

Abéné, Senegal

A Foreign-owned Fishmeal Factory Causes a Stink in Senegal

Debates about the industry's environmental impacts and livelihood opportunities have created divisions within the fishing village of Abéné.

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Standing beside the empty guest house she manages, Abie Sanyang, 36, looks with worry across the beach. The source of her concern is less than 100m away on the foreshore: A fishmeal factory – its silos looming over a concrete wall separating it from cheerfully decorated palm-thatched beach bars and settlements.

The fishing village Abéné, in the rural Casamance region of southern Senegal, has long been a popular tourist destination. But when the plant, Société des Produits Halieutiques (SPH SARL), began operating in April 2018, the noxious fumes created in the process of turning pelagic fish into powder and oil drove visitors away.

“Our guests were struggling to breath fresh air. They cannot have a good time eating here because of the bad smell from the fishmeal plant,” says Sanyang.

In the three months it was operating, local residents said they witnessed the dumping of toxic waste from the factory into the marine protected area in which Abéné lies, as well as residential gardens. Controversy surrounding the plant has also created divisions within the community of around 4,000 inhabitants.

Operations were temporarily suspended in July 2018 [following protests](#) by youths and environmental activists that led to a community referendum. The plant has remained shuttered to date. But concerns are growing that fishmeal production will soon resume amid claims of a recent change of ownership to Chinese operators who are also believed to own a fishmeal factory called Golden Lead in neighboring Gambia.





The fishmeal factory in Abéné / Credit: Mustapha Manneh.

The situation in Abéné mirrors fishmeal and fish oil (FMFO) development and investment in the wider region, where more than 50 mostly foreign-owned plants have been built along the coast of Senegal, The Gambia, and Mauritania, targeting small pelagics, oily fish such as sardinella and bonga that congregate in vast shoals off West Africa.

Much of this fish is caught in huge volumes by industrial trawlers, and the lack of current data on the catches makes it difficult to implement conservation measures or catch limits.

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), sardinella and bonga are already overexploited in the sub-region, posing “a serious threat to food security”. While a 2019 FAO report called for a 50% reduction in fishing of these species, the FMFO industry has continued to expand.

In the last 10 years, eight fishmeal plants have been established in Senegal alone. Currently only four are functional.

FISHMEAL PLANTS IN SENEGAL, 2019		
NAME	CITY	STATUS
SEA PRODUCTION	SAINT LOUIS	ACTIVE
BARNA SENEGAL	CAYAR	UNDER CONSTRUCTION
AFRIC AZOTE	DAKAR	ACTIVE
SENEGAL PROTEIN	DAKAR	TEMPORARILY INACTIVE
AFRICA FEED	YENNE	ACTIVE
OMEGA PELAGIC	SANDIARA	UNDER CONSTRUCTION
OMEGA FISHING	JOAL FADIOUTH	ACTIVE
SOCIETE DES PRODUITES HALIEUTIQUES (SPH SARL)	ABÉNÉ	TEMPORARILY INACTIVE

Source: A Waste of Fish, 2019, Greenpeace, p. 53.

Latest figures show that West Africa's trade in FMFO has grown tenfold between 2010 and 2019 – from about 13,000 tonnes to over 170,000 tonnes, undermining food security in West Africa.

A June 2021 report from the NGO Changing Markets Foundation, found that more than half a million tons of fish exported from West Africa to Europe and Asia for use in aquaculture and animal feed for livestock could instead feed 33 million people in the region.

The bulk of fish sourced from West Africa goes into feeding aquaculture, such as farmed salmon. Farmed fish currently accounts for roughly half of the world's fish consumption and is set to grow further to reach 60% of total fish consumption by 2030, according to the UN FAO.

Under Senegalese law, the fishmeal factories are supposed to use bycatch – trimmings and unwanted fish that are not fit for

human consumption – but “there is clear evidence that fishmeal factories in West Africa use fresh fish for fishmeal production,” says Dr. Ibrahima Cisse, Greenpeace Africa, Senior Ocean Campaign Manager.



