

Oil exploration

For a few oil dollars more

The current plans of oil multinationals could drastically alter the livelihoods of the artisanal fishers of Cameroon

Oil exploration, production and transport are major activities in Cameroon and its neighbouring coastal West African States (Nigeria, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea). For over two years, a consortium, comprising the oil multinationals Elf, Shell and Exxon, has been developing the largest construction project in sub-Saharan Africa. It not only involves developing oilfields in Chad, but also constructing a 600-mile pipeline from these oilfields to Cameroon's Atlantic Coast. The project also intends to establish an export terminal in Kribi, a village situated in one of the most productive and dynamic artisanal fishing areas in Cameroon (the Campo-Kribi area). The US\$ 2.5 billion project is seeking a World Bank loan of US\$ 115 million.

The transport of oil from the offshore terminal at Kribi will be done by tankers of 80,000 to 300,000 tonnes. Such tankers have been responsible for the many oil spills recorded in the Gulf of Guinea. In particular, in 1979, the tanker Petro Bousca grounded near Kribi, spilled 800 cu m of oil. The present project, therefore, poses a serious risk of oil spillage. Such oil spills directly threaten the livelihoods of the 3000 fishermen and their families living in the Campo-Kribi area.

The Cameroon coast is situated in the Gulf of Guinea, and is located at a point of convergence of two major currents from the West and the Benguela current from the South. These currents are capable of both bringing in and spreading pollutants far and wide along the coastline. The Cameroon coastline is positioned in the Gulf of Guinea as a cul-de-sac, which represents special problems for dispersing and getting rid of oil spills. The 350-km coastline has important concentrations of mangrove forests, fish nurseries and

fishing villages, all of which are highly susceptible to the dangers from oil spills.

Cameroon derives its name from the abundance of shrimp in its coastal waters (camaron and camarao are, respectively, the Spanish and Portuguese names for shrimp). The rich resources of fish and crustaceans have always played an important role, particularly in providing the basis of coastal livelihoods and meeting local consumption needs. Available data shows that for the last ten years, fish has provided more than 40 per cent of the Cameroonians' protein requirements. As a result of the rising population and declining local production, the increasing demands for fish have to be met mainly by increased imports (60,000 tonnes in 1986).

In 1996, marine fish caught locally amounted to 64,000 tonnes, half of which was caught by small-scale fishermen. Despite the lack of reliable data on the artisanal fisheries sector, it is estimated that there could be around 20,000 small-scale fishermen, using some 5,000 pirogues.

The main species caught are the *bonga* (ethmalosas), *sardinellas* and croakers. Shrimp is also caught by small-scale fishermen, mainly for local consumption. Artisanal fishing is mainly performed in the 2-mile coastal zone, as well as in mangrove areas and estuaries. There are some 50 to 60 shrimp trawlers.

Anecdotal evidence

As in other West African coastal States, there is anecdotal evidence to show that conflicts exist between the shrimp trawlers and artisanal fishermen, but no official information is available on the subject. Neither is there any information on the activities of foreign fleets fishing in

Cameroonian waters. This would seem to imply a lack of consideration by the Cameroonian government for its fishing sector, particularly the artisanal sector.

In the fishing area of Campo- Kribi, designated for the location of the offshore oil terminal, there are about 3,000 small-scale fishermen, operating 500 pirogues. The different fishing community groups include the Mvae, the Batanga, Mabi and Yassa people. All these groups critically depend on fishing for their livelihood. Other coastal communities from Benin to Nigeria are also heavily dependent on both subsistence and commercial fishing.

Fishing techniques include the use of nets, traps (nasses), and beach seines (locally called tirez-tirez or 'pull pull'). Most of the pirogues belong to non-fishermen—people from the administration or from the private sector—who see this as an opportunity for good business. Also, most of the fishing gear is imported, and to be fully equipped, a boatowner must invest the equivalent of around 40, 000 French Francs (around US\$ 6,000) for a pirogue with outboard engine, fishing gear, etc. This is a considerable constraint to fishermen becoming boatowners.

For fishing operations, pirogues generally go to sea for two nights and one day, with three fishermen on board. Half of the

income from the fish goes to the boatowner, the rest being shared among the fishermen. The fish is landed in one of the 38 landing points of the Campo-Kribi area, where women take the leading role in the post-harvest processes. Grouped in GIC (Groupe d'Initiative Commune), women engage in fish processing (salting, drying, smoking) of species like *bongas* (ethmalose) and sardinellas, locally called *bilolo*.

Fish smoking has an important impact on mangrove wood. In Cameroon, it is estimated that the open fires from burning mangrove wood for fish smoking is responsible for over 75 per cent of the total mangrove loss. Some attempts have been made to introduce more wood-efficient burning techniques (new designs of fish smokehouses, Chorkor ovens, etc), but only one group of women has taken up these techniques.

Several campaigns

Several groups have been campaigning in Cameroon against the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline. Their efforts have been supported by hundreds of development and environmental organizations from all over the world. In their campaign against the pipeline, these groups, like DEC (Défense de l'Environnement Camerounais) have been in contact with the fishermen from the Campo-Kribi area. The main concerns of the fishermen interviewed are the diminishing



resources, the lack of information on fisheries regulations, pollution and the destruction of the coastal zones through the oil industry and exploitation of iron mines.

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In November 1999, following continual pressures from these Cameroonian groups and the support given internationally, Shell and Elf (Exxon is the third partner) officially pulled out of the project. But, in view of the past tactics of these oil multinationals in the area (Nigeria in particular), there is little doubt about the dangers to be faced in the future. Given the pressures on indebted countries' governments to earn foreign exchange, there are bound to be other attempts to trade the livelihoods of small producers and small fishing communities for a few oil dollars more.

This article has been compiled from several sources, based on information received from Bela Nga Joseph of DEC (Défense de l'Environnement Camerounais), a Camaroonian NGO working on sustainable development issues