

GOVERNANCE, ENFORCEMENT AND IUU FISHING: SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICA'S BLUE ECONOMY

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Abstract

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing has emerged as one of the gravest threats to Africa's maritime governance and the sustainability of its Blue Economy. This article examined the nexus between IUU fishing and the Blue Economy, arguing that the two concepts are fundamentally incompatible, as illegal fishing depletes fish stocks, weakens marine ecosystems, distorts markets, and impoverishes coastal communities. The study adopted a socio-legal and analytical approach by examining the socio-economic implications of IUU on the development of Africa's blue economy. The article found that despite the existence of robust legal and policy instruments, enforcement across African coastal states remains weak due to corruption and other challenges. It further demonstrates that IUU fishing has severe socio-economic consequences, including food insecurity, loss of government revenue, marginalisation of artisanal fishers, ecological degradation, and the escalation of maritime insecurity. Drawing comparative insights from jurisdictions such as the European Union, Indonesia, the Pacific Island States, and China, the article identified best practices

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capable of strengthening Africa's fisheries governance regime. It concludes that the future of Africa's Blue Economy depends largely on the continent's ability to transform legal norms into effective enforcement mechanisms.

Keywords: IUU, Enforcement, Maritime, UNCLOS, PSMA, Ocean Governance, Fisheries

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Africa's seas and oceans are more than just bodies of water; they are vital conduits for survival, trade, and life. Through fisheries, shipping, offshore hydrocarbons, tourism, and marine biodiversity, the ocean significantly boosts the economies of the 38 coastal states on the continent. In fact, the maritime sector has been regularly recognized by the African Union as the "new frontier for Africa's revival," acknowledging that the so-called "Blue Economy" has the potential to unlock affluence, create millions of jobs, and strengthen resistance to poverty and food insecurity.¹

However, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing is an issue that silently but ruthlessly eats away at Africa's maritime resources, casting a cloud over this hope. IUU fishing is a systematic attack on the sovereignty of African states and a direct hindrance to their developmental goals, not just a technical violation of fisheries legislation. According to conservative estimates, IUU fishing costs Africa more than US\$2.3 billion a year, with West Africa alone bearing a third of the world's losses as a result of widespread illicit exploitation of its abundant fisheries

¹ African Union, *2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (2050 AIM Strategy)* (Addis Ababa: AU, 2014).

resources.² Even while these numbers are startling, they hardly reflect the human cost: governments are at a loss of essential funds that could support infrastructure, healthcare, and education, artisanal fishermen are driven into poverty, and coastal communities are deprived of protein supplies. IUU fishing is essentially a theft of not only marine resources but also of hopes, futures, and the general well-being of current and future generations.³

The concept of the Blue Economy, now entrenched in African policy discourse, embodies a vision of harnessing ocean resources in a manner that is sustainable, inclusive, and innovative.⁴ In order to ensure that the ocean continues to be a source of food, energy, biodiversity, and livelihoods for future generations, the Blue Economy requires that marine wealth be used to create long-term value rather than short-term gain. However, the predominance of IUU fishing is fundamentally at odds with this aim. No continent can legitimately claim to have a "blue economy" when foreign trawlers raid its waters without consequence, frequently with the help of dishonest authorities, the lax enforcement of the law, and the complacency of weak institutions.⁵

Thus, the central concern of this paper is not merely to describe the phenomenon of IUU fishing but to interrogate how the enforcement of

² World Bank, *The Sunken Billions Revisited: Progress and Challenges in Global Marine Fisheries* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2017) 45.

³ R Baird R Australia's Response to Illegal Foreign Fishing: A Case of winning the Battle? *The International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law*, (2008) 23(1), 95-124.

⁴ M Voyer, G Quirk, A McIlgorm, A. & K Azmi, 'Ocean Governance and the Blue Economy: Exploring the Challenges of Policy Integration' *Marine Policy* (2018) 87 77.

⁵ RTM Bacalso, and M Wolff, Trophic Flow Structure of the Danajon Ecosystem (Central Philippines) and Impacts of Illegal and Destructive Fishing Practices. *Journal of Marine Systems*, (2014) 139, 103-118.

maritime law can either thwart or permit its proliferation. International law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), has long provided a framework for the governance of the oceans, recognising coastal states' rights over their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).⁶ Complementary instruments such as the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA) and the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement seek to close loopholes by imposing duties on flag states, coastal states, and port states. Africa has also taken ownership of this agenda through frameworks such as the 2050 Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy and the Lomé Charter on Maritime Security, Safety and Development. However, enforcement is nonetheless weak, dispersed, and ineffectual throughout a large portion of the continent despite this arsenal of legal tools.

This article is based on the belief that the issue of IUU fishing in Africa is not just the lack of legislation, but rather the ineffectiveness of existing legislation. It concerns the gap between institutional reality and normative aspirations. It is about enforcement regimes that crumble under the weight of corruption, insufficient surveillance technology, limited naval capability, and a lack of political will, as well as legal frameworks that are attractive on paper but ineffective in practice.⁷ Fundamentally, it is about the struggle between Africa's desire for a sustainable maritime future and the harsh reality of exploitation by more powerful, organized players in the world's fisheries. This discussion is important because it has wider ramifications for the African development initiative. The continent's Blue Economy runs the risk of being relegated to a meaningless catchphrase if

⁶ United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)*, 1982.

