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A new generation of fisheries agreements

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Ministerial Meeting -The Future of Fisheries Partnership Agreements

Brussels, 13 May 2011

Ministers and Secretaries of State, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for accepting this invitation and for taking the time to come all the way to Brussels. We are all very busy and some of you travelled a long way to be here today, so I really appreciate it.

I personally took the initiative of convening this conference. Why?

Because I value the external dimension of the EU's common fisheries policy. For me it is very important. We want to make sure that the fish stocks in all our seas are healthy and productive. This is the essential premise of a healthy and productive fishing industry across the world.

All our conservation efforts make little sense if we don't make sure that they are also applied internationally. Much remains to be done to apply the golden rule of sustainable fishing everywhere and in all circumstances.

So we need to project on the international scene the rules and principles of sustainability - and conversely of course, we must enrich our internal EU policy with inputs from international experience.

Over the years the external dimension has always been deep-rooted into our work; it has been part and parcel of each reform, in 1997 as in 2004. And the EU has had bilateral agreements with each of you for several years now – to our mutual benefit. We faced of course criticism on several aspects of our policy. But after all we had considerably positive results. Our partnership has supplied our market with good-quality products; it has given jobs to thousands of people from all over the world; and it has helped your countries move toward sustainable fishing. In general, and despite occasional problems, I would say it has been a win-win deal.

We are now at the eve of another reform, and this time we are ready to make a radical change and take new directions on a number of issues. In the last few months we have had extensive consultations and discussions with governments and stakeholders; agreements must be maintained, though they need to be developed and improved.

So this is our starting point for the reform: we keep the agreements, but we also want to find ways to improve their quality and increase their added value. We modify them to make them fit for today's environmental challenges and for the international objectives we have subscribed to.

I look forward to discuss these challenges with you today and to see what could be the best approach for our future policy.

Let's start with the issue of conservation. One problem we have identified is that we cannot always be sure to be fishing exclusively "surplus" resources. By surplus resources we mean the fish that is there to be fished safely on top of what has been fished locally. This rule addresses at the same time the priority that is due to local fisheries and the imperative of conservation. We are bound to it by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

To establish how much surplus there is, or how much can be sustainably fished from it, we need to know two things: we need to know the state of the stock and we need to know if others are drawing from that stock.

This evaluation has not always been performed in the past; but in our mutual interest we have to make sure that both scientific knowledge and transparency are a strict requirement for each negotiation.

At the same time, we should reflect on how to ensure better compliance – as you know we now have a complete set of instruments against illegal fishing and we are ready to offer our help in terms of surveillance, inspection and sanctions.

The issue of compliance is linked to the second key element of our partnership: governance.

To me it is essential that our own fishing takes place within a high-quality governance framework. Compliance with the rules is clearly part and parcel of that - and when I talk of compliance I mean both on the part of our partner countries and on the part of our own EU vessels. I would like to hear your views on how to prevent people from trying to circumvent the rules by reflagging vessels, for example.

An equally important aspect of governance concerns the respect for Human Rights, the rule of law, and democratic principles.

These not only lie at the core of the EU values, but are also the basis of all our major international cooperation agreements. There can be no compromise when it comes to the respect of these fundamental principles, and this is true for all policy areas. Our Agreements must be brought in line with the general EU practice in development and foreign policy.

Another issue is that, today, relative to the benefits obtained, the level of contribution of the industry is quite low compared to the contribution from the EU budget. We want to redress this imbalance, adopting a more modern and market-oriented approach for the payment of access rights.

To underpin all these efforts, we want to restructure a third fundamental area: the shape and nature of our financial support.

If on the one hand we ask you to set up a high standard of governance, improve your scientific and auditing capacity and intensify control and surveillance, on the other it is up to us to make sure that you receive adequate and targeted financial assistance.

We are now looking at several options and are ready to hear your views on how to make the system more effective, improve financial management and maximise the benefit for the fishing sector.

Let's bear in mind that there are two levels to consider here: on one hand we need to tailor our support to the actual needs and absorption capacity of each of your countries, perhaps linking each sum granted to the achievement of specific objectives. This is in fact one of the novelties that the reform will introduce: payments should be linked to results.

On the other hand we need to consider the synergies between the fisheries support we are talking about here and all other forms of assistance your countries may receive from the EU, for instance under the development policies. Again, it would probably be a good idea to channel all these funds towards measurable objectives and improve the mechanism for monitoring and delivery.

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen,

The purpose of reforming our Partnership Agreements is threefold.

- We need to ensure long-term sustainability in your waters by means of reliable scientific advice and precise information on the total pressure on the fish stocks caused by all fleets – EU and non-EU.
- We need a strong governance framework and we need consistency with other EU policy.
- We need to find the ways to better customize financial support, based on your real needs and your absorption capacity, and taking due account of what other EU funds are doing.

These aspects - science-based knowledge, governance, and effective support - will each be reflected in the presentations and in the debates that will follow.

I know that many of you have expressed the wish to intervene, and you are very welcome to do so. I know that Ms Evans, our moderator, will give you the floor– just follow her lead.

If I have asked you to come here today it is because I want to understand your situation, your expectations and your ambition for the future of our partnership. There are things about the reality in your country that only you can explain.

This is the right time for you to do so, because we are now finalizing our reform proposals and we hope to present them to Council and Parliament in less than three months. This reform concerns you directly, because it will tackle the external dimension. All negotiations will progressively follow the new orientations that will emerge from the political debate.

So today I will be listening to what you have to say and I look forward to an interactive discussion. I hope that after this day of work and mutual exchange, we can move forward towards a new generation of agreements, one that is not only fair and satisfactory to us all, but that also takes us from today's fisheries agreements to tomorrow's *sustainable* agreements.

Thank you.