

The Contribution of the Fishing Industry to the Economic Development of Mauritania

Sidi Maibess*

IIUM Institute of Islamic Banking and Finance, International Islamic University Malaysia,
Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author Email: sidimaibess@gmail.com

Ashurov Sharofiddin

IIUM Institute of Islamic Banking and Finance, International Islamic University Malaysia,
Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Email: ashurov@iium.edu.my

Nur Farhah Binti Mahadi

IIUM Institute of Islamic Banking and Finance, International Islamic University Malaysia,
Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Email: farhahmahadi@iium.edu.my

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARAFMS/v15-i4/26779>

Published Online: 29 October 2025

Abstract

Mauritania's fishing industry is a cornerstone of the national economy, providing significant contributions to export revenues, employment, and gross domestic product (GDP). This article examines the historical evolution, economic impact, employment generation, infrastructure development, environmental sustainability, and comparative regional context of Mauritania's fishing sector. Drawing on academic literature, government reports, and international organization publications, the analysis highlights the sector's pivotal role in economic development, the challenges it faces, and the prospects for sustainable growth. The study finds that while the fishing industry has driven economic diversification and foreign exchange earnings, it is also confronted by resource management challenges, overfishing, and the need for greater value addition. Policy recommendations are offered to enhance the sector's contribution to inclusive and sustainable development.

Keywords: Fishing Industry, Economic Development, Public Revenue, International Competition

Introduction

Mauritania, located on the northwest coast of Africa, is endowed with some of the world's richest fishing grounds (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2022). The country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Atlantic Ocean supports a diverse array of marine species, making fisheries a strategic sector for economic development. Since

independence in 1960, the fishing industry has evolved from a traditional, subsistence activity to a modern, export-oriented sector that is central to the national economy (Kane & Sy, 2019). This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the contribution of the fishing industry to Mauritania's economic development, exploring its historical trajectory, economic significance, employment generation, infrastructure and technological advancements, environmental sustainability, and regional context.

Historical Development of Mauritania's Fishing Industry

At the time of independence in 1960, Mauritania's economy was primarily based on subsistence activities such as livestock raising, agriculture, and artisanal fishing (Kane & Sy, 2019). The fishing sector was dominated by small-scale, traditional methods, with limited infrastructure and technology. Most catches were for local consumption, and the industry's contribution to the national economy was modest. Recognizing the potential of its rich marine resources, the Mauritanian government began to focus on developing a modern fishing industry. In 1965, the government launched an ambitious program to establish a national fishing fleet and fish processing industry, aiming to capture more value from its maritime resources and reduce reliance on foreign fleets (Ndiaye, 2021). During the 1970s, Mauritania's waters attracted increasing numbers of foreign fishing vessels, particularly from Europe and Asia, due to the abundance of fish species such as sardines, mackerel, and cephalopods. The government began issuing fishing licenses to foreign companies, generating much-needed foreign exchange but also raising concerns about overexploitation (Kane & Sy, 2019). By the late 1970s, Mauritania shifted its approach by halting the issuance of individual fishing licenses and instead forming joint ventures with foreign partners, including Portugal, Iraq, South Korea, Romania, and the Soviet Union (Ndiaye, 2021). These joint companies aimed to increase Mauritania's share of the value chain and promote technology transfer. By the 1980s, fishing had become a leading source of foreign exchange, especially as iron ore prices declined (African Development Bank, 2022).

