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Chinese fishmeal plants leave fishermen in the Gambia all at sea

A woman brings in a bucket of fish in Gunjur village, the Gambia. Photograph: Xaume Olleros/The Guardian

Scientists and campaigners warn that factories in coastal villages are wreaking environmental and economic havoc

By **Hannah Summers**

Before the arrival of fishmeal factories in the Gambia, Musa Duboe would catch red snapper and barracuda to be sold at the local market. But his income had begun to dwindle due to depleted stocks.

Then in 2016 the Chinese-owned fishmeal plant Golden Lead began operating out of the coastal town of Gunjur, increasing demand for fish to export for overseas aquaculture.

"Now work is booming again, as we can sell our catches to both the factory and locals," Duboe, 33, explains, taking advantage of a rare patch of shade among the brightly hand-painted canoes used by the artisanal fishermen.

"Our net catches all kinds of fish. Sometimes we meet demand with just one catch – other times we need five catches, with a catch being as big as up to 400 bowls of fish. My work is a lot more profitable and I can fully provide for my family, because the factory buys more fish than I could previously sell on the local market."



Tanji fish market; top right, fish trader Isatou Darboe cleans fish and prepares it for smoking in Gunjur village

While Duboe and other fishermen who predominantly supply the fishmeal plants may be enjoying short-term gains, the forecast for the Gambia's fishing industry and the community it serves is less rosy.

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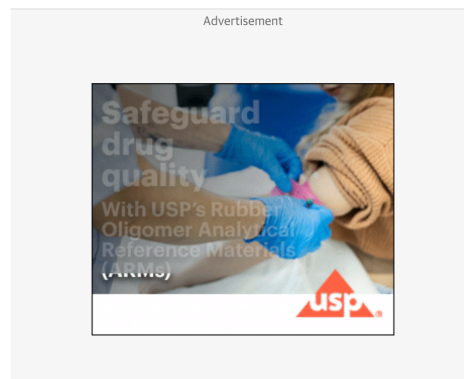
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using industry and the community it serves is less rosy.



Overseas business interests and attractive global prices for fishmeal are driving demand for species such as sardinella, and, as a result, are taking a crucial source of protein from the plates of the poorest Gambians while leaving large swaths of the community out of work.

The fishmeal business is wreaking havoc on the environment, local employment, food security and the tourism economy, scientists, Gambian activists and locals have warned.



On the frontline of those losses are local female fish processors who buy from the artisanal fishermen and smoke the fish, or sell it fresh at the local market. They also supply to a network of third parties who take the fish from the coast to inland markets or for export to countries such as Mali or Ivory Coast.

But with the factories taking the lion's share of the catches, trade has plummeted for these women and others working in the supply chain.

Matilda Jobe is a 29-year-old fish seller working at the beach in Gunjur, one of the biggest fish landing sites along the Gambia's 80km Atlantic coast.

Jobe, a widow and single mother, has been struggling to feed her young children since the opening of Golden Lead. With demand pushing up prices, the fish is too expensive, or if the catches are small, the fishmeal factories will take priority.



Fish traders Isatou Darboe (left) and Matilda Jobe wait for fishing boats to arrive, in Gunjur

"Sometimes we go empty-handed, but we keep fighting for our children," she says. "My husband died some years ago and I need to provide for them. They need a good education so they can do better than us."

Locals who once enjoyed fish as part of their daily diet are now struggling to afford it. Vast quantities of small fish diverted from the market for human consumption are instead being processed to feed animals and farmed fish.

Fishmeal constitutes around 68% of the feed used for farmed fish, with 5kg of fresh fish needed to make 1kg of fishmeal, according to the [Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements](#).





