



Fishmeal factories threaten food security in the Gambia

Local people were promised jobs, but their resistance to foreign-owned factories is growing amid overfishing and pollution that is blighting tourism

ENGLISH



Waste from the fishmeal factory is believed to have turned this lagoon red (Image: Changing Markets Foundation)



Louise Hunt
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Once-peaceable fishing communities along the Gambia's south-west coast have been split over the arrival of three fishmeal-processing factories.

At first, many locals believed the new industry would bring much-needed jobs, and village elders welcomed the pledges of financial support for building roads and local markets. But over time, local environmental groups grew increasingly concerned by pollution from untreated waste coming from the factories. Youths demonstrated, there were clashes with factory supporters and several protesters were arrested.

"My family abandoned me because of my activism. My mum is not talking to me as regularly as before because she feels that I am now disobeying her," says Sulayman Bojang, who was arrested with four other youths without charge in July 2018 for protesting against the Chinese-owned Golden Lead fishmeal factory in Gunjur.

Now more people are joining the campaigners' calls for the three factories to be shut down amid growing concerns that overfishing for the three factories is depleting fish populations, a crucial source of protein and livelihoods for Gambians. Fishmeal is made by grinding up wild-caught species and predominantly used to feed farmed fish of higher value.

How the factories hit fish stocks and raise prices at local markets

"Sometimes it goes up to one week without fish," says fisherman Assan Ndong, standing on the shore where groups of women wait with plastic basins to clean the fish when a boat comes in.

Paradoxically, the beaches of Ndong's village of Gunjur are strewn with decomposing fish: with no controls on the numbers fishing with the hope of supplying the factories, fishers often catch too many for the factories to process. Spoilt fish is dumped and washes up on the beaches.

Ndong, and other locals, increasingly blame their shrinking catches on the factories. Golden Lead was the first to begin operations in Gunjur in September 2016. Two more majority Chinese-owned factories have since opened in the fishing villages of Sanyang and Kartong, clustered along a 30km stretch of the south-western coastline.



Artisanal fishermen, such as Ndong, are finding they cannot compete with mechanised fishing trawlers and an armada of fishers paid in cash to supply the factories before local markets. Many of these come from neighbouring Senegal and Guinea Bissau. They are all going after the small pelagic fish, predominantly bonga and sardinella, that have been historically abundant in the Gambia's biodiverse waters.

"One local fishing boat might catch 100 baskets, but now one trawler can catch up to 1,000 baskets a day," says Ndong. "If this unsustainable fishing method continues, we will have a scarcity of fish."

The Gambia is Africa's smallest nation, enveloped by Senegal, its borders looping around its namesake river. But it has also become a global hub for the fishmeal and fish oil (FMFO) industry that is rapidly expanding on the coasts off north-west Africa. The majority of Gambia's FMFO produce is exported to China, which has the [lion's share](#) of the booming aquaculture market. It is also used for animal feed.

Two separate investigations by international NGOs – Greenpeace International and Changing Markets Foundation – have recently warned that the scale of Gambia's FMFO production is unsustainable and the nation's food security is under threat if the industry is not curtailed.

Greenpeace Africa's ["A Waste of Fish"](#), published in June, examines the impacts of fishmeal processing in Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia, where a total of 50 factories have sprung up in recent years. It is estimated that 4–5kg of fresh fish are used to make 1kg of fishmeal.





The report flags the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) advice to urgently reduce the intensity of fishing of bonga and sardinella in the sub-region, which are "essential to food security and livelihoods, particularly in Senegal and Gambia".

While the fishmeal industry in Gambia is comparatively small, "the situation is even more critical here", says Dr Ibrahima Cissé, Greenpeace Africa's senior oceans campaigns manager. "Even one fishmeal factory is a big issue for Gambians. In Senegal, people have more trading activities."

Fishing and related activities are the main source of income for at least 200,000 people in the Gambia. Fish accounts for over half of the animal protein they consume. In the past five years, the proportion of people considered food insecure has risen from 5% to 8%, partly due to fluctuating populations of bonga fish as a result of FMFO fishing, according to the Changing Markets Foundation "[Fishing for Catastrophe](#)" report, published in October.

"Our food security is under serious threat," says Ahmed Manjang, an environmental activist from Gunjur. "The majority of Gambians live on less than \$2 a day and locals are in direct competition with the fishmeal factories."

