

Looming clouds

The dense fumes of fishmeal factories in the Gambia are like dark clouds obscuring the future of women in the country's fisheries

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In the Gambia, 10 percent of the 2.2 million inhabitants derive their livelihoods from fisheries, with activities concentrated in the artisanal fishing communities of Kartong, Gunjur Sanyang Tanji, Brufut, Bakau and Old Jeshwang.

In these fishing villages, brightly painted fishing canoes that use entangling gillnets, hook and line, traps and long lines bring ashore their daily catch. Not far from the landing site, hundreds of women fish processors, are sun drying small pelagic like sardinella and bonga in racks or smoking them in open ovens, fuelled by locally-found wood or palm tree branches. Other women are busy marketing the fish products. For the country, the work of all these women, making affordable fish food available to the local population, is of strategic importance; indeed, fish contributes to at least half of the country's total animal protein intake, and, for its taste and texture, artisanally-processed fish is what most Gambians prefer.

Whatever the weather, most women active in Gambian artisanal fisheries wake up long before sunrise, as early as 4 am, to travel to fish landing sites in order to be there when the fishing canoes return from the sea, their bellies sometimes laden with fish, or, as is increasingly the case, quite empty. Some of the women, knee deep in the water, unload the fish from the canoes big plastic basins heavy with round and flat sardinella and bonga. Then, other women, for their daily processing and marketing activities, buy what they need, or can afford. Some of these women would have pre-financed the fishing trips, providing the fishing crews with food, fishing nets and fuel for the boat, making it easier for them to have first access to the fish upon the fishers' return. This is a traditional activity, and women in fisheries associations, who depend on it, have been for long thinking about ways to sustain the activity, and have taken bold measures to promote responsible fisheries, for example, by rejecting juvenile fish landed by the local fishers.

But today, the dark fumes of fishmeal factories cloud the collective future of these women and their communities. A report titled 'Fishing for Catastrophe' published by the website changingmarkets.org in 2019, highlighted that an increasing demand in

major markets – notably China – is responsible for spurring the high growth of West African fishmeal and fish oil (FMFO) production in the last decade: Citing UN Comtrade figures, the report states that: "...in 2016, West Africa produced 7 percent of the world's fishmeal. Some countries have experienced a particularly steep rise in production; for example, half of Mauritania's fish catch is used to produce fishmeal. Shockingly, in The Gambia, where GDP was a mere \$1,700 per capita in 2018 and people rely on fish as a staple food, our investigation found that the combined catch of just one of the country's FMFO plants accounted for approximately 40 percent of the country's total reported fish catches in 2016. Gambia's fish catch is turned into fishmeal at a rate of 5 kilos of fish for 1 kilo of fishmeal and exported abroad, mainly to China."

In the Gambia, the three Chinese owned fishmeal factories – in Gunjur and Sanyang – are using the same small pelagic fish that women need for processing: bonga and round and flat sardinella. These factories are partly supplied by Senegalese artisanal fishers, which has caused increasing tensions between Gambian fishing communities and Senegalese fishers. In Sanyang, matters came to a head on 25th March 2021, when canoes belonging to Senegalese fishers, the police station, and the fishmeal factory were all set on fire and destroyed.

These supply contracts with Senegal fishers are in fact illegal. Fishmeal operators go to Senegal and hire fishermen to fish in Gambian waters to ensure exclusive supplies for their fishmeal factories, particularly in Sanyang and Gunjur. The trips, which use fishing canoes measuring up to 30 meters and equipped with outboard engines are pre-financed and kitted with all the necessary gear, fishing nets and fuel. Housing within the premises of the fishmeal plant is also provided for as part of such contracts. This is illegal as due process is not followed. Indeed, to be able to import a fishing canoe or fish in Gambian waters, both foreigners and national citizens, are required to obtain a certificate of seaworthiness from the Gambia Maritime Administration (GMA) as well as a canoe registration number.

For the Gambian fishing communities, there is no doubt: these fishmeal factories



Fishermen unloading fish at the Gunjur landing site, The Gambia. Fishmeal factories compete with women for access to small pelagics, and encourage overfishing and illegal fishing

are depriving them of their livelihoods, and depriving the local population of food. The pollution these factories generate is another cause of concern. And the authorities by merely turning a blind eye, or even taking the side of the fishmeal factories, have done nothing to alleviate the fears of the fishing communities. In 2018, these factories were in fact shut and the owners arrested, but this was due to public campaigns led by environmental activists protesting against the pollution generated by these factories, more specifically, a leak in a wastewater pipe from the fishmeal factory which had provoked an algal bloom in a protected mangrove area. The National Environment Agency investigated the claim, and the issue was settled with a fine. The fishmeal factory thereafter simply resumed operations. Local communities view the willingness of the authorities to approve the operations of these fishmeal factories without placing any regulations to either limit their rapacious appetite for fresh fish or control the polluting foul stench, black smoke and toxic waste water effluents from these factories as simply wrong and unacceptable.

Fishing communities also suspect that part of the supply to the fishmeal comes from industrial trawlers making illegal incursions into zones reserved for artisanal fishers. These trawlers too supply bonga and sardinella to

fishmeal plants. These illegal incursions occur at night, with trawls cutting or dragging away artisanal fishers net. For the fisher, the loss of his fishing nets means the loss of his livelihood. But, still, there is no compensation. These trawls are not identified, and in the rare cases where they have been, their case was settled out of court, with payment of fines which end up nobody knows where. Fishmeal factories, and their supply chains, have created havoc in the Gambian fishing communities, in particular for women. Fishmeal factories compete with women for access to small pelagics, and encourage overfishing and illegal fishing. Women fish processors are deprived of fish to process; fishmongers have nothing to sell.

These fishmeal plants distort social cohesion as limited access to fish results in women moving to other fish landing sites where fishmeal plants do not exist. Economically, the high cost of fish and competition between fishmeal plants and women leads to difficulties for women to buy the fish and be able to sell at daily markets. This means their income is reduced to a minimum. Eventually they can no longer pay for their children's school fees, food and medical care. Other issues include health problems due to the inhalation of smoke and foul stench from fishmeal plants. As many women spend up to 18 hours per day, their health is severely affected.

Fishmeal factories compete with women for access to small pelagics, and encourage overfishing and illegal fishing

One woman fish processor, who was interviewed, said “Now I can’t even give my neighbors fish for free as I used to, because of the high cost of fish and all the access problems.”

Another woman noted: “The quantity of sardinella and bonga I used to cook for lunch at my house is drastically reduced because of overfishing. Poor quality fish and juvenile landings are all consumed by fishmeal plants.” She further added that even her cats at home don’t get any left-over fish these days.

The factories allegedly dump untreated waste in the sea while the smell of the fishmeal

processing has devastated local tourism. Waste from the factories is linked to mass death of fish and birds.

The ultimate victims are the Gambian consumers, who have no fish on their plates.

The Gambian artisanal fishers associations, notably the National Association of Artisanal Fisheries Operators (NAAFO), the All Artisanal Fisheries Cooperative Association (AFICOSA) and environmentalists in Gunjur are currently investigating the possibility of taking legal action against the fishmeal factories over human rights violations. ❖