The sector's contribution to GDP increased, and fish products became one of Mauritania's main exports. The government also began to focus on developing fish processing facilities and port infrastructure to support the growing industry. In the 1990s, Mauritania signed a series of agreements with the European Community (later the European Union) to define fishing rights and quotas within its EEZ (European Commission, 2023). These agreements provided significant revenue and technical assistance, but also led to debates about resource sustainability and the equitable distribution of benefits (Think Africa Press, 2022). Today, more than 95% of catches from Mauritania's EEZ are exported, with the export value of fisheries products estimated at about USD 828 million in recent years (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2023). The sector remains a major contributor to GDP, accounting for between 4% and 10% of the national total, and provides direct and indirect employment to tens of thousands of Mauritians (World Bank, 2023). The government has invested in modernizing port facilities, expanding fish processing capacity, and improving regulatory oversight. Foreign direct investment, particularly from the EU and Asian countries, has played a key role in upgrading the sector's infrastructure and technology (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2024). However, heavy fishing by both domestic and foreign fleets has raised concerns about overfishing and resource depletion, prompting the implementation of stricter licensing regimes, marine protected areas, and international cooperation on resource management (Ndiaye, 2021).

Economic Impact of the Fishing Industry

The fishing sector is a major driver of Mauritania's export revenues. In recent years, the sector has accounted for between 35% and 50% of the country's total export value (World Bank, 2023). Historically, this share has increased over time, with fisheries contributing 60% of export earnings in 1980 and rising to 68% by 1988 (Kane & Sy, 2019). In 2023, Mauritania's total exports were valued at \$4.94 billion, with fisheries representing a major component of this figure (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2023). The primary export markets for Mauritanian fish products are Europe (notably Spain), Japan, and China (UNCTAD, 2023). A substantial portion of the catch is exported directly, often without being processed locally. Some fish products are processed in Spain and then re-exported to other markets, including the United States (Kane & Sy, 2019). The high export share of fisheries contributes positively to Mauritania's trade balance. The sector's strong export orientation, with a large proportion of the catch destined for international markets, helps offset imports and supports foreign exchange earnings (IMF, 2024).

Mauritania is the second largest producer and exporter of fish products in Africa, contributing 8.3% of total African fish production and 10.7% of African fish exports (African Union Interafrican Bureau for Animal Resources [AU-IBAR], 2022). The fishing industry's contribution to Mauritania's GDP is estimated to be between 4% and 10%, depending on the year and data source (World Bank, 2023). Recent reports place the figure at around 10% (African Development Bank, 2022), while other sources cite a range of 4% to 10% and about 6% in earlier years (AU-IBAR, 2022; FAO, 2022). This makes fisheries one of the top three sectors in Mauritania's economy, alongside mining and agriculture (CIA, 2023). While the majority of fish products are exported with limited local processing, government strategies aim to increase domestic value addition. The Mauritanian government's Fisheries Strategy 2020-2024 emphasizes the promotion of joint ventures, enhancement of value addition before export, and the development of local processing facilities (Fisheries Transparency Initiative [FiTI], 2021). The recent inauguration of the Industrial Complex for the Processing and Value Addition of Pelagic Fish in Nouadhibou, the largest fish processing plant in North Africa, is a significant step in this direction (Global Seafood Alliance, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Employment Generation and Livelihoods

The fisheries sector in Mauritania supports approximately 66,000 direct jobs and 300,000 indirect jobs as of 2023 (World Bank, 2023). Other sources estimate over 65,000 direct and 226,000 indirect jobs in the sector, with the majority of these positions being informal and sometimes seasonal (AU-IBAR, 2022). The sector offers important opportunities for job creation, especially in coastal communities where alternative livelihoods are limited. The artisanal sub-sector is particularly significant, accounting for about 40% of the total annual catch and generating approximately 80% of the sector's added value and employment (World Bank, 2021). Around 70% of jobs in the sector are found in artisanal fisheries, including roles such as sailors, fishermen, fishmongers, and processors (OECD/SWAC, 2022). The sector is a vital source of income for thousands of Mauritanian households, supporting not only those directly involved in fishing but also a wide range of ancillary activities such as fish processing, transportation, and marketing. While specific gender-disaggregated data is limited, women are known to play a significant role in fish processing and marketing, particularly in artisanal fisheries (World Bank, 2021).