The declining accessibility of fish is inflating prices and jeopardising the traditional craft of fish-smoking, a livelihood of many people in fishing communities, especially women. "The fishermen sell fish to us at a higher price than to the fishmeal factory. Before we would buy a basket for 100 Gambian Dalasi (\$2), but now it can be up to 500GMD (\$10)," says fish-smoker Abdou Joof.

Many people can no longer afford this vital source of protein. "Fish is very expensive at the market now. We struggle to have fish on our plate," says Ndey Manneh, a widow with three children from Gunjur village.



A smokehouse in Gunjur processing bonga fish for local markets. (Image: The Changing Markets Foundation)

'A deeply unsustainable industry'

Groups of local activists from environmental and fisheries organisations in the FMFO-affected communities have been working together over the past two years to put pressure on the government to shut the factories down. So far, they have been fighting a losing battle.

The fisheries minister James Gomez [reaffirmed the government's support](#) for FMFO production at the National Assembly in September, stating there were no immediate considerations about

at the National Assembly, in September, stating there were no immediate considerations about closing the factories. He has repeatedly claimed this position is based on data from annual surveys on pelagic resources such as bonga and sardinella that show “Gambian waters can accommodate up to five fishmeal factories.”

As well as contradicting the FAO advice, a senior UN fisheries official who wished to remain anonymous also disputed Gomez’s claim, saying “virtually no scientific fisheries studies have been undertaken in the Gambia”, according to the Changing Markets investigation.

Fisheries associations also complain about the dearth of information. “We have been calling on the government to obtain data on how many tonnes the fishmeal factories have been producing. But nobody can give any data. The government is just letting the factories do whatever they want,” says Dawda Saine, a marine biologist and lead for Gambia’s Artisanal Fisheries Development Agency.

The Changing Markets investigation, based on interviews with activists and locals conducted in May 2019, as well as analysis of available official data, has helped to shed some light on Gambia’s murky FMFO supply chain.

“Everything we’ve seen so far suggests this is a deeply unsustainable industry,” says Natasha Hurley, Changing Markets campaign manager. “The statistic that’s really striking is we found that that the annual production from just one of the three Gambian fishmeal factories – Golden Lead – represented 40% of Gambia’s entire fish catch for a given year.”



Selling the same species of fish as is sent to the factories (Image: Changing Markets Foundation)

The investigation also found that neither the FAO nor the government has records of Gambian FMFO production or exports, even though fishmeal plants have been operating in the country for some years.

The investigation has revealed strong links between Gambia’s FMFO production and China, the world’s largest aquafeed producer. Demand for feed for farmed fish is set to soar in coming decades, Changing Markets predicts.

“We’ve got evidence that a lot of the Gambian FMFO is ending up in China, but it’s not necessarily being exported directly,” says Hurley.

The Changing Markets investigation found at least one Gambian plant sells most of its fishmeal to Vietnam, where it is relabelled on the black market for re-export to China. This circumvents more stringent Chinese food-safety controls and the absence of a fishmeal export agreement between the Gambia and China, said the report.

“We found the authorities in Gambia weren’t actually aware of what was happening. It’s dependant on the factories reporting,” adds Hurley.

Foreign investors given tax breaks for creating jobs

that haven't materialised

The Gambian government under president Adama Barrow has taken a decidedly more laissez-faire approach to encouraging foreign business investment than previous leader Yahya Jammeh, who tightly controlled all industries for his own benefit. Jammeh's 22-year dictatorial regime ended with his exile to Equatorial Guinea and a transition to democracy in January 2017.

With the treasury virtually bankrupted by endemic corruption under the Jammeh regime and most of the state requiring major reform, Barrow's government wasted no time in re-establishing diplomatic ties with China. Gambia is now part of China's Belt and Road Initiative to build infrastructure and stimulate trade. The agreement promises a \$33 million development grant, which includes investment into fisheries and agriculture, and a further \$4 million for the military. In 2017, China also cancelled \$14 million of Gambia's national debt, the Changing Markets report notes.

The Chinese ambassador to Gambia, Ma Jian Chun, [has previously said](#) his country wishes to invest further in the fisheries sector. The Chinese government has said such development has helped to bring economic development and jobs to Gambia.



Aerial view of the Golden Lead plant at Gunjur (Image: Changing Markets Foundation)

Chinese investors fully or partially control all three of the fishmeal processing factories: Golden Lead, JXYG and Nessim.

An anonymous source at Gambia's development agency GIEPA said that foreign investors, including the fishmeal factories, were routinely given tax privileges in return for creating jobs.

But the factories have not lived up to the high hopes: they have only directly employed a handful of locals in low-skilled jobs, such as security guards, or in ad hoc work.