⁷ D Belhabib, UR Sumaila & B Le Gallic, IUU fishing: a Global Problem with Local Solutions. *Marine Policy*, (2016) 71, 120-128.

IUU fishing is not addressed decisively. On the other hand, if maritime law is properly implemented, Africa may diversify away from its precarious reliance on commodities and hydrocarbons and turn her marine endowment into a true pillar of sustainable growth.⁸ In this sense, maritime governance is not merely an environmental or fisheries issue; it is a developmental, economic, and even existential imperative for Africa.⁹

Accordingly, this article sets out to achieve three objectives. First, to explain the concept of IUU fishing and the Blue Economy, then demonstrate their inter-relationship. Second, to analyse the international, regional, and domestic legal frameworks governing IUU fishing in Africa, exposing the enforcement gaps and challenges. Third, to propose pragmatic recommendations, informed by comparative insights, for strengthening the continent's capacity to enforce maritime law in a manner that safeguards its Blue Economy. In the end, it is argued that Africa's waters are both its greatest opportunity and its greatest peril. The success or failure of the continent's Blue Economy will depend on how African nations respond to the problem of IUU fishing.

2.0 IUU FISHING AND THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE BLUE ECONOMY

The Blue Economy and IUU fishing have an antagonistic and mutually exclusive relationship. While the Blue Economy aims to maximize the

⁸ F Igbani, E Ezon-Ebi and JJ Terenyu, Effects of IUU and other Illegal Fishing Activities on Aquatic Biodiversity: the Review *Journal Of Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences* Issn: 3048-9075 (Online)

⁹ MC Onuegbulam, "A Critique of Section 136 (1) of the Nigerian Communications Act (NCA), No.19 2003 as a Contradiction to the Doctrine of Assault and Duty of Care in Law" *Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University Journal of Private and Public LAW, COOUJPPL* (2019) 2(1).

sustainable advantages of marine resources, IUU fishing consistently undermines food security, distorts markets, and depletes stocks. For example, illicit catches account for up to 37% of the region's entire fish harvest in West Africa, which is sometimes referred to as the epicenter of worldwide IUU fishing and costs governments billions of dollars in lost income every year.¹⁰ This reduces the capital base required to reinvest in sustainable fisheries management in addition to depriving states of revenue. IUU fishing also contributes to a cycle of vulnerability and poverty. The mainstay of Africa's coastal economies, artisanal fishermen are up against more efficient and destructive industrial vessels that operate illegally. This increases the number of maritime accidents and fatalities by pushing numerous people into deeper waters with insufficient vessels.¹¹ In some cases, the economic desperation created by depleted fisheries has been linked to the rise of piracy and maritime crime in the Gulf of Guinea, as unemployed youth turn to illicit activities for survival.¹² Ecologically speaking, IUU fishing damages ecosystems, reduces biodiversity, and jeopardizes the ocean's ability to regulate climate change and provide resilience. Destroying coral reefs, mangroves, and breeding sites lowers fish numbers as well as the larger ecological services that support carbon sequestration and coastal protection. Thus, the loss is existential as well as

¹⁰ World Bank, *The Sunken Billions Revisited: Progress and Challenges in Global Marine Fisheries* (2017) 55.

¹¹ MT Fillie, *Socioeconomic Impacts of Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing on Sierra Leone*, A Dissertation Submitted to the World Maritime University In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Award of the Degree of Master of Science in Maritime Affairs.

¹² ICC International Maritime Bureau, *Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships: Annual Report 2021* (London: ICC-IMB, 2022).

financial, endangering the foundation of the Blue Economy.¹³ Therefore, enforcing marine law against IUU fishing is a fundamental prerequisite for any serious development of the Blue Economy in Africa and is not a discretionary policy decision. The dream of a healthy maritime economy will remain a pipe dream, submerged under the waves of impunity, unless decisive action is taken.

3.0 THE GAP BETWEEN NORM AND REALITY

A common theme running through both international and regional frameworks is the persistent gap between normative aspiration and institutional reality. Africa has not been passive; it has signed, ratified, and in some cases even domesticated key international treaties, while also developing ambitious regional and sub-regional strategies.¹⁴ Yet, the persistence of IUU fishing on such a massive scale demonstrates that the existence of law does not guarantee compliance or enforcement. Corruption, a lack of ability, inadequate budget, and even political involvement in illicit fishing arrangements exacerbate the issue. Therefore, Africa's challenge is not to create new treaties or policies, but to make sure that those that already exist are implemented efficiently, coordinated, and backed by sincere political will. Without it, the Blue Economy will remain a catchphrase, destroyed by a wave of criminality that no theoretical framework can withstand.

¹³ J Omar, Impacts of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing on Developing Countries: The Case of Somalia. *Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences*. (2019) 9(4), 15.

¹⁴ OVC Ikpeze, CC Ani To What Extent Does Maritime Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea Affect the Liability of Carriers under Contracts of Carriage of Goods by Sea *International Journal of Comparative Law and Legal Philosophy (IJOCLLEP)* 7 (2) 2025.