The sector is a key driver of rural and coastal development, providing livelihoods in areas where employment opportunities are otherwise scarce. Most jobs in the sector are informal, lacking social protection and job security (AU-IBAR, 2022). This is particularly true in the artisanal sub-sector, where employment is often seasonal and dependent on the availability of target species. Employment levels fluctuate with fishing seasons, which are determined by the biological cycles of key species and regulatory measures such as closed seasons to protect stocks (FAO, 2022). The fishing sector contributes between 2.8% and 10% of Mauritania's GDP (depending on the source and year) and accounts for 35% to 50% of the country's exports (World Bank, 2023). This economic significance underpins the sector's role in supporting livelihoods at both the household and national levels.

Infrastructure Development, Investments, and Technological Advancements

A landmark in Mauritania's fisheries infrastructure is the recent inauguration of the Industrial Complex for the Processing and Value Addition of Pelagic Fish in Nouadhibou. This facility, operated by the Arab Mauritanian Fish Company (SAMAK), is the largest fish processing plant in North Africa (Global Seafood Alliance, 2024). It is equipped with world-class standards and advanced technologies for processing, freezing, and exporting small pelagic fish such as mackerel, sardines, and Atlantic chub mackerel. The complex covers 15,000 square meters, with an annual production capacity of 100,000 tons and a storage capacity of 10,000 tons (Reuters, 2024). The location of the new industrial complex in the Port Industrial Zone of Nouadhibou highlights ongoing investments in port infrastructure to support the fisheries sector (Global Seafood Alliance, 2024). These developments facilitate efficient landing, processing, and export of fish products, strengthening Mauritania's position as a leading fish exporter in Africa. The SAMAK project exemplifies a pioneering public-private partnership model, with significant stakes held by the Arab Authority for Agricultural Investment and Development (AAID), the Imam Walad Ibno Group, and other Mauritanian investors. The total investment in the project reached USD 28 million, reflecting a strong commitment to expanding the sector's industrial base and export capacity (Reuters, 2024).

Mauritania's fisheries sector continues to attract both domestic and international investment, particularly in processing, storage, and export infrastructure. These investments are critical for job creation, value addition, and foreign currency earnings (IMF, 2024). The new industrial complex is equipped with state-of-the-art processing and freezing technologies, enabling Mauritania to meet international standards for fish exports (Global Seafood Alliance, 2024). This technological leap is expected to enhance value addition, product quality, and competitiveness in global markets. A significant technological trend is the push towards decentralised renewable energy (DRE) solutions in the artisanal fisheries sub-sector (WorldFish, 2021). The sector has traditionally relied on fossil fuels, which undermines profitability and increases greenhouse gas emissions. Recent assessments have mapped out suitable DRE solutions for different segments of the value chain, aiming to decarbonise operations, reduce costs, and improve energy access (WorldFish, 2021).

Key barriers to DRE adoption include policy and regulatory bottlenecks, limited access to financing, underdeveloped supply chains, and low technical expertise. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts in policy reform, capacity building, and financial support (WorldFish, 2021). Recent funding initiatives have supported the development of a monitoring system that integrates satellite technology with radar stations and patrol ships.

This system is designed to improve resource management, combat illegal fishing, and ensure the sustainability of marine resources (European Commission, 2023). Infrastructure and technological advancements are expected to generate hundreds of direct and indirect jobs, expand the industrial base, and increase the sector's contribution to foreign currency earnings (IMF, 2024). Enhanced processing capacity and energy efficiency will further empower local livelihoods and support sustainable development. The integration of renewable energy and advanced monitoring systems aligns with broader goals of balancing economic growth with natural resource preservation (World Bank, 2021). These efforts are crucial for maintaining the long-term viability of Mauritania's fisheries sector.