Lt. Sanyang, Commander of the Abéné Marine Protection Area / Credit: Mustapha Manneh.

The factories have made it more lucrative for local fishermen to sell their catch to them, rather than at local markets, diverting a vital source of animal protein for local populations.

FMFO production is not only harming food security in the region but is destabilizing the marine food chain that depends on these shoals. “Fishmeal is not good for the marine ecosystem. The fishmeal plant needs pelagic fish and those are the kind of fish the big fish will feed upon, especially sardinella,” says Abdoulie Sanyang, commander of the Abéné Marine Protection Area.

Broken promises

The Abéné plant has been mired in controversy from the start and many in the community now believe they were duped into agreeing to its development.

A business directory search of fishmeal factories in Senegal did not reveal the ownership of the SPH plant at the time it was operating. However, sources in the community reported that the investors who met with community leaders in 2017 were Chinese.

The owners initially said that they wanted to build an ice plant. They also promised to invest in infrastructure, including building a new road and hospital and creating much-needed local jobs at the plant. But none of these benefits have come to pass. Women and youths were excluded from these meetings, as it is traditional for elders to make decisions on behalf of the community.

In December 2017, the investors were granted a building permit from Senegal's Fisheries and Maritime Economy Ministry for an ice plant, intended to support the local fishing industry.

Later that month, the ministry [approved changes for the plant](#) to move to the production of fishmeal and fish oil without a public consultation on the change of use. A [report at the time claimed](#) that the “ice plant” was simply a disguise of the fishmeal plant from the beginning. Many locals were shocked to discover the plant was producing fishmeal when it started operating in 2018.

“They [the owners] bypassed all the legal processes of bringing up investment. They selected a few people including the elders and worked with them,” says Kutubo Sonko, 52, former president of the Abéné Youth Association.

“No doubt those people [who attended the meetings] were corrupted,” he alleges. “Imagine flying a few to Dakar, those who never had a bike – flying them to Dakar means a lot to them. They agreed with everything said [by the investors] in Dakar.”

On the other side of the fence, Lamin Jabang, 70, who helped to promote the factory to the community, says he is still in support of fishmeal production in the village, pointing to the neighbouring village of Kartong, over the border in the Gambia: “We don't hear about damage caused by fishmeal in Kartong, and that's why I never think fishmeal will be bad for Abéné,” he argues.



Kutubo Sonko, former president of the Abéné Youth Association / Credit: Mustapha Manneh.

Damage caused by fishmeal

But almost immediately after the fishmeal plant in Abéné began operations, polluting discharge was witnessed, with reports of unbearable smells, black smoke and untreated waste.

"I saw the discharge of the waste of toxic water in our rice farms," says Kebba Sonko, 39, the current president of the Abéné Youth Association.

"All those nearby garden wells were contaminated and the cattle owners were even driving their cattle away from the area."

Because the initial permit was for an ice plant, the SPH factory had never been subject to an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA), a legal requirement for every fishmeal plant in Senegal, according to a report published in EJAtlas. The site also contravenes an environmental code, which stipulates that such industrial complexes cannot be located less than 500 meters from homes. But on a visit to Abéné in May, it was evident that the plant was in much closer proximity to residential homes and hospitality sites than the regulations allow.

FMFO production is a polluting process of grinding and drying fish that requires large amounts of water that becomes toxic when it mixes with fermented fish. Where factories are not compliant with environmental regulations there have been cases of them dumping untreated effluent into water sources.

Two out of the three fishmeal factories in the Gambia, which are all Chinese-owned, have been charged with dumping untreated waste into the sea. In the case of the Golden Lead Factory in Gunjur, a mangrove wildlife reserve turned an alarming red color. This phenomenon was attributed to algal blooms caused by phosphate in the wastewater that was leaking from a broken outlet, according to a report by *China Dialogue Ocean*.



Kebba Sonko, current president of the Abéné Youth Association / Credit: Mustapha Manneh.

Locals complained of rashes when they bathed in the water. Independent tests of water taken from the lagoon initiated by local environmental groups also found high levels of carcinogenic arsenate, which they believe has killed fish and oysters in the area.

