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Bridging the Governance Gap with Actionable Measures for Addressing IUU Fishing in the Gulf of Guinea

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Background Paper 2

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[1] This paper was presented at the Fourth International Conference on Maritime Security off African Waters.

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Abstract

Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing poses a major threat to marine resources, coastal livelihoods and state revenue in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG). Although the region is supported by numerous national laws, regional institutions and international instruments, including ECOWAS, the Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission, the Fisheries Committee for the West Central Gulf of Guinea, the Abidjan Convention, UNCLOS and the FAO Port State Measures Agreement, enforcement remains fragmented and uneven. This study examines the governance gap that enables IUU fishing to persist. It argues that the central challenge is not the absence of legal frameworks, but the failure to align, coordinate and operationalise them effectively. The brief identifies overlapping mandates, weak information-sharing, limited monitoring, control and surveillance capacity, inconsistent political commitment, and inadequate integration between fisheries governance and maritime security as key constraints. It also examines the responsibilities of foreign fishing vessels and flag states, particularly where weak oversight and flags of convenience undermine enforcement. The brief proposes practical measures, including binding regional protocols, harmonised licensing and penalties, interoperable surveillance systems, joint patrols, stronger port-state inspections, improved flag-state accountability, and implementation of the ECOWAS–SRFC–FCWC Memorandum of Understanding. It concludes that effective action requires political will, sustainable financing, cross-sector coordination and the meaningful participation of coastal communities.



Keywords: IUU fishing; Gulf of Guinea; fisheries governance; regional cooperation; maritime security; flag states.

Introduction

Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported (IUU) fishing poses a substantial risk to the sustainability of marine resources in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG).[1] The region's abundant fisheries support food security, livelihoods, and economic stability for millions, rendering efficient governance crucial for the protection of these resources.[2]

Efficient governance and regional cooperation are essential for tackling this complicated issue, considering the transboundary characteristics of fishing activities and the intricate interactions among national, regional, and international legal frameworks.[3] This policy brief analyses the governance of IUU fishing in the GoG[4] by evaluating current collaboration mechanisms, identifying legal and institutional redundancies, investigating political dynamics, and clarifying the roles of foreign fishing vessels and their flag states. It seeks to provide practical solutions for bolstering regional collaboration, aligning legislative frameworks, improving enforcement capabilities, and promoting accountability. The document is designed to offer a thorough analysis of the difficulties and suggest pragmatic solutions to support the GoG's governance of IUU fisheries for more effective and sustainable management.



[1] Okafor-Yarwood, I. (2019). Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and the complexities of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) for countries in the Gulf of Guinea. *Marine Policy, 99*, 414-422.

[2] Ukwe, C. N., Ibe, C. A., & Sherman, K. (2006). A sixteen-country mobilization for sustainable fisheries in the Guinea Current Large Marine Ecosystem. *Ocean & coastal management, 49*(7-8), 385-412. See also Asiedu, B. (n.d.). *Declining fish stocks in the Gulf of Guinea: Socio-economic impacts.* ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Berchie-Asiedu/publication/299337662_Declining_Fish_Stocks_in_the_Gulf_of_Guinea_Socio-Economic_Impacts/links/5735d52008ae298602e09107/Declining-Fish-Stocks-in-the-Gulf-of-Guinea-Socio-Economic-Impacts.pdf

[3] Ameyaw, G. A. (2017). Managing conflicts in the marine fisheries sectors in Ghana. *University of Wollongong*.

[4] In this policy brief, the focus is primarily on Gulf of Guinea states with significant maritime economic activities, established fisheries governance frameworks, active regional cooperation roles, and documented enforcement capacity related to IUU fishing. This includes Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and select smaller states such as Togo, Benin, and Guinea-Bissau. The exclusion of some neighbouring states, such as Liberia, reflects their relatively limited engagement in regional fisheries governance and limited publicly available data, rather than a value judgment. This delimitation is intended to maintain analytical clarity and relevance to the policy brief's objectives.