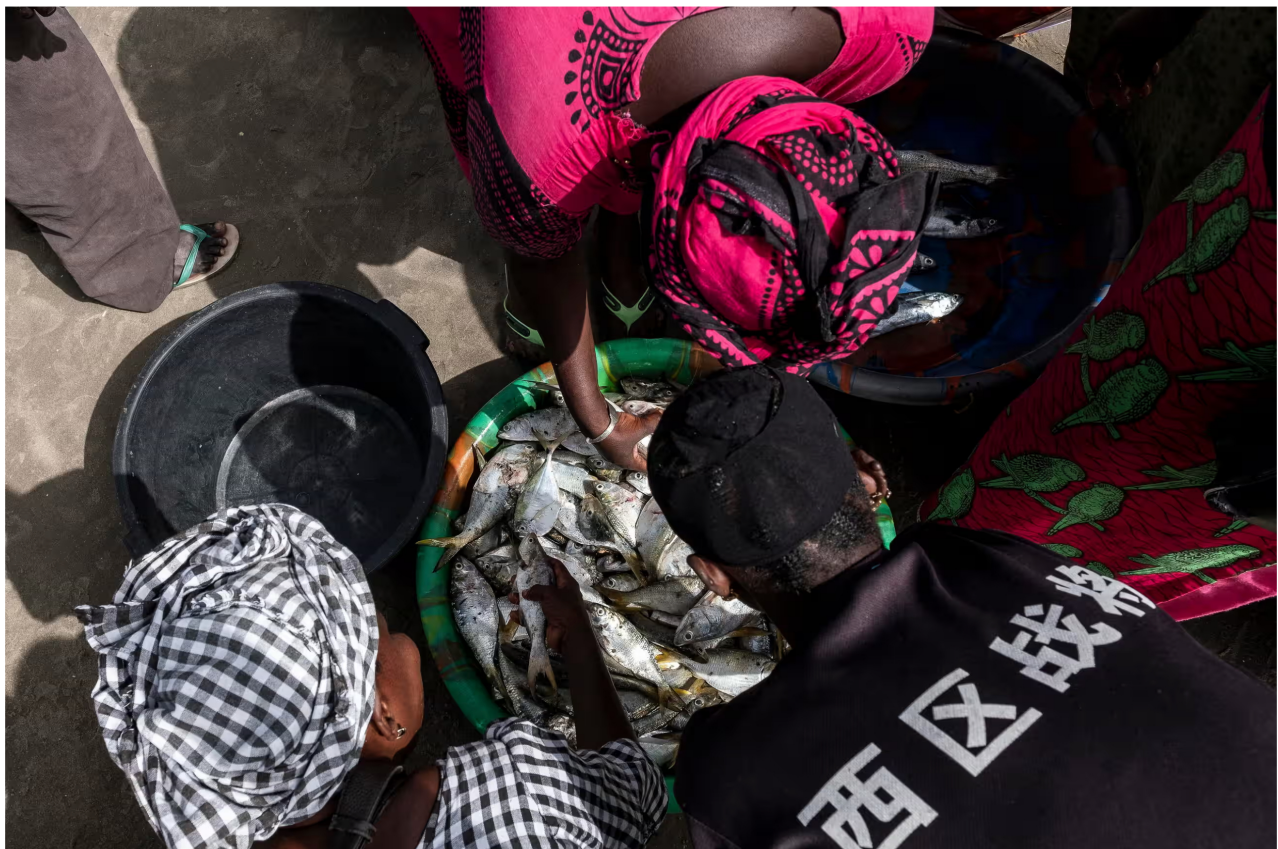
A Chinese fishmeal factory by the beach in Kartong village

Golden Lead is one of three Chinese-owned fishmeal plants currently operating out of the Gambia. Two others - the JXYG factory in Kartong and the Nassim fishmeal company in Sanyang - have both re-opened in recent months after temporary closures following complaints about their waste disposal methods.

Members of the community reported to the Ministry of Fisheries in May last year that the eco tourism industry in Kartong was under threat due to the discharge of toxic waste. The JXYG factory, which denies dumping waste in Kartong, was asked to cease operations by the National Environment Agency, but local sources say it was given the green light to **continue production** following an out-of-court settlement.

Factory owners have promised to bring employment to the Gambia, but because the processing of fish for fishmeal is a simple operation - fish is boiled and minced before being dried - the average plant does not employ more than 30 people.

Dawda Saine, a marine biologist and lead for Gambia's Artisanal Fisheries Development Agency, says: "It's very difficult to get any information from the factories about how much fish they are using or fishmeal they produce. They are not providing any data."



Women check the catch of the day on the beach in Gunjur

One worker serving the factory in Kartong says the plant processes a maximum capacity of 500 tonnes of fresh fish per day. Speaking

anonymously, he says: "My job is to powder the remaining fish that can't be processed by the machine."

He has worked at the factory since it first opened in 2017 and earns around 3,000 Gambian dalasi (£45) a month, but has never had a contract. There are seven Chinese workers doing skilled jobs at the factory, while the local workers are employed as security guards and fish transporters, he explained.

Experts warn the production of fishmeal is not only weakening food security in north-west **Africa** but is contributing to the existing pressures of overfishing in the region.

New research shows stocks of round sardinella, a species that migrates along the Atlantic coast between the Gambia and Morocco, have plummeted due to overfishing.



Smoking fish in Gunjur

"The main cause of this increased effort is the development of a fishmeal industry in the region," explains Ad Corten, a marine biologist who set up the **Food and Agricultural Organisation** working group on small pelagic fish in north-west Africa.

Sometimes, landings are so big even the fishmeal plants cannot take them, and as a result considerable quantities of fish might be dumped at sea or on land.