When Golden Lead, the largest factory, was introduced to the Gunjur community in 2015, the firm promised to build a new fish market and a road linking the fishing village and the main town. "They also promised to employ over 600 youths. Right now, they have employed approximately 60 locals and they have failed to fulfil any of their other promises," says Ahmed Manjang.

A wildlife reserve lagoon turns red

Instead, the FMFO industry is devastating a budding eco-tourism sector that is situated in the same area of sweeping, sandy coastline and mangrove swamps as the fishmeal plants. Lodge owners complain visitors are being driven away by their noxious side-effects.

"Very soon business will be no more at Sanyang beach," says Lamin Jawla, owner of Rainbow Lodge next door to the Nessim fishmeal factory. "The amount of dead fish on our beach causes bad smells and is so disheartening that tourists don't like to go to the beach or swim."

Tourism is one of Gambia's biggest employers and contributes 20% of GDP. Locally, the 15 or so basic eco-lodges that have developed in recent years have provided a lifeline, especially among youths where unemployment stands at more than 40%.

Lamin Camara, manager of Stala Adventure Lodge, in Kartong, says he has had to lay off staff because of the stench when the JXYG Factory is processing. "Visitors can no longer sleep in their rooms. Before the factory, I employed 14 youths. Now guests are not coming. I had to send them home," he says.

Golden Lead in Gunjur and Nessim Factory in Sanyang have been found to be in breach of wastewater regulations, with the factories accused of dumping untreated waste into the sea. In the case of Golden Lead, the freshwater lagoon in the nearby Bolong Fenyo wildlife reserve frequently turns an alarming shade of red.



Dead fish dumped on Sanyang beach (Image: Changing Markets Foundation)

Environmental groups first found a waste pipe dug into the lagoon in May 2017. The red colour is caused by phosphate that produces algal blooms, explains Ahmed Manjang, who works as a biochemist in Saudi Arabia, but regularly returns to his home village of Gunjur. Independent tests of water taken from the lagoon initiated by environmental groups found high levels of carcinogenic arsenate. They believe the pollution has killed fish and oysters in the river and mangrove swamps, and locals have reported skin rashes after bathing in the waters.

The National Environment Agency (NEA) revoked Golden Lead's licence and sued the owners for environmental damages in June 2017. But operations quickly resumed after the firm paid an out-of-court settlement of \$25,000.

The campaigners strongly suspect ministerial interference had blocked the NEA's initial legal actions against Golden Lead. The activists filed their own civil case against the firm in 2017, which is still dragging through the courts.

In the past few months, activists say new waste pipes have been discovered in the sea off Gunjur, dead fish continue to wash up along the coast and the lagoon has turned red again.

Bottom-up resistance is building

Since 2017, activists have held several protests against the pollution. They have met with resistance from within their own communities and some have been arrested.

The factories have directly contributed money to local communities through village elders and village development committees. Commodities such as rice and oil are also provided as gifts during festivals. As a consequence, support for the factories tends to come from community leaders and elders. But opponents take a sceptical view of the philanthropy.

"When it's Tobaski [an Islamic festival] the factories give money to the elders. We are trying to make sure the elders understand this money is to make them silent," says environmental activist Lamin Jassey from Gunjur. "We are not only fighting the injustices of the company, but

we are also having to reconcile the community.”

“The communities have been divided by the factories,” agrees Cissé of Greenpeace. “The fishmeal factories have their strategies to keep the people not talking. The situation is complicated. Activists have received threats and are not comfortable to talk about it. The factory has supporters. They have a network, but it’s not visible.”

Now that growing numbers of people are impacted by the negative consequences of the fishmeal industry, campaigners believe there is a chance to intensify pressure on the government.

“We are trying to get everybody on-side. We hope when the whole community speaks the same language it will add a lot of weight to what we’re doing. That is the time we’ll make the case again to the government,” Jassey adds.

Greenpeace Africa is supporting campaigners in bolstering their action. “Now we are meeting with the communities and helping them to be organised and face these issues,” says Cisse. “We want to bring everyone together to have an action plan to put pressure on MPs and ministers.”

The NGO is also planning to meet with the Chinese embassies of Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia. “China is investing a lot in Africa, we want them to know this is not even good for them. Strategically for China it’s not a good thing to contribute to these tensions. Fishmeal is not sustainable for them. They can build bridges and roads, but not take the food from people,” he adds.

*Additional reporting by Mustapha Manneh

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