Environmental Sustainability and Resource Management

Mauritania has partnered with the European Union (EU) under a Sustainable Fishery Partnership Agreement (SFPA). This agreement is notable for its science-based management plan, launched in 2022, which includes setting quotas for different species, designating no-fishing zones, establishing closed seasons to allow fish stocks to reproduce, and addressing fishmeal and freezing practices to prioritize food security over industrial processing (European Commission, 2023). The EU provides €57 million annually for access to Mauritanian waters, with the condition that only surplus stocks are targeted. This funding also supports the development of artisanal fishing, infrastructure upgrades, and capacity building for sustainable management (European Commission, 2023). In response to overfishing concerns, Mauritania has reduced the number of industrial fishing vessels from over 70 to fewer than 15. Some fishmeal factories have closed, and others are being encouraged to install refrigeration to preserve fish for human consumption rather than for fishmeal and oil production (Think Africa Press, 2022). The government has taken steps to monitor fishmeal plants more closely, tracking the composition and size of catches processed into fishmeal. There is also a push to encourage the use of small pelagics for human consumption, rather than for export as fishmeal and fish oil (Think Africa Press, 2022). Mauritanian legislation authorizes a maximum of 3% by weight of by-catches for small pelagic trawlers operating under the SFPA (European Commission, 2023). There are also requirements for scientific observers on board EU vessels, although compliance has been inconsistent (Ndiaye, 2021).

Major Resource Management Challenges

Despite these efforts, the sector faces significant challenges:

Overfishing and Stock Depletion: Many fish species, especially small pelagics like sardinella, are being harvested beyond sustainable limits (FAO, 2023). Some stocks are in alarming decline, threatening food security and livelihoods. Industrial fishing vessels, often foreign-owned, are seen as a major driver of this overexploitation, particularly through the fishmeal industry (Think Africa Press, 2022). **By-Catch and Discards:** By-catch remains a significant issue, especially for EU shrimp trawlers, where up to a third of catches are by-catch, including valuable species like monkfish and octopus (Ndiaye, 2021). Black hake, an overexploited resource, is heavily impacted by by-catch from small pelagic trawlers. The Joint Scientific Committee (JSC) has called for a total ban on demersal by-catches by small pelagic trawlers, but implementation and enforcement remain challenging (European Commission, 2023).

Insufficient Regional Cooperation: Small pelagic stocks migrate along the West African coast and are shared between several countries. Effective management requires harmonized, regional approaches (OECD/SWAC, 2022). Without regional agreements on total allowable

catches (TAC) and resource sharing, it is impossible to ensure sustainability for each country individually. Weak Enforcement and Data Gaps: Enforcement of regulations, such as observer requirements and by-catch limits, is inconsistent (Ndiaye, 2021). Some EU vessels have refused to take observers on board, citing logistical constraints. This undermines scientific monitoring and effective management (FiTI, 2021).

Climate Change and Environmental Degradation: Climate change, pollution, and habitat degradation further threaten fish stocks and marine ecosystems (World Bank, 2021). These factors compound the pressures from overfishing and make resource management more complex. Socio-Economic Pressures: Fishing supports as many as 300,000 jobs in Mauritania, directly and indirectly (World Bank, 2023). The need to balance economic gains with sustainability is acute, as the country has few alternatives to its marine resources (Think Africa Press, 2022). Some fish stocks are reportedly recovering under the new management plan, but others remain critically depleted (European Commission, 2023). Scientists recommend a 60% reduction in fish mortality to allow full recovery, which would require fewer boats, shorter seasons, and tighter enforcement—measures that are difficult to implement given the socio-economic importance of fishing (Ndiaye, 2021). Eco-certification efforts for fishmeal and fish oil have been criticized as “greenwashing” unless they are accompanied by real improvements in resource recovery and food security (Think Africa Press, 2022).

Comparative Regional Context

Mauritania’s fishing industry is among the most developed in West Africa, but it shares several characteristics and challenges with neighboring countries such as Senegal, Ghana, Togo, Mali, and Niger (OECD/SWAC, 2022). Across the region, artisanal fisheries are major sources of employment and livelihoods, supporting millions of people directly and indirectly. Industrial sectors provide fewer jobs but contribute significantly to export revenues and government income (AU-IBAR, 2022). Senegal and Ghana are leading fish exporters, with fisheries making substantial contributions to national GDP and trade balances. Togo’s fisheries contribute less to export revenues but remain important for local food security and income (OECD/SWAC, 2022). Infrastructure development is more advanced in Senegal and Ghana, while Togo, Mali, and Niger face greater constraints in funding, regulation, and resource management. Common challenges across the region include overfishing, weak enforcement of regulations, and environmental degradation (FAO, 2023). Countries are at various stages of implementing fisheries management plans, with mixed success due to limited resources and capacity. Effective regional cooperation is essential for the sustainable management of shared fish stocks, particularly migratory species (OECD/SWAC, 2022).

