

Mealy Deal

For West African artisanal fishing communities, the fishmeal boom may be a bonanza for a few, but is a curse for most

With an increased demand for fishmeal and fish oil in the major world markets, which offer very remunerative prices, fishmeal factories are multiplying in West Africa. In Senegal, there are now more than a dozen officially registered fishmeal plants—and some more operating clandestinely. In Mauritania, their numbers have exploded over the last few years, reaching 29 plants by end 2015. In The Gambia a first fishmeal plant has begun operating, while a second one is being built.

Last September, at the initiative of the Senegalese artisanal fishing platform CONIPAS, together with the local support association APRAPAM, a regional forum was held where fishing communities, environmental associations, scientists from Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia shared their experiences and concerns about fishmeal production in West Africa. The initiative was supported by the African Confederation of Artisanal Fishing Organizations, which now gathers fishing organizations from 24 African countries, many of which are worried about the boom of fishmeal production in West Africa.

Indeed, nowadays, fishmeal factories are using an increasing amount of fresh fish, in particular sardinella. Round sardinella are the most abundant species among small pelagics in the region, most of which are shared between Mauritania and Senegal. Average annual catches of sardinella in Northwest Africa are around 600,000 tonnes. In 2013, in Mauritania alone, more than 300,000 tonnes of small pelagic fish were sent to fishmeal factories.

Round sardinellas are showing signs of overexploitation in the

region. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Working Group on small pelagics, composed of experts representing the coastal States as well as countries fishing in the sub-region, has recommended, for several years, the reduction of fishing effort on this resource. However, this seems like an insurmountable task, in the absence of concerted regional management of small pelagics. Instead, fishing pressure is growing, fuelled by the increasing demand for small pelagics to be used for fishmeal.

...the anarchic development of the fishmeal industry threatens fishing communities' health and access to fish as raw material...

The round sardinella, and small pelagics in general, are a staple food for West African coastal communities, providing proteins, vitamins and amino acids. Worryingly, as was described in a research report published in 2014, the contribution of small pelagic fish to people's diets throughout West Africa is in decline. Between 2004 and 2014, at least 1.7 mn tonnes of small-pelagic fish caught off Northwest Africa, from Mauritania down to Guinea, was landed for direct human consumption.

Dwindling catches

Yet there has been a steady decline in catches. The report predicts that by 2025, the gap between demand and supply may reach 3.3 mn tonnes, if the aim is to sustain fish consumption at the 2012 level. In this context,

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The catch of sardinella is being sucked up by pump at the unloading pier at Djifer, Senegal. Nowadays, fishmeal factories are using an increasing amount of fresh fish, sardinella

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the expansion of the production of fishmeal is a threat to regional food security.

For the West African consumer, the scarcity is already apparent with the soaring prices of sardinella sold on the beaches. Indeed, fishmeal production plants turn increasingly to fresh sardinella caught by both industrial and artisanal vessels, competing with women who process the fish to supply the local markets for human consumption. “All these factories feed on fresh fish, mainly sardinella, often with the help of our fishermen”, says a woman fish processor who attended the forum.

More and more, women are struggling to get fish for processing and they see their businesses grinding to a standstill.

Fishmeal factories send people to buy directly on the beaches, offering fishermen higher prices than fishmongers. In Saint Louis (Senegal), there is only one fishmeal plant owned by a Chinese company. It buys its fish directly at the landing site.

Fishmeal factories

A fisherman explains that they offer between 3,000 and 4,000 CFA francs per box of 50 kg (USD 1=CFA534). The fishmeal is sold abroad (in Asia and

Europe) or locally for the production of animal feed, for industrial poultry farms or for aquaculture.

In a place like Saint Louis, many fishers feel they do not have any alternative other than to sell to the factory, as the local processing and distribution channels are not developed enough to absorb the quantities of fish they land in some seasons, when small pelagics are abundant. When sardinella is abundant, the fishmeal plant can buy up to 100 tonnes a day. But in the low season, it sometimes happens that the plant almost stops its activities.

If some fishers find it lucrative to sell to the fishmeal factories, many in the sector argue that the fishmeal industry develops at the expense of jobs in artisanal fisheries. The activities associated with sardinella fisheries, artisanal processing and distribution of processed fish, are characterized by low barriers to entry in terms of capital, skills and knowhow.

In Senegal, a single artisanal purse seine catching sardinellas can give jobs to more than a hundred people—not just those active in processing, transport and distribution of processed fish products, but also boat builders, net makers, and so on, each of them with a family to feed, points out Gaoussou Gueye, from the association APRAPAM. About 20 per cent of the 60,000 fishers in Senegal fish exclusively for sardinella.


In 2015, the Senegalese Research Centre CRODT identified more than 2,000 artisanal purse-seine *pirogues*, that account for more than 200,000 people living off the fishing activities of these units. In comparison, a fishmeal production plant offers a few dozen jobs.

Fingers are also pointing to fishmeal factories as sources of pollution and health problems. The factories release toxic wastes into the sea. Thick smoke from factories pollute the air. This smoke is the cause of many diseases. Mokhtar Ould Amah, a Mauritanian ENT doctor, explains that air pollution, due to the fishmeal factories in Nouadhibou, propagated numerous pathologies such as allergy, asthma and respiratory

disorders, especially in children and people with chronic diseases. “These plants are a serious threat to public health”, he insists.

In Senegal, the press recently reported the discomfort caused to the local population by the fumes coming out of a fishmeal factory near Mbour, which eventually exploded, causing fatal casualties.

In Gambia, in September 2016, a Chinese fishmeal factory was opened in Gunjur, a village very close to the capital city of Banjul. It was hoped that the factory would create much-needed jobs. However, a few months later, the villagers began to notice foul smells coming from the factory, and pollution that caused water to turn red. Taken to court, the company, Golden Lead, had to pay US\$25,000 as penalty and take immediate measures to treat its wastewater.

The forum in Senegal was an opportunity to set up an informal network that will continue to mobilize people around this issue, sharing information, campaigning and raising awareness with the authorities and the fishers themselves. Evidently, the anarchic development of the fishmeal industry threatens fishing communities’ health and access to fish as raw material for processing, thus jeopardizing food security. 

For more

<http://www.cape-cffa.org/>

Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements (CFFA)

<https://www.icsf.net/en/samudra/article/EN/77-4319-The-Black-Hole-.html>

The Black Hole in the Seas

<http://cape-cffa.squarespace.com/new-blog/2017/8/29/fishmeal-production-in-west-africa-issues-for-coastal-communities>

Fishmeal Production In West Africa: Issues For Coastal Communities