4.0 ENFORCEMENT CHALLENGES IN AFRICAN COASTAL STATES

The existence of IUU fishing throughout Africa is due to a lack of enforcement rather than a legal void. The continent has ratified numerous treaties, charters, and strategies, as was mentioned in the previous paragraph. However, the fulfillment of these pledges is frequently compromised by weak institutions, insufficient funding, and systemic governance shortcomings. As a result, the enforcement problem is multifaceted, spanning institutional, legal, technical, and political obstacles. The weakness of the institutions in charge of enforcement is one of the most notable aspects of fisheries governance in Africa. Coastguards, marine administrations, and fisheries ministries are frequently understaffed, underfunded, and politically marginalized.¹⁵ Many lack basic assets such as patrol vessels, surveillance aircraft, or even fuel to conduct regular operations.¹⁶ For instance, a report by the Environmental Justice Foundation revealed that some West African states are unable to patrol their EEZs more than a few times a year, leaving vast maritime domains effectively unmonitored.¹⁷ This creates an environment where foreign trawlers can operate with near impunity, secure in the knowledge that the likelihood of detection, let alone prosecution, is

¹⁵ A Doumbouya, OT Camara, J Mamie, J Intchama, JF Jarra, A Ceesay, S Guèye, A Ndiaye, D Beibou, E Padilla, and D Belhabib, Assessing the Effectiveness of Monitoring Control and Surveillance of Illegal Fishing: The Case of West Africa. *Frontiers in Marine Science*, (2016) 4, p.50.

¹⁶ Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), *Securing Sustainable Fisheries: The Case for Transparency in Fishing Licensing* (London: EJF, 2018).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

minimal.¹⁸ Inadequate coordination, bureaucratic turf battles, and overlapping mandates plague many regulatory bodies. In some countries, responsibility for maritime law enforcement is split among the navy, coastguard, police, fisheries department, and port authorities, with little harmonisation. Due to this fragmentation, accountability is weakened, limited resources are wasted, and loopholes are created that IUU operators eagerly take advantage of.¹⁹

Also, corruption represents perhaps the most insidious barrier to enforcement. In several African states, the very officials charged with policing illegal fishing are themselves complicit in perpetuating it. Licenses are sometimes issued fraudulently, fines are negotiated informally, and vessels arrested for IUU activities are quietly released without prosecution in exchange for bribes.²⁰ In addition to giving criminals more confidence, this coordination undermines public confidence in maritime government and demoralizes law-abiding officers. The issue is made worse by the political economy of fishing. Deals are made with distant-water fishing nations that put short-term profit ahead of long-term sustainability in situations where governments are in dire need of foreign money and investment. Because bilateral access agreements are frequently structured in an opaque manner, multinational fleets are able to operate under conditions that are detrimental to local artisanal

¹⁸ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), *Africa's Blue Economy: Opportunities and Challenges to Bolster Sustainable Development and Shared Prosperity* (UNECA, 2021) <https://hdl.handle.net/10855/46359> accessed 24 February 2026.

¹⁹ A Standing, *Corruption and IUU Fishing* (U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, 2008).

²⁰ Transparency International, *Netting Billions: A Global Valuation of IUU Fishing* (Berlin: TI, 2019).

fishermen.²¹ These arrangements frequently ignore the environmental and social costs of overfishing, reducing enforcement to a charade where legality is determined by political convenience rather than ecological reality. Even though satellite tracking, vessel monitoring systems (VMS), automatic identification systems (AIS), and electronic catch documentation are all crucial components of modern fisheries enforcement, many African nations lack the infrastructure, knowledge, and resources necessary to implement these systems successfully.²² Even in cases where systems are in place, they are frequently not integrated across agencies or are poorly maintained, which results in data silos and lost chances for real-time enforcement.

IUU operators are able to engage in activities like trans-shipment at sea, fabricating vessel identities, and turning off tracking equipment to avoid discovery since there is insufficient surveillance. In the Gulf of Guinea, for instance, ships have been known to "go dark" in order to transfer illegally harvested fish onto refrigerated cargo ships, which subsequently launder the goods into international supply networks.²³ Without technological tools, coastal states remain blind to these sophisticated operations, perpetuating the asymmetry between well-equipped illegal fleets and poorly resourced regulators.²⁴ Another dimension of the enforcement challenge lies in the complexities of jurisdiction under

²¹ D Belhabib, U Sumaila, & D Pauly, 'Feeding the Poor: Contribution of West African Fisheries to National Economies' *Marine Policy* (2015) 70, 1.

²² FAO, *State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture* (SOFIA) (Rome: FAO, 2020).

²³ Global Fishing Watch, *Tracking the Unseen: How Vessels Evade Detection in African Waters* (Washington DC: GFW, 2021).