Context and Challenges of IUU Fishing Governance in the GoG

The Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of the GoG represent some of the most abundant fishing areas worldwide, sustaining both artisanal and industrial fisheries. GoG states exhibit varied enforcement capacities and governance models.[5]

Country/Region	Key Pressures & Enforcement Model	Primary Challenges
Nigeria	Large industrial fleets; jurisdictional overlaps[6]	Corruption; inter-agency coordination[7]
Ghana	Mixed civil-military model; regional cooperation[8]	Monitoring/ surveillance gaps[9]
Cameroon	Militarised enforcement[10]	Tensions between security & civil agencies[11]
Senegal & Côte d'Ivoire	Regional cooperation; ecosystem-based management[12]	Resource/capacity limitations
Togo, Benin, Guinea-Bissau	Limited capacity; heavy reliance on collaboration[13]	Financial/technical constraints

[5] Mohammed, A. (2023). Maritime Security Governance in the Gulf of Guinea: Opportunities and Challenges of States' Responses. *J. Territorial & Mar. Stud., 10*, 60. See also Jacobsen, K. L. (2017). Maritime security and capacity building in the Gulf of Guinea: On comprehensiveness, gaps, and security priorities. *African Security Review, 26*(3), 237-256.

[6] Akintola, S. L., Fakoya, K. A., Areola, F. O., Olatoye, K. A., & Abiodun-Solanke, A. (2024). Legal and Policy Instruments on Rights and Provisions on Other Issues in Small-Scale Fisheries of Nigeria. In *Implementation of the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines: A Legal and Policy Scan* (pp. 259-278). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. See also Fakoya, K., & Akintola, S. L. (2018). A contextual analysis of small-scale fisheries governance in Nigeria: building on challenges and opportunities for sustainability.

[7] Areola, F. O. (2022). An evaluation of multidimensional justice conflicts in small-scale fisheries in Nigeria. In *Blue Justice: Small-Scale Fisheries in a Sustainable Ocean Economy* (pp. 161-178). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

[8] Asiamah, M. A. (2018). Investigating the issue of maritime domain awareness: the case of Ghana. See also Dambre, D. L. (2025). *The Influence of Colonial Administrative Policies on Contemporary Intelligence Frameworks and Cooperation: A Comparative Case Study of Ghana and Togo* (Doctoral dissertation, American Public University System).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Beseng, M., & Malcolm, J. A. (2021). Maritime security and the securitisation of fisheries in the Gulf of Guinea: experiences from Cameroon. *Conflict, Security & Development, 21*(5), 517-539.

[11] Ibid

[12] Osemwegie, I., Delgado, K. D. C., Arimiyaw, A. W., Kanneh, A. B., Todota, C. T., Faye, A., & Akinyemi, F. O. (2021). Diagnostic analysis of the Canary Current System of West Africa: the need for a paradigm shift to proactive natural resource management. *Ocean and Coastal Research, 69*(suppl 1), e21043.

[13] Bourmaud, S. (2021). *Who is really pirating the seas?: a study on European overfishing in the Gulf of Guinea* (Doctoral dissertation). See also N'Souvi, K., Sun, C., Zhang, H., Broohm, D. A., & Okey, M. K. N. (2021). Fisheries and aquaculture in Togo: Overview, performance, fisheries policy, challenges and comparative study with Ghana, Mali, Niger and Senegal fisheries and aquaculture. *Marine Policy, 132,* 104681. See also Gbedomon, R. C., Salako, K. V., Gnansounou, S. C., Gandji,

The region has ongoing difficulties with IUU fishing, which jeopardises marine biodiversity, endangers the livelihoods of coastal populations, and diminishes government revenue from fisheries. Estimates indicate that as much as 40 per cent of fish captured in the GoG may be illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU), resulting in substantial economic losses surpassing hundreds of millions of dollars per year.

The management of fisheries in the GoG is hindered by insufficient enforcement capabilities, limited surveillance systems, and inadequate data acquisition. Corruption and insufficient transparency impede efforts to combat illegal fishing activity. IUU fishing intensifies disputes between artisanal fishers and industrial fleets, heightening social tensions in coastal communities.[14] The propensity of states to engage in regional cooperation varies significantly.[15] Certain nations exhibit robust dedication to fisheries enforcement, whilst others contend with conflicting national interests. The disjointed marine governance framework hinders coordinated responses, enabling IUU activities to exploit regulatory gaps and jurisdictional uncertainties.[16] Confronting these difficulties needs not just strengthened enforcement but also increased political resolve, regional cohesion, and cohesive legal frameworks that facilitate sustainable fisheries management.

