



Declaration on Transparency for Sustainable Artisanal Fisheries in Africa

Transparency is essential to enhance the value of African artisanal fisheries

MBOUR/SENEGAL, 4 October 2021

The African Confederation of Professional Organizations Artisanal Fisheries Organisations (CAOPA) has been working on [transparencysince 2011](#). It has also played a leading role in designing and supporting the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI). The FiTI is the first initiative to set minimum standards on what governments should publish and how. It was particularly important for CAOPA to ensure that the FiTI standard included sections on artisanal fishing and the role of women in the sector.

Recently, we have seen the Seychelles and Mauritania publish their first FiTI reports showing their level of compliance with the standards. The government of Madagascar has now publicly committed to implementing FiTI. Other African governments, such as those of Senegal, Guinea and Sao Tome and Principe have also announced their intention to commit to FiTI: there is still much work to be done to ensure that they deliver on their promises.

Unfortunately, while there are success stories, a lack of transparency remains the norm in many African fisheries. As the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYafa 2022) approaches, CAOPA makes the following recommendations to African governments, the African Union and their international partners to advance transparency, particularly in African marine fisheries.

1. Transparency is not a voluntary act. It is a right.

Transparency is too often seen as a voluntary act. This is a mistake. Transparency must be approached as a right for citizens, and in particular for those whose lives depend on fishing. This is outlined in the [Voluntary Guidelines](#) for Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication and the [Policy Framework](#) and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture Sector in Africa.

CAOPA believes that initiatives such as the [FiTI](#) are in line with the African Union Guidelines and Policy Framework. If countries commit in FiTI, they have an obligation to publish information and to ensure that the information is credible.

However, Freedom of Information must be seen as a legal obligation for governments. Many countries have signed legally binding conventions on access to information, which means that a lack of transparency can be challenged in court. The most important convention in this respect is the "[Aarhus Convention](#)" finalised in 1998, i.e. the "Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters". This convention ratified by European countries is also applicable to the European Union. In 2018, Latin American and Caribbean countries established their own version of the Aarhus Convention, known as the [Escazu Convention](#).

In collaboration with partners in Europe, CAOPA has used the Aarhus Convention to ensure that the EU publishes its previously confidential studies on the impacts of European fisheries access agreements in African countries since 2015. CAOPA and its partners are also using the Aarhus Convention to obtain information on the beneficial owners of European industrial trawlers operating in West Africa.

The African Union should increase its efforts to develop an African equivalent of the Aarhus Convention. As a first step, the African Union should endorse the FiTi and support its implementation by African countries.

2. Companies and foreign governments impose confidentiality on fisheries agreements



Most governments prefer not to share so-called confidential information with fishing communities, as they fear that this information will reveal their decisions and actions that often do not respect the interests of these communities.

However, confidentiality is also a requirement of foreign companies and governments. For example, confidentiality is written into investment contracts and fisheries agreements. The European Union has done this in the past, but it is improving. Some Asian countries and Russia are fishing in African maritime waters. But the fishing communities do not have access to the information that bind their governments and these third countries.

African countries should not favour foreign-owned fishing companies over artisanal fishing communities.

3. Transparency and the blue economy

So far, CAOPA has mainly campaigned for transparency in the licensing of foreign industrial fishing vessels. Frustratingly, this demand is still refused by many national authorities in Africa. This therefore remains one of CAOPA's main demands. In recent years, CAOPA has also called for more transparency regarding investments and permits for industrial fish processing plants. Fishmeal and fish oil plants are proliferating in West Africa and have a significant impact on artisanal fishing communities. However, ownership and licensing of these plants remain confidential.

CAOPA also expressed concern about the lack of transparency and consultation surrounding foreign aid projects. International organizations such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the EU provide millions of dollars to reform fisheries and promote sectors that are part of the blue economy. But the transparency surrounding this flow of money is often very low. We are concerned about the growing influence of some Asian countries on fisheries management, as well as new and innovative forms of financing for ocean conservation, including "blue bonds" and "debt swaps."

We are increasingly aware of the high demand for exploration and mining permits in coastal and offshore areas. Our governments are contracting to aggressively develop offshore mining for oil and gas and other precious minerals and metals. Access to information about all this is very limited. And without it, it is almost impossible for fishing communities to oppose developments when they have a negative impact on fishing.

The African Union should prioritise transparency in blue economy strategies in Africa. This includes significantly improving information and opportunities for public scrutiny of investments and activities in other sectors that impact fishing communities and the procedures surrounding social and environmental impact assessments.

4. Transparency and visibility for African artisanal fisheries

It is essential to recognize that transparency is not just about the visibility of what governments and foreign companies are doing. CAOPA wishes to emphasize that transparency is also about increasing the visibility of the artisanal fisheries sector.



In most African countries, public information on the artisanal fisheries sector is almost non-existent. Government reports can and should include estimates of the number of fishers and their catches, and the number and production of post-harvest cluster actors, but this information is either outdated or unreliable. Women in the fishing sector are particularly neglected in official statistics. This means that governments have very little information on the importance of fisheries to people's livelihoods and food and nutrition security, and do not monitor vulnerabilities in the fisheries sector, such as access to education, health services, poverty levels and working conditions.

The failure to collect this information leads to the marginalisation of our sector and a lack of support from governments. We also find that without detailed information on the small-scale sector, social and environmental impact assessments of new investments, such as fishmeal processing or mining, are not credible in understanding the costs to our communities.

African countries need to significantly improve studies on the artisanal fisheries sector and ensure that this information is well disseminated. Governments should consider how existing national surveys of their economies can better incorporate information on small-scale fisheries, particularly on women involved in the sector.

Transparency is not an end in itself. It is a necessary part of sustainable fisheries management and an important element in respecting the rights of artisanal fishers. If the same interest were shown in fisheries as in mining (Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative EITI) the sector would be better off.

Conventions such as the Aarhus Convention do not focus on transparency in isolation, but strengthen all aspects of democracy.

CAOPA is therefore campaigning not only for transparency, but also for improved participation and accountability, so that the voice of small-scale fisheries is taken into account in decision-making processes at all levels.