²⁴ CC Ani, ER Amaefule, A Eze Beyond Compliance: Evaluating African States' Obligations and Enforcement Gaps in Addressing Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing under International Maritime and Fisheries Law *Achievers University Law Journal* 6 (1) 2025.

international law. While coastal states exercise sovereign rights over their EEZs, their authority does not extend to the high seas, where unregulated fishing is rampant. Policing these waters requires collaboration through RFMOs and international agreements, but as noted earlier, African participation in such bodies is often weak.²⁵ Vessels can readily avoid national jurisdiction by entering neighboring waters or the high seas, taking advantage of gaps in surveillance and coordination, due to the fragmented nature of fisheries regulation. The legal complexities of pursuing IUU offenses also provide challenges for many African nations. Domestic laws are frequently out of date and have too lenient punishments to dissuade criminal activity. Non-compliance is essentially a sensible business decision in certain jurisdictions when the sanctions for illegal fishing are less than the market value of a single illegal catch.²⁶

Weak judicial capacity combined with poor legal writing leads to prosecutions that are either dropped or quickly reversed. Furthermore, political rather than technological obstacles are the biggest obstacles to enforcement. Political leaders who are prepared to put long-term sustainability ahead of immediate expedience are necessary for effective maritime law enforcement. However, compared to mining, oil, and gas, fisheries seldom receive political attention. Though it receives little funding or executive attention, the Blue Economy is rhetorically supported in policy documents in many African states.²⁷ Enforcement agencies are reduced to "paper tigers" due to persistent underfunding and

²⁵ Lodge, M. et al., *Recommended Best Practices for RFMOs* (Chatham House, 2007).

²⁶ I Okafor-Yarwood & D Belhabib, 'The Duplicity of the European Union Common Fisheries Policy in Third Countries: Evidence from West Africa' *Marine Policy* (2020) 9 103.

²⁷ UNECA, *Africa's Blue Economy: Opportunities and Challenges of Sustainable Development of Oceans and Seas* (2016).

bureaucratic apathy in the absence of strong political intent. Furthermore, enforcement is frequently compromised by policy incoherence. Trade, investment, and foreign policy interests often conflict with fisheries governance. For instance, commerce ministries may concurrently negotiate access agreements with foreign fleets while fisheries authorities try to limit access to safeguard stocks. African seas are vulnerable to exploitation because the left side of government weakens the right due to the lack of cohesive policy frameworks. Lastly, without taking into account the human factor, any consideration of enforcement difficulties would be lacking.

Despite being the forefront of Africa's fisheries, artisanal and small-scale fishermen are particularly susceptible to IUU fishing. Their livelihoods are threatened not only by the depletion of stocks but also by harassment and displacement by industrial trawlers operating illegally in inshore waters.²⁸ The failure of enforcement mechanisms to protect artisanal fishers undermines social stability, fuels migration pressures, and in some cases drives youth into illicit maritime activities such as piracy and smuggling. Strengthening enforcement is therefore not merely a matter of legal compliance; it is a matter of social justice and human security. Unless enforcement delivers tangible benefits to local communities, the legitimacy of maritime governance will remain fragile.

5.0 SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF IUU FISHING ON AFRICA'S BLUE ECONOMY

5.1 Erosion of Food Security and Nutrition

²⁸ African Development Bank (AfDB), *African Fisheries Reform Mechanism: Strategic Framework* (Abidjan: AfDB, 2017).

The attack on food security is arguably the most obvious and catastrophic effect of IUU fishing in Africa. For millions of Africans, especially in coastal and island republics, fish continues to be their main source of animal protein.²⁹ Over half of the animal protein consumed in West Africa comes from fish, but foreign fleets and uncontrolled operators are plundering the same resource that these populations rely on.³⁰ Illegal overfishing reduces availability to reasonably priced protein, which raises costs in local markets and exacerbates malnutrition, particularly among vulnerable populations like women and children. The FAO has repeatedly cautioned that unless immediate action is taken, Africa's population, which is expected to double by 2050, will face a growing disparity between supply and demand for fish.³¹ By undermining the sustainability of fisheries, IUU fishing effectively steals food from the tables of millions. The tragedy is sharpened by the fact that much of the illegally caught fish is exported to distant markets in Europe and Asia, meaning African communities bears the ecological costs while receiving none of the nutritional benefits. This creates a cruel paradox: oceans brimming with life, yet plates empty of fish.

5.2 Loss of Government Revenue and Economic Leakage

IUU fishing has a startling financial cost. When multiplier effects are taken into account, estimates indicate that Africa loses up to US\$10 billion in economic value and more than US\$2.3 billion in direct revenue

²⁹ FAO, *State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture (SOFIA)* (Rome: FAO, 2020).

³⁰ D Belhabib, et al, 'Impacts of Fisheries Subsidies on West African Marine Fisheries' *49 Marine Policy* (2015) 188.

