

## Policy brief

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# The smoke and mirrors of Blue economy bonanza make African women fish processors choke

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In this short policy brief, the author looks at several case studies in which sectors from the Blue economy are competing or threatening women in African artisanal fisheries' livelihoods. However, some of these examples also show how these women fight to be heard and strive to improve their working and living conditions. The article concludes with some recommendations to recognise and take into account the needs of these women in decision-making on Blue economy public policies and private investments.

### 1. Overview

The oceans and coastal areas are drivers of African countries economies, providing livelihoods, particularly to the fisheries dependant coastal communities. Women are the pillars of these African fishing communities. They are also key for ensuring that public policies and private initiatives, -many of which are now pursued under a 'blue economy' flag-, protect, support, and improve artisanal fisheries livelihoods.

CFFA and its partners have constantly brought to light the fact that industrial blue economy initiatives in Africa generally prioritize short term economic gains at the expense of environmental degradation and local coastal communities' livelihoods.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the sectors mentioned in the 'African Union Blue Economy Strategy'<sup>2</sup> are male-dominated: shipping, transport, oil/gas extraction, tourism, etc. African fisheries and aquaculture, - most of which are small scale-, have a comparatively better record. Women in African artisanal fisheries play prominent roles in the whole value chain, from pre-harvest to post-harvest activities. The impacts of blue economy developments on women in artisanal fisheries will therefore affect the sustainable development prospects of the whole community. The way women in fisheries have raised awareness, mobilised, innovated to face these challenges posed by industrial blue economy initiatives shows their crucial role in protecting and sustaining livelihoods from African artisanal fisheries, maximising their contribution to the attainment of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. How the quest for blue growth affects women in African artisanal fisheries

The current blue economy narrative has for objective the maximal exploitation of the vast ocean and coastal spaces and resources, mainly through investments in industrial exploitation. This approach, also adopted by the African Union (AU), represents a multi-faceted threat<sup>4</sup> for the activities of African artisanal fishing communities: it leads to increased coastal pollution, destruction of coastal ecosystems like mangroves, competition with the local artisanal fisheries sector for access to land and sea resources, and overfishing, among others. It also limits the ability for ocean resources to contribute to the realization of the SDGs<sup>5</sup> and the AU's Agenda 2063 of the "Africa we want". Some have argued that such investments in big industrial blue economy projects "*prevents, in fact, innovation from reaching small-scale fisheries and especially women who ensure food security and nutrition, and secure livelihoods and intra-regional trade in Africa*"<sup>6</sup>.

A long-standing source of conflict has been the **competition between African artisanal fisheries and industrial fishing fleets**, mostly of foreign origin. These fleets, from Russia, Europe, Japan, Korea but increasingly from China come to fish African coastal waters under the guise of various fisheries arrangements – bilateral agreements, private licensing, chartering, joint-ventures, with negative impacts on the level of exploitation of fish resources, local fishers' catches and ecosystems. This

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<sup>1</sup> See "Is Blue Growth compatible with securing Small-scale Fisheries? - Six areas of concern for the artisanal fish value chain" on CFFA-CAPE website. Available at: <https://www.cffacape.org/blue-growth-incompatible>

<sup>2</sup> This strategy document can be found on the African Union website: <https://www.au-ibar.org/strategy-documents>

<sup>3</sup> FARTHING, Courtney, "Life Below Water: Sustainable fisheries and gender equality", Global Fishing Watch, 8 March 2020. Available at: <https://globalfishingwatch.org/vms-transparency/life-below-water-gender-equality/>

<sup>4</sup> CAOPA, "Communication on the African Union's 'Africa Blue Economy Strategy'", September 2020. Available at: <https://caopa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CAOPA-Communication-on-AU-Blue-economy-strategy.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> OKAFOR-YARWOOD, Ifesinach et al., "The Blue Economy – Cultural Livelihood – Ecosystem Conservation Triangle: The African Experience", *Frontiers in Marine Science*, Marine conservation and sustainability, 23 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2020.00586/full>

<sup>6</sup> NJUKI, Jemima and LEONE, Michele, "Positioning women smallholder fisher folk to benefit from the Blue Economy", 2018. Available at: <https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/bitstream/handle/10625/57447/IDL-57447.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=2>. Note: This article is a result of a discussions during side event on Women of the Blue Economy co-organized by IDRC and Government of Canada on November 26, 2018.

