assessment reports were compiled into a Regional IUU Assessment Report (achieved)
 - Regional Plan of Action for IUU (RPOA-IUU) in Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region (draft achieved, under review).
 - Provide guidelines/training and develop/update National Plans of Action (NPOAs-IUU) for all PERSGA member states, consistent with the RPOA (ongoing).

Agenda for Discussions

- (1) Road map and arrangements to achieve remaining activity outcomes: i.e., review and validation of the RPOA-IUU; completion of NPOAs (need to be driven and owned by the IUU competent national authority for fisheries with the assistance of the PERSGA SFISH IUU national consultant).
- (2) The strategic outcome of these project activities is to drive active national and collaborative efforts addressing the IUU, SPAGs and bycatch problems. **If such efforts are to be effective and sustainable, what would the most important keys for success¹?**
- (3) What are the strengths and opportunities? **Recommended actions to seize them?**
- (4) What are the weaknesses and risks for continued process? **Recommended actions to overcome them?**

¹ Note: Proposed PERSGA RPOA & NPOA-IUU fishing Action IV.02.18 relates to Service Delivery Targets to indicate delivery of effective IUU fishing management.