³¹ FAO, *Africa Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2020* (Rome: FAO, 2020).

per year.³² Unpaid license fees, tax evasion, and the diversion of catches into illicit markets are the causes of these losses. Such losses represent hospitals not constructed, schools not supported, and infrastructure projects postponed for states grappling with budgetary shortages and development demands. Furthermore, illegal fishing undermines legitimate fishing businesses by distorting competitiveness and discouraging compliance. Because licensed operators are unable to compete with illegal vessels that avoid paying regulatory costs, formal systems lose confidence. This vicious cycle reduces the incentive to engage in sustainable fishing while preserving a shadow economy marked by impunity and opacity.³³ The economic leakage also extends beyond the fisheries sector, as the laundering of illegal catches through international supply chains contributes to broader patterns of illicit financial flows out of Africa.³⁴

5.3 Marginalisation of Artisanal and Small-Scale Fishers

Among those most negatively impacted by IUU fishing are artisanal and small-scale fishermen, who constitute the foundation of Africa's fishing industry. These fishermen rely on inshore waters, which are regularly overrun by industrial trawlers operating unlawfully in areas designated for small-scale use. These invasions damage fishing gear, lower catches, and

³² World Bank, *The Sunken Billions Revisited: Progress and Challenges in Global Marine Fisheries* (2017).

³³ Transparency International, *Netting Billions: A Global Valuation of IUU Fishing* (Berlin: TI, 2019).

³⁴ UNECA, *Illicit Financial Flows: Report of the High-Level Panel on Illicit Financial Flows from Africa* (Addis Ababa: UNECA, 2015).

interfere with traditional livelihoods.³⁵ The marginalization of artisanal fishermen increases social inequality, poverty, and animosity toward national governments and foreign fleets that are thought to be involved in their predicament. There are wider socioeconomic ramifications to the decline of artisanal livelihoods. Fishing contributes to social cohesiveness and cultural identity in many coastal communities in addition to generating revenue. When these sources of income fail, communities become unstable, migration pressures rise, and young people are more susceptible to illegal activities like trafficking, smuggling, and piracy.³⁶ Thus, the failure to curb IUU fishing contributes indirectly to wider security challenges in regions such as the Gulf of Guinea and the Gulf of Aden where the nexus between economic desperation and maritime crime has become increasingly evident.³⁷

5.4 Threats to Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience

Beyond its negative effects on people, IUU fishing poses a serious threat to the environment. Devastating equipment like bottom trawls and fine-mesh nets, which catch young fish and destroy marine habitats, are commonly used by dishonest operators. These actions interfere with spawning habitats, lower recruitment, and hasten the decline of fish populations.³⁸ Bycatch mortality of non-target species, such as seabirds, dolphins, and turtles, can occasionally worsen ecological balance and

³⁵I Okafor-Yarwood, 'Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated in West Africa: The Impacts and the Policy Responses' *Marine Policy* 106 *Marine Policy* 103525.

³⁶ ICC International Maritime Bureau, Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships: *Annual Report 2021* (London: ICC-IMB, 2022).

³⁷ CC Ani, 'An Appraisal of the Regional Efforts of the Gulf of Guinea Commission in Curbing Maritime Crimes and Insecurity', *Esut Public Law Journal*, (2023) 4 (1).

³⁸ D Agnew, et al., 'Estimating the Worldwide Extent of Illegal Fishing' *PLoS ONE* (2009) 4(2) 4570.

biodiversity. Uncontrolled fishing techniques also threaten marine ecosystems including mangroves, coral reefs, and sea grass beds, which offer essential functions like carbon sequestration and coastal protection.³⁹ Their deterioration makes coastal areas less resilient to the effects of climate change, such as storm surges and sea level rise, making African nations already facing climate-related issues more vulnerable. Therefore, the ecological impact of IUU fishing goes much beyond fisheries, endangering the same life-supporting systems that the Blue Economy depends on.⁴⁰

5.5 Undermining Maritime Security and Governance

Because it gives other illegal activity cover, IUU fishing compromises overall marine security. Illegal fishing vessels have been connected to the spread of weapons, drug trafficking, and human smuggling.⁴¹ Criminal networks can take advantage of maritime spaces with relative impunity due to the opaqueness of fishing operations and lax oversight. The combination of organized crime and fisheries crime weakens state authority, encourages corruption, and destabilizes already vulnerable coastal areas. Additionally, the public's confidence in institutions is weakened and the legitimacy of legal regimes is compromised by the sense of impunity in fisheries governance. People are less likely to respect other facets of governance when they witness foreign trawlers stealing national resources without facing repercussions, which perpetuates cycles

³⁹ UNEP, *Blue Economy: Sharing Success Stories to Inspire Change* (Nairobi: UNEP, 2018).

⁴⁰ Österblom, H., Sumaila, U. R., Watson, R. and Pauly, D. (2015). The Global Economic Impact of Marine Fisheries. *Reviews in Fisheries Science & Aquaculture*, 23(1), 39-62.

⁴¹ UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in the Fishing Industry* (Vienna: UNODC, 2011).

of lawlessness. Therefore, preventing IUU fishing involves more than just safeguarding fish stocks; it also entails upholding state sovereignty and the rule of law throughout Africa's marine region. The Blue Economy is reduced to a rhetorical goal rather than a developmental reality as a result of these socioeconomic and environmental ramifications.

Every pillar of the Blue Economy—economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability—is threatened by IUU fishing because it depletes resources, marginalizes communities, erodes biodiversity, and increases insecurity. If left unchecked, it might perpetuate the "resource curse," which has long plagued Africa's extractive industries and turned natural wealth into a cause of poverty rather than development.⁴² In this way, combating IUU fishing is a developmental necessity rather than a singular fisheries problem. It serves as a yardstick for determining whether Africa can manage its resources in a way that turns potential into real advantages for its citizens. The question of whether the continent's maritime richness will support sustainable development or prolong cycles of loss, dependency, and ecological collapse is therefore generational.