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situation has damaging effects on women's activities: with decreasing artisanal fishing catches, their supply of raw material dries up, leaving them without fish to process and sell. This also jeopardizes their vital contribution of fish towards African populations' food security. Finally, foreign fleets operations make fishing trips riskier for artisanal fishermen, with dangers of collisions between pirogues and industrial vessels, or risks of losing nets dragged away by the trawl. This is a source of stress for fishers as well as their wives and mothers.

Women have increasingly, and successfully, mobilised against the presence of industrial fishing fleets of foreign origin in their countries' waters. In 2020, in Senegal, women from the artisanal fisheries sector joined their voices to those who denounced the promise made by the Fisheries Minister, to release licences to fish in Senegalese waters more than 50 foreign trawlers, of Chinese and Turkish origin<sup>7</sup>. To this day, most of these trawlers have been kept out of Senegalese waters.

Fleets of foreign origin are not the only foreign operations that hamper the women's access to fish raw material. In The Gambia and Senegal, women in artisanal fisheries cannot compete with **industrial fishmeal processing factories**, which offer better prices to fishers for their small pelagic fish, often referred to as 'the fish of the poor'. In Senegal, Chinese operators buy fish for their fishmeal processing factories directly on the landing sites or beaches.<sup>8</sup> Women are struggling to access fish for processing and they see now their business getting to a standstill.

Knowing that the biggest part of the artisanal processed products is destined for the national and sub-regional markets, whilst foreign fishing and fishmeal processing is mainly geared for export to international markets, women difficulties to access fish raw material is leading to food insecurity.

This also happens in Africa inland fisheries, like in Lake Victoria, where the expansion of the **Nile perch processing for export**, including to the European market, has led to malnutrition, but also to gender violence. The introduction of Nile perch in the lake in the last century brought significant changes to its economy. It triggered a shift from a subsistence fishing activity to a commercial intensive fishing operation for profit. A 2017 paper<sup>9</sup> explored how these changes affected gender relations in the sector and the livelihoods of women in small-scale fisheries. Women unload the fish brought to shore by local fishers, and in return, receive a portion of the fish caught. This fish is then used for their own processing business, where they dry and fry fish for local markets. However, in exchange of "a right to work" unloading fish, fishermen demand money and sex. This practice has led to high rates of sexually transmitted infections as well as a sharp increase gender-based violence along the shores of Lake Victoria.

**Coastal tourism** is another sector where many African countries see a potential for blue growth, can also affect negatively women in fisheries, by encroaching on their space in coastal areas, like fish processing sites. In 2019, Guinean artisanal fishermen

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<sup>7</sup> CFFA-CAPE, "Senegalese fishing sector unites against issuing licences to Chinese and Turkish vessels", 4 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.cffacape.org/coronavirus-crisis-impacts-on-african-artisanal-fisheries/senegalese-fishing-sector-unites-against-issuing-licences-to-chinese-and-turkish-vessels>

<sup>8</sup> "Voices of African artisanal fisheries. Calling for an African year of Artisanal Fisheries", CAOPA – REJOPRAO joint production, January 2016. Available at: [http://www.prcmarine.org/sites/prcmarine.org/files/voices\\_from\\_african\\_artisanal\\_fisheries.pdf](http://www.prcmarine.org/sites/prcmarine.org/files/voices_from_african_artisanal_fisheries.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> SMITH, Hillary, "Small fish, big problems: Gender based violence in Lake Victoria's fisheries", Duke Human Rights Center, 21 August 2017. Available at: <https://humanrights.fhi.duke.edu/small-fish-big-problems-gender-based-violence-in-lake-victorias-fisheries/>

and women fish processors were forcefully evicted<sup>10</sup> from a landing site in Conakry. The reason for the eviction was the leasing of the land to an international Hotel Group for the construction of Hotel Noom. The community had been proposed an inadequate, alternative site for relocation, which was far too small to host the women fish processors. After women mobilised, and sought support from their international partners, the Minister promised<sup>11</sup>, early 2020 to expand the space of the alternative site. However, to date, one year later, the government has not relocated the community, and the women continue spending the night in the open. The hotel has neither used the empty space, which is gradually becoming a garbage dump.

The increase of **shipping activities in African ports** has also led to the expansion of port infrastructures, often affecting coastal communities and hampering women's activities. About 7 years ago, the Togolese Government decided, without consultation with stakeholders, to enlarge the Lomé Autonomous Port, which mainly hosts containers of second-hand cars from Belgium, Germany, Spain and Italy. The enlargement was finalized by exploiting a land traditionally used by artisanal fishing communities for their activities. After completion of the project, nothing much was left for the local fishers: the fishing quay in the port of Lomé looked like a pocket handkerchief, with hundreds of pirogues crammed in a small space – fishermen complained that the crashing waves destroyed pirogues as they collided with each other.