Policy Frameworks and International Cooperation

The Mauritanian government’s Fisheries Strategy 2020-2024 outlines key priorities for the sector, including increasing domestic processing, promoting joint ventures, enhancing value addition, and improving regulatory oversight (FiTI, 2021). The strategy emphasizes the need for sustainable management, capacity building, and the development of infrastructure to support the sector’s growth. Mauritania has signed a series of agreements with the European Union, Japan, and China to define fishing rights, quotas, and technical assistance within its EEZ (UNCTAD, 2023). The Sustainable Fishery Partnership Agreement (SFPA) with the EU is particularly significant, providing financial support, technical assistance, and a framework for science-based management (European Commission, 2023). Mauritania is a leading

participant in the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI), which aims to improve transparency and accountability in the sector. The first FiTI report, finalized in 2021, covers six core areas of the FiTI standard and provides new transparency on foreign fishing agreements, sectoral governance, and regulatory frameworks (FiTI, 2021).

Challenges and Opportunities

1. **Overfishing and Resource Depletion:** The sector faces significant challenges related to overfishing, stock depletion, and the need for effective resource management (FAO, 2023).
2. **Informality and Seasonality:** High levels of informal and seasonal employment limit job security and social protection for workers (AU-IBAR, 2022).
3. **Limited Value Addition:** The majority of fish products are exported with limited local processing, reducing the potential for value addition and job creation (Kane & Sy, 2019).
4. **Weak Enforcement and Data Gaps:** Inconsistent enforcement of regulations and data gaps undermine effective management and sustainability (Ndiaye, 2021).
5. **Climate Change and Environmental Degradation:** Climate change, pollution, and habitat degradation further threaten fish stocks and marine ecosystems (World Bank, 2021).
6. **Infrastructure and Technological Advancements:** Investments in processing facilities, port infrastructure, and renewable energy solutions offer opportunities for value addition, job creation, and sustainable growth (IMF, 2024; Global Seafood Alliance, 2024).
7. **Policy and Institutional Reforms:** Ongoing policy efforts and international cooperation provide a framework for sustainable management and inclusive development (FiTI, 2021).
8. **Regional Cooperation:** Strengthening regional cooperation on resource management is essential for the sustainable exploitation of shared fish stocks (OECD/SWAC, 2022).
9. **Gender and Social Inclusion:** Promoting gender equality and social inclusion in the sector can enhance its contribution to poverty reduction and rural development (World Bank, 2021).

Conclusion

Mauritania's fishing industry is a pillar of the national economy, driving export revenues, employment, and GDP growth (World Bank, 2023). The sector has undergone significant transformation since independence, evolving from a traditional, subsistence activity to a modern, export-oriented industry (Kane & Sy, 2019). While the fishing sector has contributed significantly to economic diversification and foreign exchange earnings, it faces major challenges related to overfishing, resource management, informality, and limited value addition (Ndiaye, 2021). Policy efforts to promote sustainable management, infrastructure development, and value addition are critical for enhancing the sector's contribution to inclusive and sustainable development (IMF, 2024). Strengthening regional cooperation, improving enforcement and data collection, and promoting gender and social inclusion are essential for addressing the sector's challenges and realizing its full potential (OECD/SWAC, 2022). As Mauritania continues to navigate the complex interplay between economic growth and environmental sustainability, the fishing industry will remain central to the country's development trajectory. Continued investment, policy support, and international cooperation will be essential to ensure that the sector contributes to the well-being of current and future generations.