Overlapping Legal and Institutional Frameworks: Conflicts and Opportunities

The management of fisheries and the regulation of IUU fishing in the GoG are governed by a multifaceted array of national, regional, and international legal frameworks.[17] At the national level, each nation possesses distinct fisheries legislation and enforcement frameworks. Regionally, elements such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC), the Fisheries Committee for the West Central Gulf of Guinea (FCWC), and the Abidjan Convention[18] offer legal and institutional governance. Globally, agreements such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the FAO's Port State Measures Agreement, and the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies under the WTO create obligatory standards for member nations.

[14] Ayilu, R. K. (2023). *The blue economy in Ghana: Industrialisation, contestation and impacts on small-scale fisheries*. University of Technology Sydney (Australia).
[15] Ali, K. D. (2015). Maritime security cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea: Prospects and challenges.
[16] Mohammed, A. (2023). Maritime Security Governance in the Gulf of Guinea: Opportunities and Challenges of States' Responses. *J. Territorial & Mar. Stud., 10*, 60. See also Adusu, S. A. (2020). *Regional Cooperation over Gulf of Guinea Resources*. Lancaster University (United Kingdom).
[17] Okafor-Yarwood, I. (2019). Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and the complexities of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) for countries in the Gulf of Guinea. Marine Policy, 99, 414-422.
[18] Convention for Co-operation in the Protection and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the West and Central African Region (Abidjan Convention), signed 23 March 1981 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire; entered into force 5 August 1984. Administered by UNEP, it covers pollution prevention, coastal management, and sustainable development for 22 Atlantic-coast states from Mauritania to South Africa.

This overlapping governing structure frequently leads to conflicts and inefficiency.[19] Discrepancies occur between national legislation and regional agreements for licensing, monitoring, and penalties for IUU fishing. Conflicting jurisdictions generate enforcement ambiguities that vessels exploit, especially in border regions and the high seas near Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).[20] The proliferation of institutions occasionally results in redundant efforts and inadequate coordination of data sharing and collaborative surveillance.[21] Overlapping national and regional laws cause enforcement ambiguities, with multiple agencies having unclear or duplicated roles. This leads to delayed response times and regulatory loopholes exploited by illegal operators, especially in border and offshore zones.

Nevertheless, these overlaps offer opportunities. Aligning laws via regional protocols can diminish discrepancies and enhance coherence, hence promoting more robust collective action. Opportunities exist to harmonise laws through regional protocols. ECOWAS, the SRFC and the FCWC serve as forums for the harmonisation and coordinated management of fisheries.

Promisingly, projects associated with the Abidjan Convention seek to amalgamate marine resource governance with environmental conservation. The conflict resolution procedures inherent in these regional organisations provide avenues for resolving disagreements and fostering collaborative enforcement.[22] Improving institutional connections, standardising legislation, and creating interoperable enforcement systems can fully realise the promise of regional and international frameworks, hence enhancing effectiveness against IUU fishing in West Africa.

[19] Ali, K. D., & Tsamenyi, M. (2013). Fault lines in maritime security: Analysis of maritime boundary uncertainties in the Gulf of Guinea. *African Security Review, 22*(3), 95-110. See also Jacobsen, K. L. (2017). Maritime security and capacity building in the Gulf of Guinea: On comprehensiveness, gaps, and security priorities. *African Security Review, 26*(3), 237-256.

[20] Adusu, S. A. (2020). *Regional Cooperation over Gulf of Guinea Resources*. Lancaster University (United Kingdom). See also Sobseh, E. Y., & Talla, R. T. (2025). Piracy and the Porosity of Cameroon's Maritime Security Borders in the Gulf of Guinea: Legal Framework, Challenges and Policy Recommendations. *Saudi J. Humanities Soc Sci, 10*(6), 272-285.

[21] Islam, M. S. (2024). Maritime security in a technological era: addressing challenges in balancing technology and ethics. *Mersin University Journal of Maritime Faculty, 6*(1), 1-16. See also National Research Council, Division on Engineering, Physical Sciences, Naval Studies Board, & Committee on the" 1,000-Ship Navy"-A Distributed and Global Maritime Network. (2008). *Maritime security partnerships*. National Academies Press.

[22] Onyekwere, I. E. (2020). *The significance of ECOWAS norms and mechanisms in conflict prevention and security-building in West Africa since 2000* (Doctoral dissertation). See also Jack, E. (2014). *The African Union's Involvement in Conflict Resolution in Some ECOWAS Countries* (Doctoral dissertation, Brandeis University).