6.0 COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS AND BEST PRACTICES FROM OTHER JURISDICTIONS

6.1 European Union

One of the most developed nations in the fight against IUU fishing is the European Union (EU). A catch certification program was formed by the 2008 IUU Regulation, which mandates that all fish products entering the

⁴² R. Auty, *Resource Curse Thesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

EU market be accompanied by paperwork attesting to their lawful origin.⁴³ This system effectively globalises EU standards by leveraging market access as a tool of enforcement.⁴⁴ As demonstrated by the EU's "yellow card" and "red card" system, trade restrictions or outright bans were imposed on nations like Thailand, Cambodia, and others that could not show sufficient efforts against IUU fishing.⁴⁵ This strategy highlights two important lessons for Africa. First, market leverage has the potential to be an effective tool for enforcement. African nations might raise the expenses of IUU operations by declining to act as conduits for illegal fish.⁴⁶ Second, traceability and transparency are essential. Illegal goods can easily find their way into legitimate marketplaces in the absence of strong documentation and verification processes. Even if African nations might not have the institutional capabilities of the EU, the idea of coordinating trade policy with enforcement goals is still quite applicable.⁴⁷ Additionally, the EU aids developing nations in bolstering monitoring, control, and surveillance (MCS) and makes significant investments in regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs). Its model shows that enforcement involves more than just policing; it also

⁴³ European Commission, *Council Regulation* (EC) No 1005/2008 Establishing a Community System to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate IUU fishing, OJ L 286, 29.10.2008.

⁴⁴ A. Leroy, F. Galletti, C. Chaboud The EU Restrictive Trade Measures Against IUU Fishing, *Marine Policy* (2016) 64, pp. 82-90.

⁴⁵ European Commission, *EU IUU Fishing Regulation: Yellow and Red Card Scheme*, Brussels, 2019.

⁴⁶ AM Miller, SR Bush, AP Mol Power Europe: EU and the Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Tuna Fisheries Regulation in the West and Central Pacific Ocean *Marine Policy*, 45 (2014), pp. 138-145.

⁴⁷ K Mfodwo, B Milligan, MA Palma, and M Tsamenyi, The European Council Regulation on Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing: an International Fisheries Law Perspective. *International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law*, (2010) 25(1), pp.5-31.

entails building systems that combine growth, trade, and the law.⁴⁸ Instead of viewing fisheries enforcement as a stand-alone problem, the EU example highlights the significance of integrating it into larger frameworks for economic governance in Africa.

6.2 Pacific Island States

Despite their little size and scarce resources, the Pacific Islands have made significant progress against IUU fishing by combining sovereignty through creative regional agreements. For instance, the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) work together to manage tuna populations in their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), establishing and collectively enforcing access requirements for foreign boats.⁴⁹ The PNA has changed the bargaining leverage of minor states by requiring vessels to adhere to regional norms, guaranteeing greater license costs and more robust compliance. The Pacific model emphasizes the need of regional cooperation and solidarity. By working together, they were able to achieve economies of scale even though no single small island state could adequately patrol its large EEZ on its own. Regional observer programs, information exchange, and cooperative surveillance operations have significantly decreased chances for illicit operators. The Pacific experience highlights the critical need for greater regional integration for Africa, with its dispersed coastline governments and overlapping jurisdictions. By standardizing access agreements, organizations like the Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC) and the Fisheries Committee

⁴⁸ MA Young, 'International Trade Law Compatibility of Market-Related Measures to Combat Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing', *Marine Policy*, (2016) 69, 209–219.

⁴⁹ E Havice, 'The Structure of Tuna Access Agreements in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean: Lessons for Africa' (2013) 38 *Marine Policy* 979.

of the West Central Gulf of Guinea (FCWC) might imitate the PNA model.⁵⁰

6.3 Indonesia

One of the biggest archipelagic nations in the world, Indonesia, has taken a very hard stance against IUU fishing. The government implemented a "zero tolerance" policy under the direction of former Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti, which includes the drastic measure of publicly blowing up and sinking foreign vessels found engaging in illicit fishing in Indonesian waters.⁵¹ Among the ships destroyed was the Viking, a notorious vessel that the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society was actively chasing and that Interpol sought for poaching Patagonian toothfish.⁵² Despite being contentious, this audacious approach greatly decreased unlawful invasions and delivered a clear deterrent message. Beyond symbolism, Indonesia made investments to improve openness, overhaul licensing procedures, and fortify its monitoring mechanisms. The political economy of fisheries was transformed by the combination of strict enforcement and institutional reform, proving that political will and decisive action can produce noticeable outcomes.⁵³

6.4 China

⁵⁰ Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC), *Strategic Action Plan for West Africa*, 2015.

⁵¹ G Petrossian & M Sosnowski, 'Preventing IUU Fishing: The Indonesian Example' *Marine Policy* (2019) 104 20.