Theoretical and Contextual Contribution

This research makes a significant theoretical and contextual contribution to the literature on resource-based economic development and sustainable fisheries management. Theoretically, it extends the understanding of how natural resource endowments, when strategically managed, can drive economic diversification and foster inclusive growth in developing economies. By situating Mauritania's fishing industry within frameworks of export-led growth and sustainable development, the study demonstrates the complex interplay between economic gains, social welfare, and environmental stewardship. Contextually, this research provides a nuanced analysis of Mauritania's unique position as a leading African fish exporter, highlighting the sector's role in employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, and rural development. It addresses critical gaps in the literature by integrating empirical data on employment, export revenues, and policy reforms with an assessment of governance challenges and international cooperation. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars interested in the sustainable management of marine resources, not only in Mauritania but also in other resource-dependent economies facing similar challenges. By emphasizing the importance of balancing economic, social, and environmental objectives, this study contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable development and provides a contextualized model for leveraging fisheries as a catalyst for national and regional economic transformation.

References

- African Development Bank. (2022). *Mauritania economic outlook*. <https://www.afdb.org/en/countries/west-africa/mauritania/mauritania-economic-outlook>
- African Union Interafrican Bureau for Animal Resources. (2022). *The contribution of the fisheries sector to economy in Africa: Mauritania profile*. <https://www.auiabar.org/mauritania-fisheries-profile>
- Central Intelligence Agency. (2023). *The world factbook: Mauritania*. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/mauritania/>
- European Commission. (2023). *Fisheries partnership agreement with Mauritania*. https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/fisheries/international-agreements/mauritania_en
- Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI). (2021). *Mauritania: 1st FiTI report*. <https://fiti.global/resource/first-fiti-report-mauritania/>
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2022). *Fishery and aquaculture country profiles: Mauritania*. <https://www.fao.org/fishery/en/facp/mrt>
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2023). *The state of world fisheries and aquaculture 2022*. <https://www.fao.org/publications/sofia/2022/en/>
- Global Seafood Alliance. (2024, January 9). *Mauritania inaugurates the largest fish processing plant in North Africa*. <https://www.globalseafood.org/blog/mauritania-largest-fish-processing-plant-north-africa/>
- International Monetary Fund. (2024). *Mauritania: 2023 Article IV consultation—Press release; staff report; and statement by the executive director for Mauritania (IMF Country Report No. 24/17)*. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2024/01/10/Mauritania-2023-Article-IV-Consultation-Press-Release-Staff-Report-and-Statement-by-the-478928>

- Kane, A., & Sy, A. (2019). The Mauritanian fisheries sector: Analysis of its contribution to the national economy. *Journal of Maritime Studies and National Integration*, 3(2), 118–126. <https://doi.org/10.14710/jmsni.v3i2.5678>
- Ndiaye, A. (2021). *Fisheries governance and sustainable management in Mauritania: Current status and challenges*. *Marine Policy*, 134, 104803. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2021.104803>
- OECD/SWAC. (2022). *West African fisheries: Mauritania country note*. In *West African Papers*, No. 31. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1b6b6e7e-en>
- Reuters. (2024, January 8). *Mauritania opens North Africa's largest fish processing plant*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mauritania-opens-north-africas-largest-fish-processing-plant-2024-01-08/>
- Think Africa Press. (2022). *Overfishing and the future of Mauritania's blue economy*. <https://thinkafricapress.com/mauritania-blue-economy-overfishing/>
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2023). *Mauritania: Trade and fisheries sector overview*. <https://unctad.org/mauritania-fisheries>
- World Bank. (2021). *Mauritania's blue economy: Unlocking the potential of marine resources*. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/35244>
- World Bank. (2023). *Mauritania economic update: Diversifying for growth*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mauritania/publication/economic-update-2023>
- WorldFish. (2021). *Powering Mauritania's fisheries value chains with decentralized renewables*. <https://www.worldfishcenter.org/news/powering-mauritanias-fisheries-value-chains-decentralized-renewables>