

STATEMENT

The Namibian sardine fishery – taking a “gamble” on a sustainable future?

Various newspaper articles in the last two weeks quoted the Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources, Bernard Esau, as admitting that he ignored the scientific evidence and resulting recommendations for a moratorium on sardine (pilchard) fishing from his own fisheries scientists. Instead, he “took a gamble” in allocating a fishing quota for sardines for 2017. This is most disturbing at many levels.

Namibia has been praised internationally for its forward-thinking Constitution which, in Article 95, safeguards the “*maintenance of ecosystems, essential ecological processes and biological diversity of Namibia and utilization of living natural resources on a sustainable basis for the benefit of all Namibians, both present and future [...]*”. Moreover, the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR) has been recognized internationally as a proponent of the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) Management, for its commitment to responsible fisheries management (with the former Minister Abraham Iyambo being a co-chair of the committee drafting the *Reykjavik Declaration on Responsible Fisheries in the Marine Ecosystem* in 2001), and for being a signatory to Agenda 21 and adopting the Plan of Implementation that was drafted at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002. Among many other relevant commitments related to improving food security, efforts to reduce the rate of loss of biodiversity, the implementation of an ecosystem approach to fisheries etc., this plan calls specifically for the adoption of urgent measures to rebuild depleted fisheries stock to maximum sustainable yield levels by the year 2015.

The Namibian sardine stock was first targeted by the purse-seine industrial fishery after World War II. The industry grew rapidly during the 1960s, with a peak in 1968, when declared catches were 1.4 million tonnes. Actual catches were probably much higher as much of the sardine caught was used for fishmeal and the stock was also fished in southern Angola. This level of exploitation was grossly unsustainable and as a result the stock crashed between 1970 and 1972. Following this decline, the fishery targeted anchovy and juvenile horse mackerel, which in turn led to a crash of the anchovy stocks but did not result in a recovery of the sardine. Most canneries closed down in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the loss of several thousand jobs and a drastic drop in production of an abundant, healthy and affordable food. Already in 1982 fisheries scientists called for a moratorium on sardine fishing in order to let the stock recover to sustainable levels but were ignored. In the 1950s and 1960s sardine stocks were first estimated, varying between 5 and 11 million tonnes. Since then, it appears that the biomass of sardine in our waters has declined currently by 99% or more.

In recent decades, scientists worldwide have demonstrated the key role that “low trophic level” forage fish species (i.e. those that feed on plankton and in turn provide food for marine predators) - such as sardines and anchovy - play in the marine ecosystems, and how a drop in biomass of such species to low levels severely affects the marine food chain, various fisheries and top predators. Many of these studies have highlighted the degradation of the Namibian marine ecosystem as a “worst case scenario in the 21st century”, where a depleted sardine stock has led to drastic changes in the essential ecological processes of the Benguela ecosystem that also affects other fisheries resources such as valuable predatory fish like hakes and perhaps tunas. Some of Namibia’s seabirds, once reliant on sardines, have been forced to switch to less suitable, poor-energy prey. This has

been the primary reason for the declines of endemic seabirds such as African Penguins, Cape Gannets and Cape Cormorants, all of which are now at serious risk of local extinction.

Several regional studies made under the auspices of the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem programme (BCLME) found that the low biomass of sardine, the continuation of fishing and lack of serious measures to promote the recovery of this stock in Namibia had serious detrimental consequences on the ecosystem, its biodiversity, levels of unemployment, the economy of the coastal towns, as well as food security in the region. Those studies called for a more rational and scientifically based management of this fish stock to allow its recovery, as well as more transparency in the determination and allocation of fishing quotas.

A sardine stock rebuilt at maximum sustainable yield level (as mandated by the Namibian Constitution, the WSSD Plan of Implementation and the fisheries policies in place since Namibian independence) would mean a potential annual catch of close to a quarter million tonnes or more in most years. This would make the sardine sector the primary fisheries sector in terms of food production, and second behind the hake industry in export value. This in turn would mean several thousand additional jobs, as opposed to the few hundred temporary seasonal workers at present which, in part, have been sustained recently through the import of frozen sardines from Morocco for the canneries. The marine ecosystem processes would be greatly improved and other sectors of the Namibian fishery would probably benefit from a more productive and healthier ecosystem. The main cause of the decline of our endangered seabirds would be resolved - a great step towards halting the loss of biodiversity.

Given the current state of the sardine sector, a moratorium of several years could be achieved at minimal costs. Current jobs could be maintained with the sourcing of fish from elsewhere as is being done already, or by redeploying employees temporarily in other sectors. However, repeated calls by scientists for a moratorium on sardine fishing to allow stocks to recover have been ignored, apart from a single year (2002) when no quota for sardine was granted. However, this measure was defeated that year by sardines being caught as bycatch of other fisheries, as well as vessels registered in Walvis Bay seeking fishing licences in southern Angola.

Bearing in mind the key role that sardines play in our marine ecosystem, the collapsed state of the stock, and Namibia's commitment to sustainable resource use, the recent announcement of a 14,000 tonne quota for 2017 by Minister Esau raises serious questions on the soundness of the decision-making process that is being followed. While the "Minister may, from time to time set a total allowable catch to limit the quantity which may be harvested ..." he shall do so "on the basis of the best scientific evidence available ..." (Marine Resources Act 27 of 2000). Given the pivotal nature of sardines in the Benguela ecosystem, a seriously precautionary approach should be taken, erring on the conservative side. Minister Esau seems to dismiss scientific recommendations, including that of his own scientists, as a "misconception", despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Instead, he suggests that sardines simply may have moved to deeper waters, a statement that appears to be a personal view that is seemingly not backed by any solid data. Minister Esau is gambling with the ecological stability, biodiversity, productivity and economy of Namibia's marine ecosystem. Is it sound governance to allow such decisions, on the long-term future of Namibia's marine ecosystem, to be taken by one person on a gamble?

Minister Esau further states that the decision was done in consultation with the Marine Resources Advisory Council (MRAC), which currently comprises 13 members, of which at least five members represent the fishing industry or have fishing interests. Only one practising fisheries scientist serves on the council (and notably none from MFMR), essentially biasing decisions in favour of the fishing industry. It is unclear what advice the MRAC gave to the Minister, as so many aspects of marine

fisheries lack transparency. Transparency is urgently needed on estimated fish stocks, on decision-making processes, on the minutes of the discussions held with the MRAC, as well as the scientific and socio-economic recommendation report.

And most important, urgent measures are needed to promote the recovery of the stock. These should include:

- a moratorium on sardine fishing (including fines on sardine caught as bycatch) until the stock has recovered to sustainable levels – for at least three years - as per the Namibian Constitution, national policies and international commitments;
- rigorous scientific research on stock size and related ecosystem aspects to be continued and intensified;
- implementation of agreed EAF management principles, including long term sustainability of ecological (including biodiversity), economical and social wellbeing;
- development of Marine Protected Areas, specifically to protect key spawning and nursery areas;
- an agreement with Angola on the sustainable management of shared sardine stocks, ideally via a joint sardine/pilchard management plan.

Namibia's sardines belong to all Namibians. As the official custodian, MFMR is tasked with their sustainable management. Instead of being merely "a gamble", this task needs to be carried out in a transparent, equitable manner that is based on science-based decisions that heed national and international obligations.