Footage uploaded to YouTube shows Gambian fishermen from the town of Tanji protesting against the discarding of sardinella refused by one of the Chinese factories.

■ *'The beaches that were once beloved by tourists are covered in reeking fish carcasses'*



Locals reported that Senegalese fishermen had been trying to land a catch at a Gambian fishmeal plant but the load was rejected. Instead, the fruits of their labour were left to rot. Sometimes they are discarded at sea, but on this occasion they were sent to the factory by lorry and, after being rejected, were

abandoned in the bush.

"We are seeing dead fish thrown back into the sea causing massive environmental pollution," says Sulayman Bojang, a small business entrepreneur and local activist with the Gunjur Youth Movement.

"The beaches that were once beloved by tourists are covered in reeking fish carcasses. The toxic water reaches local farming and harvests go to waste. We want to stop exploitation at the hands of the fishmeal plants; but with the Gambia being one of the poorest countries in the world we stand no chance against the Chinese corporations."

Those who speak out against the Chinese factories say they risk intimidation or harassment by the authorities, and Bojang is among a number of protesters who have been arrested.





A waste pipe belonging to Golden Lead

The **Environment Concern Group Gunjur** has been collecting evidence of environmental pollution.

In 2017 environmental groups contacted the local authority to complain that trucks being turned away from the factory were dumping fish, with rotting carcasses littering the road, beaches and bush.

They also documented that manual workers paid to collect the fish when they are landed and take them to the factory were complaining of skin and eye irritations - and local children were reported to be suffering from coughs and chest infections.

After waste was dumped in a local lagoon, **turning the water red** - and with dead birds and crabs found at the site - the National Environment Agency filed a lawsuit against Golden Lead. But in July 2017, an out-of-court settlement was made.



The Golden Lead Chinese fishmeal factory, standing between the beach and Bolong Fenyo salty lake, which is allegedly still polluted

Ahmed Manjang is a Gambian microbiologist based in Saudi Arabia, but makes regular visits home to work with local activists in Gunjur. According to Manjang, the trade minister at the time had warned that prosecuting the factory could deter potential foreign investment in the area.

Dissatisfied with the agreement the company had made as part of the settlement, the community **filed a lawsuit on 17 August 2017**, but there has only been one hearing of the case, which remains adjourned.

Meanwhile, anecdotal reports of dead marine life have been increasing. "We have seen a spike recently in the number of dead turtles washed up on our beaches and dead dolphins spotted floating at sea," says Manjang.

On 21 November a baby whale was found dead on the beach outside the factory.

Manjang says: "Scientifically we cannot link the deaths of marine life to the factory but these are unusual phenomenon and we think the pollution is to blame."





Clockwise from top left: a pilot whale on the beach in Gunjur; a dead turtle in Kololi/Bijilo; a dead bird in front of JXYG Chinese fishmeal factory, October, in Kartong

The effect on tourism has also been devastating, he says. “We had quite a bit of investment in eco tourism around Kartong, but people do not want to stay there because of the foul smell. These businesses are involved in the lawsuit.”

Despite a temporary ban placed on the local Nassim fishmeal company, operations recently resumed, in the face of strong opposition from those working in the tourism industry. They include local restaurant owners who say customers have been leaving their food on the table when the factory operates, due to the stench.

The government is protecting the factories, says Manjang, a senior researcher at the King Fahad Medical Centre in Riyadh.

“It fears if we start prosecuting the Chinese they will withdraw investment from the country. They already pump a lot of money into local cultural events in the community.”

He adds: “The factories are killing the women’s processing business and they cannot afford school fees for their children. We are not here to ruin opportunities. We need to educate people and fight against what in the long-term will affect everybody.”

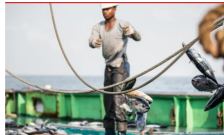
The JXYG factory in Kartong, which employs 35 people, denied operating in a way that disadvantaged those in the local fishing community and causing pollution in the area.

It said it had a new plant to treat the waste and there had been no complaints since its re-opening after a temporary, four-month closure. It said treated waste would be pumped back into the sea using new pipes that had not yet been laid.

The Guardian contacted the Gambian government for a comment, including the Ministry for Fisheries and the Ministry for Trade, but has not had a response. The factory manager at the Nassim Fishmeal Company in Sanyang declined to comment.

Golden Lead denies outcompeting local fish sellers and says it has a zero tolerance approach to pollution. Jojo Huang, the director of the fishmeal plant, has previously stated that the factory is in no way responsible for the dumping of fish in the local area. She said the factory does not pump chemicals into the sea and has followed guidance from the National Environment Agency on waste management.

Additional reporting: Mustapha Manneh



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Women get ready to buy fish as the canoes come back to the shore at Gunjur

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