A separate investigation into the negative impacts of fishmeal production by the Global Reporting Program found toxic levels of four heavy metals – cadmium, thallium, selenium and vanadium in wastewater discharged from the Omega fishmeal factory in Joal, Senegal.

When the beach at Abéné also became littered with dead fish, samples were taken but these proved inconclusive. "The problem is that Abéné is close to the Gambia and we can't determine if the water contamination [has been] done by the fishmeal plants in Gambia or Abéné," explains Lieutenant Sanyang, the Marine Protection Area Commander for Abéné.

In May 2018, a local campaign was launched with several online petitions. Called "SOS to save the Yayboye" (yayboye means sardinella in Wolof), it aimed to raise awareness with open-air screenings of a documentary, *Poisson d'or, poisson africaine*, which examines the impact of the fishmeal factory on the traditional fishing practices of the region.

In June, in response to the protests, the Minister of the Environment, Mame Thierno Dienga, instructed Governor Guedj Diouf to hold a referendum on the fishmeal plant to decide whether the community wanted the fishmeal plant or not. The results showed that 93% of the 500-600 respondents were against the plant's operation. Six villages – Abéné, Djannah, Kabadio, Niafrang, Colomba, Bambadiaky – also submitted a memorandum citing their refusal to live next to a "killer" and "toxic" industry.

Youths, who were initially in favor of the development of the factory, turned against it as it became clear that their hopes of new job opportunities were not going to materialize. In fact, the factory did not employ anyone from the local community but used workers from other West African countries.

Rather than improving the flow of money into the community, the factory has had the opposite effect.

Abéné's once-thriving tourism sector, which attracted tens of thousands of visitors a year to its annual music festival and

Abéné since shutting tourism sector, which attracted tens of thousands of visitors a year to its annual music festival and rich cultural scene has been in limbo since 2018. Many tourist lodges and restaurants were forced out of business when visitors stopped coming and investment into reopening is on hold while the future of the factory remains uncertain. Locals say reopening of the factory would be the final nail in the coffin for what is left of Abéné's tourism sector.

"If the factory resumes operations I will lose my job," says Abie Sanyang.

Up and down the coastline of Senegal and the Gambia, the decision to allow fishmeal production into communities has proved divisive. Elders such as Abdou Jabang from Abéné argue that the protests by youths are thwarting community development. "The factory will be a blessing for the entire region of southern Senegal. Our business will grow and lots of people will work there. The factory will bring income to the community," says Jabang. His wife was among the few to visit the Golden Lead factory in Gunjur.

But youths are suspicious that some of the fishmeal supporters stand to make personal financial gains from allowing fishmeal production.

Illegal fishing

A return to fishmeal production in Abéné will also make policing the marine protected area, a critical breeding ground for pelagic fish which extends 2km offshore from Kafountine in Casamance to Kartong in the Gambia, even more difficult, says Lt. Sanyang.

"Fishmeal [production] will encourage overfishing and that will lead to illegal fishing in the protection area," he adds.



Fish meal powder from Golden Lead Factory in Gunjur, The Gambia / Credit: Mustapha Manneh.

Even while the Abéné plant has been shut down, fishing boats believed to be working for fishmeal plants in the Gambia regularly encroach inside the marine protection zone off Abéné where it is illegal to fish. This has [led to clashes](#) between Senegalese and Gambian fishermen.

Senegal's Maritime Fisheries Code has stricter provisions against IUU fishing and the state is equipped with vessels to patrol its waters and enforce the regulations, unlike the Gambia, where if vessels are caught fishing illegally they are dealt with through out-of-court settlements, which have been [linked to allegations of corruption](#) within the fisheries ministry.

"As long as the fishmeal factories pay more for 5-liters of fish than the fishers would get for 10-liters [at the market], they will keep on fishing illegally and chaos between Gambia and Senegal will escalate again," warns Lt Sanyang.