[23] Okafor-Yarwood, I., Eastwood, O., Chikowore, N., & de Oliveira Paes, L. (2024). Technology and maritime security in Africa: Opportunities and challenges in Gulf of Guinea. *Marine Policy, 160,* 105976.

Existing Regional Collaboration Structures and Their Limitations

The GoG hosts several regional institutions dedicated to fisheries governance, including ECOWAS, the SRFC, and the Abidjan Convention. ECOWAS, primarily an economic and political union, also addresses fisheries through its regional integration mandates and promotes coordination among member states. The SRFC and FCWC, focuses specifically on fisheries management and sustainable exploitation of marine resources by fostering cooperation in scientific research, data sharing, policy harmonisation, and enforcement.

The Abidjan Convention, a regional environmental agreement, supports sustainable coastal and marine ecosystem management through integrated approaches, complementing fisheries governance efforts. These bodies provide coordination mechanisms for information exchange, joint surveillance, and capacity building. For instance, joint patrols along contiguous coastal areas and shared databases facilitate monitoring, control, and surveillance (MCS) activities. Despite these institutional arrangements, significant limitations persist. Institutional capacity varies widely among member states, leading to uneven enforcement and monitoring standards. Regional bodies like ECOWAS, SRFC and FCWC support policy harmonisation and joint surveillance but suffer from inconsistent political commitment, funding gaps, and overlapping mandates. Data-sharing and integration with maritime security remain weak, limiting coordinated IUU fisheries control.[23]



Financial and technical constraints hamper sustained regional operations, while political will fluctuates, affecting commitment to shared priorities. Coordination challenges emerge from overlapping mandates and insufficient communication between fisheries-specific and broader regional organisations.

[23] Okafor-Yarwood, I., Eastwood, O., Chikowore, N., & de Oliveira Paes, L. (2024). Technology and maritime security in Africa: Opportunities and challenges in Gulf of Guinea. *Marine Policy, 160*, 105976.



Moreover, information-sharing platforms remain fragmented and insufficiently integrated, limiting timely responses to IUU activities. Cross-sectoral collaboration with maritime security agencies and port authorities is often weak, constraining comprehensive control measures. Additionally, there is notable non-alignment between the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (YCoC), focused on maritime security, and the jurisdictional mandates of fisheries bodies like the FCWC and SRFC, with no formal partnership mechanisms to bridge these gaps.

Despite an existing tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the ECOWAS Commission, SRFC and the FCWC[24][25], effective coordination and information-sharing is not currently ongoing. There are also clear organisational deficiencies and redundancies, which result in heightened ambiguity regarding the dissemination of information and the effective execution of various initiatives originating from all three entities.
Lastly, non-compliance by some flag states of foreign fishing vessels complicates enforcement efforts, as regional bodies have limited jurisdiction over these actors.
To strengthen regional collaboration, these institutions require enhanced funding, capacity building, improved legal harmonisation, and robust mechanisms to engage stakeholders across sectors, including foreign flag states. Additionally, one clear avenue of mitigating the effects of IUU in the region, is for the ECOWAS Commission and other sub-regional fishing bodies to draft policies, a strategy, and an action plan to address IUU fishing at regional level to be domesticated across the national level.

[24] The MoU (2022), establishes a framework for collaboration, partnership and cooperation in the fisheries and aquaculture sector, and coordinated implementation of regional fisheries and aquaculture policies.
[25] Andersen, M. Ø., & Vreÿ, F. (2025). Exploring Communities of Practice for Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea: Opportunities and Constraints. Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies, 8(1), pp. 521–536.

Political Will, Resistance, and Stakeholder Dynamics in IUU Fishing Enforcement

Political will across Gulf of Guinea states varies significantly, deeply influenced by entrenched governance cultures, corruption, and institutional capacity constraints. Weak governance structures and limited resources often lead to inconsistent enforcement and uneven penalties, creating opportunities for IUU actors to operate with relative impunity. Economic dependence on fishing licenses and political patronage further weakens enforcement incentives, while local communities may tolerate illicit fishing due to livelihood vulnerabilities. Addressing these intertwined socio-political challenges requires not only legal and technical reforms but also fostering transparency, accountability, and inclusive stakeholder participation to sustain effective governance and promote an ethical culture entangled in a best practice.

To bolster regional collaboration, these organisations must require increased funding, capacity development, expanded law harmonisation, and effective mechanisms to involve stakeholders across all sectors, including foreign flag states.