Next to it, the fish market where no less than 1000 women operated on a daily basis had become so small that vendors and buyers walked on each other. A new harbour was inaugurated in 2019, 10 km away from Lomé. With a capacity of 300 pirogues, this new equipment is expected to compensate for the reduction in the space reserved for parking pirogues. The Ministry announced that this new artisanal fishing port could be used by 3500 fish processors, mainly women, and 3000 fishers, and that it would indirectly employ 5000 people: engines and nets repair, ice selling, etc. The Ministry said<sup>12</sup> that “*the platform will provide fertile ground for the integration of the artisanal fishing marketing circuit into the blue economy, and will contribute to improving the income of the players and the healthiness, not to mention the quality of the products*”. However, during the building of the new port, many fishers and women fish processors lost the space they needed for their activities, and lost their livelihood...

The narrative is similar in Côte d'Ivoire, where the expansion of port infrastructure in Abidjan led to a loss of fishing grounds and a loss of coastal space for the artisanal sector. Combined with the general state of overexploitation of the resources in the country's waters, this contributed to a diminution of landings for women fish processors. Women have been struggling since to get access to raw material at an affordable price: diversifying their supply sources<sup>13</sup> is one avenue they are pursuing,

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<sup>10</sup> PHILIPPE, Joëlle, "Conakry: fishing community to be evicted due to a Government lease of land to Hotel Noom", CFFA-CAPE website, 1 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.cffacape.org/news-blog/conakry-fishing-community-to-be-evicted-due-to-the-enlargement-of-hotel-nooms-parking>

<sup>11</sup> PHILIPPE, Joëlle, "Conakry: Guinea Fisheries Minister expresses support to the evicted fishing community in the continuation of their activities", CFFA-CAPE website, 3 February 2020. Available at: <https://www.cffacape.org/news-blog/conakry-guinea-fisheries-minister-expresses-support-to-the-evicted-fishing-community-in-the-continuity-of-their-activities>

<sup>12</sup> DOSSAVI, Renaud Ayi, « Togo : le nouveau port de pêche inauguré », Togo First, 24 April 2019. Available at : <https://www.togofirst.com/fr/agro/2404-3005-togo-le-nouveau-port-de-peche-inaugure>

<sup>13</sup> PHILIPPE, Joëlle, "'Faux thon' to improve the livelihoods and conditions of Ivorian women", CFFA-CAPE website, 9 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.cffacape.org/news-blog/faux-thon-to-improve-the-livelihoods-and-conditions-of-ivorian-women>

as well as ensuring better conservation of the landed fish by using a refrigerated container<sup>14</sup> they recently acquired. They have also been looking at improving the quality of their processed products, whilst using less fuel wood. This is being achieved by the use of an improved fish smoking technique, the FTT oven. The use of this oven also drastically diminishes the exposure of women to the smoke of the processing operations<sup>15</sup>, which is greatly improving their health.

In Senegal, recently, a Turkish **steel industry**, Tosyali Holding Senegal planned to build a factory on a land in Bargny which has served as a fish processing site for decades, with more than 1000 women working there, plus approximately 5,000 more indirectly related. The steel plant promoters say they will create 500 jobs. Women fish processors argue they will destroy 5,000<sup>16</sup>. The women stood their ground, and supported by a local association, they introduced mid-2020 a complaint<sup>17</sup> against the Turkish company for non-compliance with the OECD guidelines for multinational enterprises, as the company failed to carry out impact assessments, to submit a resettlement plan, and consult with the impacted communities. Today, artisanal fish processing remains the backbone of Bargny's economy, and the women are calling on the state to help them maintain their income-generating activity.

But the sector of the blue economy that is lighting up stars in many African governments' eyes is **offshore oil and gas exploitation**. Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Libya, together share more than 90% of the continent's oil reserves. But other countries, like Mozambique, Sénégal and Mauritania are looking at exploiting recently discovered offshore oil and gas reserves. There is little regard for neither environmental sustainability nor the impacts on coastal communities in this quest for oil or gas profits. The offshore oil and gas exploration and exploitation disturbs fishing activities, or fish stocks on which fishing depends on. The consequences are many: fishers are losing their traditional fishing grounds, pollutions can be generated by the oil/gas exploitation, vessels engaged in the exploitation destroy fishing gear and collide or damage with pirogues. This in turn affects negatively women's processing and fish trading activities.