New owners

There have been ongoing rumours over the reopening of the Abéné factory. The strongest indication yet came in June this year when community leaders from Abéné and neighboring villages were invited by the Golden Lead factory on a study tour to its plant in Gunjur, Gambia. The apparent objective of the tour was to woo delegates into changing their minds and persuade fishmeal detractors in the wider community to drop their resistance to the factory.

“They want us to see how fishmeal has benefited the Gunjur community,” says community leader Yaya Jabang who was among those on the trip. He added that the group from Abéné were told by the organizers of the study tour that they “have another functional factory in Gunjur,” suggesting the Abéné factory had changed hands to the Chinese-owned Golden Lead plant.



Bonga fish stocks are being plundered to produce fishmeal, driving prices up for local communities / Credit: J. Poelen via [Flickr](#)

Along with its poor track record on environmental pollution, Golden Lead has been accused of plundering pelagic fish stocks and driving up the cost of fish for locals. Gunjur residents say that since Golden Lead began operating in 2016, the average price for three sardinella fish has gone from 10 Gambian dalasis to 25 or 30 dalasis, while a bowl of bonga fish has increased from 150 dalasis to 350 dalasis.

A [previous investigation](#) by NGO Changing Markets Foundation [found that this plant alone](#) was taking 40% of Gambia's entire fish catch for a given year.

The investigation also revealed strong links between the Gambia's FMFO production and exports to China, the world's largest aquafeed producer. Golden Lead's management declined to respond when asked in October whether it was the new owner of the Abéné plant. However, a security guard at the gate said that the factory in Abéné was now owned by Golden Lead.

Despite having been gifted a bag of fishmeal to demonstrate its uses to the community, for Yaya Jabang at least, the study tour failed in its mission of convincing him that resuming fishmeal production would be a positive move for Abéné.

“I was shocked and heartbroken to see the large amounts of fresh fish entering Golden Lead factory in Gunjur. They aimed to make us believe that fishmeal is good, but from what I saw there, I will never wish such a destructive company to come to my community,” he said in October.

This latest development has only reinforced the divisions between elders. “Our fight to end fishmeal will never stop. We will not only fight against the Abéné fishmeal factory, but we will fight against any other fishmeal plant in Casamance,” says

activist Bakary Sanga, 29. But their campaign may cost them: in retaliation to the youths’ resistance, the elders have threatened them with a ban on the Abéné music festival, a vital source of income for the community. They have also declared they will disown and put a curse on those who stand against the fishmeal plant, a serious threat in Abéné’s traditional Mandinka community.

“They want to harm us because of fishmeal,” says Kebba Sonko.



Fishmeal and fish oil from Golden Lead Factory in Gunjur, The Gambia / Credit: Mustapha Manneh.

This story was produced with support from China Dialogue Ocean.

Banner image: Abie Sanyang standing from her workplace facing at the empty beach / Credit: Mustapha Manneh.

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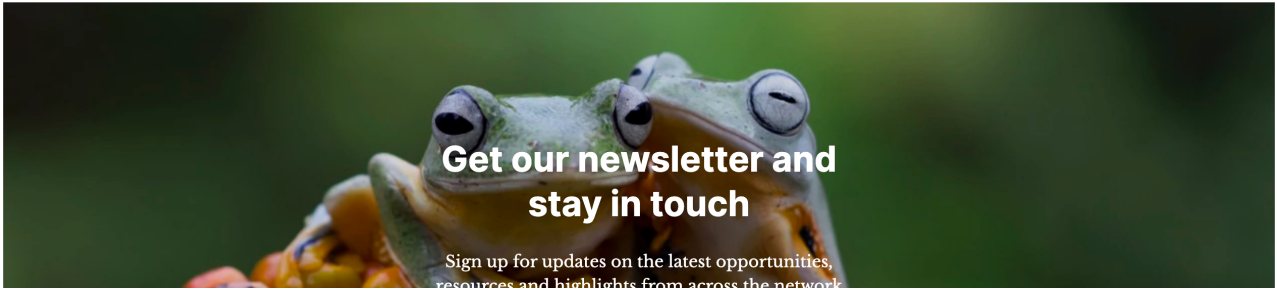
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