Creating Synergies between Indigenous Practices and Scientific Knowledge (ISIPSK) in Fisheries Management: West Africa Small-scale Fisheries in Profile.

ABSTRACT.

Fisheries is a sector that is critical to the world, especially in West Africa. fisheries contribute to food and economic security. The sector is deemed a “gender equaliser” because it facilitates the complementary relationship between men and women, wherein men predominantly fish and women process, distribute, market and sell. However, access to fish and fish’s role in promoting gender equality is gravely threatened by overfishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, pollution and climate change. To improve fisheries conservation, West African countries have, since 2019, implemented a closed fishing season that restricts artisanal fishers from fishing for one month throughout the year. This restriction has provoked major objections from the local and traditional fisherfolk, noting that their perspectives were ignored in the formulation of this intervention. Significant gaps exist in integrating indigenous knowledge into fisheries management practices, such as the closed fishing season in West Africa. Overall, marine conservation interventions in non-Western countries are mostly based on Western scientific knowledge with little consideration for traditional perspectives. Despite the effectiveness of indigenous practices, the extent to which they are considered viable solutions to marine conservation by policymakers remains significantly low in Africa. Therefore, co-developing synergies between indigenous practices and scientific knowledge are fundamental to sustainable marine conservation approaches in West Africa.

This project aims to employ an interdisciplinary (indigenous-science-policy interface) and cross-regional approach:

• Advancing knowledge on the gendered impact of the closed fishing season, focusing on socio-economic implications, using an interdisciplinary (science-policy interface) and cross-regional approach.
• Examining how indigenous practices can be integrated into marine conservation interventions.
• Developing innovative ways of disseminating information to develop an effective sub-regional fisheries conservation and sustainable livelihood plan.

To achieve these objectives, this project would ask the following broad questions.

• What are the impacts of the marine closed season on resource users, artisanal fisheries, and the economy in West Africa (case study countries)?
• What alternative source of income does fisherfolk deploy in the period of low catch or closed seasons?
  o What other alternative or complementary livelihood options might be viable for small-scale fishers in the closure period?
• How might indigenous practices be integrated with scientific knowledge as a more sustainable solution to marine conservation?

The research objectives will be achieved through the following means:

• Work Package 1 (Pilot Study): Deploy quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data.
• Work Package 2 (Science-Policy-Gender-Economics Insight): Critically evaluate data, focusing on the gendered impact of fisheries’ closed season on small-scale fisheries (SSF). In tandem, assess alternative and complementary livelihood options available to fisherfolk. Finally, investigate how indigenous fisheries conservation practices can be integrated into scientific knowledge through engaging with communities and developing a framework for adaptation at the national and regional levels.
• **Work Package 3 (Dissemination & Application of findings):** Methods deployed in the case study countries will be scaled-up in other countries in West Africa. The findings from the study will be shared to amplify the need to harmonise regional fishing management measures. This study would significantly demonstrate the effectiveness of combining traditional and science-based decisions for a regional approach to the current closed season through the Fisheries Committee for West Central Gulf of Guinea or the Economic Community of West African States institutional framework. This will be achieved by developing a high-level Expert Group to share the best practices, creating a short-term awareness and capacity-building program, disseminating knowledge through an international conference during the project's third year and exploiting findings through peer-reviewed scholarly publications, policy briefs and Op-eds.

**Supervisory Team:**

Dr Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood. Ife has published and taught widely on oceans and fisheries governance, maritime security, the blue economy and environmental justice. Ife is supervising and in the advisory committee of other PhD students of oceans and environmental sustainability-related topics using mixed methods approaches.