Roles and Responsibilities of Foreign Fishing Vessels and Flag States

Foreign fishing vessels operating in or adjacent to West African waters, along with their flag states, have substantial obligations in addressing IUU fishing. According to international law, including UNCLOS and the FAO Port State Measures Agreement, flag states must guarantee that vessels under their flags comply with fisheries management regulations and abstain from illegal operations.[26]

However, in practice, many flag states exercise limited oversight, especially when it comes to vessels registered under flags of convenience, undermining enforcement efforts across the Gulf of Guinea. The lack of rigorous vessel monitoring, insufficient licensing transparency, and inconsistent application of port state measures reduce overall deterrence and allow illicit fishing to persist. A multitude of vessels circumvent regulatory scrutiny and penalty systems, perpetuating ongoing, unsustainable, and illegal activities.

Effective addressing of IUU fishing, therefore, hinges on binding compliance mechanisms, robust data sharing, and enhanced cooperation between flag, port, and coastal states.[27] Port states play a regulatory role through inspections, denying admission, or refusing offloading privileges to non-compliant vessels, but significant variation in inspection rigour and data dissemination remains an obstacle. Standardising port state legislation and deepening regional coordination can substantially broaden enforcement capacity and disrupt IUU fishing networks.

Regional fisheries organisations must prioritise the integration and enforcement of comprehensive flag state obligations within their governance frameworks to systematically close compliance gaps and support sustainable fisheries management.

[23] Okafor-Yarwood, I., Eastwood, O., Chikowore, N., & de Oliveira Paes, L. (2024). Technology and maritime security in Africa: Opportunities and challenges in Gulf of Guinea. *Marine Policy, 160*, 105976.

Practical Measures and Mechanisms for Effective Regional Collaboration Against IUU Fishing

To strengthen regional cooperation against IUU fishing in West Africa, the following pragmatic actions are recommended. These are grouped by primary actors, states alone or in tandem with regional bodies, to clarify responsibilities and enhance implementation.

Category	Recommendation	Primary Actors
Binding Protocols	Formulate binding regional protocols reconciling national laws and common norms for licensing, fines, and enforcement.	States & Regional Bodies
Surveillance Technology	Mixed civil-military model; regional cooperation	States & Regional Bodies
Joint Patrols	Enhance cross-border joint patrols integrating navies and coast guards.	States
Regional Incentives	Leverage access to financing, technical help, and reputational advantages.	States
Community Integration	Integrate artisanal fishermen and enterprises in monitoring and awareness campaigns.	States
Tripartite MoU	Implement FCWC-SRFC-ECOWAS MoU for better execution, coordination, and assessment.	States & Regional Bodies
Flag/Port Controls	Enhance flag state supervision and standardise port state inspections.	States & Regional Bodies
Cross-Sectoral MOCs	Have MOCs accommodate delegates from fisheries and security sectors for synergy.	States & Regional Bodies

Conclusion

The regulation of IUU fishing in the GoG is hindered by disjointed legal frameworks, inadequate enforcement capabilities, and inconsistent political commitment. Opportunities exist to bolster regional collaboration via harmonised legislation, improved monitoring, control, and surveillance (MCS), and joint enforcement efforts.

Capacity enhancement through training, resource mobilisation, and technology assistance must complement these initiatives. Regional entities such as ECOWAS, the FCWC and the SRFC ought to enhance the execution, coordination, and assessment processes for enduring impact. Proposed measures, legal harmonisation, MCS upgrades, and joint patrols must align with varied state capacities and political will. Sustainable financing, community engagement, and political consensus are prerequisites for translating recommendations into effective, long-term regional action. Examining the responsibilities of foreign fishing vessels and their flag nations in regional governance is essential for accountability. Success relies on cultivating political commitment, engaging stakeholders, and utilising existing regional organisations to execute effective, sustainable systems. Coordinated regional efforts are essential to preserve West Africa's fisheries resources for the future.



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About the Forum

Since 2022, the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), the Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC), and SIGLA at Stellenbosch University have collaborated under the Danish Peace and Stabilisation Fund's Maritime Security Programme to organise annual fora on maritime security, primarily focusing on the Gulf of Guinea.

The fora provide a platform to examine maritime security challenges, assess existing vulnerabilities, and discuss initiatives and responses to insecurity in the region. In 2025, the forum was held in Stellenbosch, South Africa, with discussions expanded to cover developments in the Red Sea and their implications for littoral countries in Southern and Western Africa.

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