⁵² BA Putra, The Foreign Policy Fiasco of Countering Illegal Fishing: Reflections from Indonesia's Approach to Publicly Explode and Sink Illegally Intruding Boats, *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, (2026) Volume 13.

⁵³ B Soyer, G Leloudas, D Miller Tackling IUU Fishing: Developing a Holistic Legal Response *Transnatl. Environ. Law*, (2018) 7 (1), 139-163.

China, as the world's largest distant-water fishing nation, has long been implicated in IUU fishing activities across Africa and beyond.⁵⁴ However, in response to pressure from other nations, Beijing has tightened control over its fleets in recent years. Among the measures are mandatory vessel licensing, blacklisting delinquent operators, and penalties for illegal activities abroad. These findings show that, despite uneven implementation, market and diplomatic pressure may compel reform even in major fishing nations.⁵⁵ Additionally, China has a major obligation to enhance both domestic and international fisheries management and contribute to the sustainability of the world's live marine resources.⁵⁶

6.5 Lessons for Africa

In the global battle against Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, these contrasting experiences offer some crucial insights, especially for Africa's continuous efforts to protect its marine resources and create a sustainable Blue Economy. The significance of market leverage is one important lesson. Denying market access to fish products supplied illegally is an efficient way to integrate trade and enforcement processes, as the European Union's experience shows. Markets can be effective instruments for implementing fisheries governance through stringent import laws, certification standards, and penalties for non-compliant governments. The value of regional solidarity and cooperation is another important lesson. The Pacific Island States have demonstrated that collective management of marine resources strengthens bargaining

⁵⁴ D Pauly & D Zeller, 'The Global Fisheries Crisis as a Result of Chinese Distant-Water Fleets' *Marine Policy* (2016) 5 15.

⁵⁵ Greenpeace, *China's Distant Water Fishing Fleet: 2019 Update*, (Greenpeace East Asia, Beijing 2019).

⁵⁶ S Huang, Management of China's Capture Fisheries: Review and Prospect. *Aquacult. Fish.* (2019) 4, 173–182.

power, improves surveillance capacity, and lowers the financial burden associated with enforcement. For African states, greater regional collaboration through institutions and joint maritime frameworks could significantly improve monitoring and control efforts across shared waters.

The Indonesian experience further highlights the importance of political will and deterrence. Indonesia's aggressive stance against illegal fishing, including highly visible enforcement measures, serves as a powerful deterrent to violators. Also, engaging distant-water fishing nations⁵⁷ is very crucial. China's recent reforms show that external entities can be persuaded to respect coastal governments' sovereignty and adopt more responsible fishing methods. This emphasizes the need for Africa to negotiate more robust bilateral and multilateral agreements that can hold foreign fishing fleets responsible for illegal exploitation of African waters. Additionally, the comparative experiences continually show how important traceability and transparency are in the fight against IUU fishing. Reliable data systems, vessel tracking technologies, open registries, and transparent reporting processes are critical components of effective fisheries governance. Enforcement actions continue to be feeble and ineffectual in the absence of precise data and monitoring systems.⁵⁸ When combined, these comparative observations show that Africa won't always be at risk from IUU fishing. Africa can turn the promise of the Blue Economy from a pipe dream into a real route for economic expansion, environmental sustainability, and regional prosperity by

⁵⁷ Distant water fishing nations (DWFNs) are countries whose industrial fishing fleets operate outside their own domestic waters, either in the international "high seas" or within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of other nations

⁵⁸ GA Petrossian, "Preventing Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing: A Situational Approach." *Biological Conservation* (2015) 189: 39–48.

adapting successful international practices to its particular socio-political and economic realities, bolstering regional cooperation, and exhibiting the political guts required to enforce fisheries laws.

7.0 CONCLUSION

One of the best examples of the conflict between Africa's enormous maritime potential and the enduring flaws in its governance mechanisms is the problem of Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. It has been clearly depicted that throughout the discussion in this paper that although the continent has abundant ocean resources that could spur economic change through the Blue Economy, the persistence of IUU fishing poses a threat to these prospects and prolong cycles of poverty, ecological degradation, and insecurity. The article has demonstrated that there is a basic antagonistic relationship between IUU fishing and the Blue Economy. IUU fishing thrives on exploitation, illegality, and impunity, while the Blue Economy is based on sustainability, inclusivity, and responsible resource use. Food shortages, economic losses, biodiversity degradation, diminished maritime security, and the marginalization of artisanal fishing groups are just a few of its far-reaching effects.

This paper also showed that the lack of legal frameworks is not the issue facing Africa. Significant normative foundations for preventing IUU fishing are provided by regional initiatives like the Lomé Charter and the 2050 Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy, as well as international instruments like UNCLOS, the PSMA, and the UN Fish Stocks Agreement. Rather, the gap between law and enforcement, however, is the main challenge. Effective execution is nonetheless hampered by weak institutions, corruption, insufficient surveillance technologies, overlapping

mandates, poor regional coordination, and a lack of political commitment. Because of this, powerful international fishing interests and organized crime networks continue to have the ability to exploit marine governance in many African states. Strong political will, regional unity, transparency, and the strategic application of market processes are all necessary for effective enforcement, as this paper's comparative experiences show.