Organisations like CANCO<sup>18</sup>, in Kenya, call for a better information of fishing communities about the impacts of this exploitation, a better regulation of the interactions between mining companies, the government and fishing communities, including transparent mechanisms to address conflicts, and help ensure abuses are minimised<sup>19</sup>. However, the consultation and information of men and women from fishing communities about the impacts of oil/gas exploitation on the marine environment and coastal communities is clearly lacking.

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<sup>14</sup> PHILIPPE, Joëlle, "This is the first time fishing communities are seeing a concrete positive impact of the agreement with the European Union", CFFA-CAPE website, 10 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.cffape.org/news-blog/this-is-the-first-time-fishing-communities-are-seeing-a-concrete-positive-impact-of-the-agreement-with-the-european-union>

<sup>15</sup> FAO, "FTT-Thiaroye Ovens in Côte d'Ivoire: transforming lives through simple technology" (video), 16 December 2016. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejoa524ls4A>

<sup>16</sup> TRAORE, Paule Kadja, "Fight against the installation of a steel plant in Bargny: Women fish processors change their strategy", CFFA-CAPE website, 2 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.cffape.org/news-blog/fight-against-the-installation-of-a-metallurgical-plant-in-bargny-women-fish-processors-change-their-strategy>

<sup>17</sup> See OECD Watch, "LSD et al. vs. Tosyali Holding Ltd", Case 573, 20 August 2020. Available at: [https://complaints.oecdwatch.org/cases-fr/Case\\_573](https://complaints.oecdwatch.org/cases-fr/Case_573)

<sup>18</sup> See their website for more information: <http://cancokenya.net/home/aboutus>

<sup>19</sup> STANDING, Andre, "Big scale mining vs small-scale fishing: Concerns from East Africa", CFFA-CAPE website, 23 January 2015. Available at: <https://www.cffape.org/publications-blog/2015/01/23/2015-1-21-big-scale-mining-vs-small-scale-fishing-concerns-from-east-africa>

In the case of the Tortue-Ahmeyim project, a huge hydrocarbons exploration under the seabed, covering 33,000 square kilometres off the coasts of Senegal and Mauritania, the companies involved, BP and the US-based company Kosmos, used dubious information and science in their EIA, and they organised token public consultations<sup>20</sup>. This made it impossible for local communities to be well informed about the potential impact of gas and oil exploitation.

### 3. Women in fisheries: essential for sustainable blue economy

Industrial projects in coastal areas may be given a boost as African countries quest for blue growth is presented as a privileged path for economic post-Covid recovery. The various examples here above show how women in African artisanal fisheries are impacted by some of these industrial types of exploitation of the ocean.

From losing access to the land they occupy for their traditional activities, to being deprived of the raw material they need for processing and selling, as fish resources get scarcer because of over-exploitation, or become too expensive for them to buy. From being victim of gender-based violence, of pollutions from the industries they live nearby or of increased anxiety because their husbands, sons, brothers are taking ever more risks when they go fishing.

Nevertheless, some of these examples also show how women are, against all odds, trying to improve their working and living conditions, organising to make their voices heard, innovating with new techniques that protect their health, improve the quality of their products and increase their revenue.

Because of their roles all along the fisheries value chain, in catering for their families, and in contributing to the populations food security, **it is imperative that blue economy policies recognise and consider the different needs and challenges faced by women in coastal fishing-dependent communities.**

**African coastal states must first ensure that the impacts of blue economy initiatives are assessed to incorporate the views of coastal communities, with a special attention to the voices of women.**

Compulsory Environmental Impact Assessments for blue economy initiatives should be complemented by Social Impacts Assessments, that consider the particular impacts on women's physical and mental health, their activities and prospects for developing them sustainably. The results of such assessments must be shared and discussed publicly, with particular efforts made to reach out to women from fishing communities.

Transparent and participatory mechanisms should be set up by coastal states to resolve potential conflicts arising between fishing communities and other users of the ocean and the coastal zones, a special attention to include women from the fishing communities in the process.

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<sup>20</sup> STANDING, Andre, "How BP is drilling through one of the world's largest deep-water coral reefs", CFFA-CAPE website, 25 August 2019. Available at: <https://www.cffacape.org/publications-blog/2019/08/25/2019-8-25-how-bp-is-drilling-through-the-worlds-largest-deep-water-coral-reefnbsp>

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Provided women in African artisanal fisheries are heard, their concerns taken into account, and their innovative spirit supported by adequate policies and funding, they will remain the backbone of sustainable fishing communities in Africa, and become a driver for a sustainable blue economy, that puts fisheries at its centre.

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