Africa can learn a lot from China's developing regulatory changes, Indonesia's deterrence-based enforcement strategy, the Pacific Islands' collective fisheries management system, and the European Union's traceability regime. These instances demonstrate that effective fisheries governance necessitates integrated institutions, technical investment, regional cooperation, and unshakable political commitment in addition to legal pronouncements. The ability of Africa to exercise significant control over its marine domain will ultimately determine the future of the continent's blue economy. The promise of the Blue Economy runs the risk of becoming little more than a theoretical goal if IUU fishing is allowed to continue. On the other hand, if African nations prioritize sustainable fisheries governance and bolster maritime law enforcement, the continent's seas can truly serve as a foundation for long-term prosperity, food security, economic diversification, and environmental resilience. Therefore, the fight against IUU fishing is more than just a fisheries issue; it is a test of Africa's ability to preserve its sovereignty, manage its natural resources responsibly, and ensure a sustainable future for future generations.

8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

African coastal governments urgently need to bolster their maritime enforcement institutions to effectively combat Illegal, Unreported, and

Unregulated (IUU) fishing and protect the viability of Africa's Blue Economy. Increased finance, specialized training, and institutional changes that can boost operational effectiveness are necessary for fisheries ministries, coastguards, navies, and marine enforcement organizations. In order to effectively monitor and police territorial seas and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), these agencies should also have sufficient patrol boats, surveillance planes, and logistical support. The enforcement of fishing rules will remain feeble and mostly symbolic in the absence of robust and adequately funded organizations. The necessity of increased regional collaboration and collective enforcement among African states is equally crucial. Since IUU fishing routinely crosses national borders, isolated enforcement actions are insufficient. African states should so increase their collaboration through regional organizations such as the Fisheries Committee for the West Central Gulf of Guinea (FCWC), the Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC), and other Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs). Joint patrols, intelligence sharing, harmonization of fishing rules, and coordinated sanctions against guilty vessels would significantly minimize the jurisdictional weaknesses frequently exploited by IUU operators. Additionally, African nations must invest heavily in state-of-the-art surveillance and monitoring technologies. Modern fisheries enforcement mostly relies on technology means such as satellite monitoring, electronic catch documentation techniques, Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS), and Automatic Identification Systems (AIS). The use and integration of these technologies across pertinent authorities would enhance real-time surveillance, make it easier to identify suspect fishing activity and increase states' ability to efficiently investigate and prosecute violators. Strengthening domestic legislative and judicial frameworks about fisheries governance is also urgently needed. Outdated fisheries

regulations with insufficient punishments to discourage illicit operators are still in place in many African governments.

Therefore, in order to ensure harsher penalties for violators, domestic legislation should be examined and harmonized with international legal standards. Additionally, to strengthen judicial knowledge in maritime matters and accelerate the prosecution of offenses relating to fisheries, specialized maritime or environmental courts may be established. One of the biggest barriers to efficient fisheries governance in Africa is still corruption. As a result, fisheries and maritime organizations need to put strong anti-corruption measures in place. Access agreements, licensing processes, and enforcement actions ought to be open and subject to impartial supervision. The public's trust in marine governance institutions would be restored and potential for collusion, bribery, and abuse of office would be lessened with the public publication of fisheries agreements, vessel registries, and enforcement results. One of the main tenets of African fisheries governance should be the protection of artisanal and small-scale fishermen. Governments must make sure that inshore fishing areas set aside for local fishermen are shielded from illicit industrial trawlers, whose operations damage fishing gear, lower fish catches, and jeopardize livelihoods. To empower coastal communities and foster local involvement in sustainable fisheries management and marine governance, community-based frameworks for fisheries management should be equitably encouraged. African nations could also use market and trade processes as weapons against IUU fishing. Stricter certification and traceability procedures, akin to those used by the European Union, ought to be implemented for fish imports and exports. Operators who adhere to sustainable fishing norms should be rewarded with favorable trade

conditions and certificates, while fish products associated with illicit fishing operations should be excluded from regional and global markets.

Coherent policy coordination and a strong political commitment are also necessary to combat IUU fishing. African countries must prioritize fisheries in order to go beyond token pledges to the Blue Economy. To maintain uniformity and prevent circumstances where competing state agendas jeopardize enforcement efforts, fisheries management policies should be integrated with more general trade, security, environmental, and economic policies. Furthermore, better bilateral and multilateral agreements are necessary for African states to interact more successfully with distant-water fishing nations. Foreign fishing fleets operating in African waters should be subject to explicit duties under such agreements, such as requirements for responsibility, transparency, and conflict resolution. In order to guarantee adherence to international fisheries rules, distant-water countries whose fleets participate in illicit activities should also face political and economic pressure. Lastly, to maintain long-term efforts against IUU fishing, more international cooperation and increased public awareness are required. International development partners, academic institutions, and civil society organizations should work together to inform the public about the environmental and socioeconomic effects of illicit fishing. African nations should simultaneously fortify their alliances for capacity-building with global institutions as the Food and Agriculture Organization and the International Maritime Organization in order to improve technical expertise, enforcement capacity, and institutional resilience across the continent.