

Where is Blue Justice when we prevent harvesting of our fish in the name of oil exploration? The Case of Ghanaian fishers



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Ghana is located in West Africa along the Atlantic coast. It has a coastline of 528 km and its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is 218,100 km² long. There are 310 fishing landing sites and 189 coastal fishing villages (Finegold et al., 2010). The fishing sector of Ghana is primary marine-based. Pelagic species, such as round and flat sardine, are the predominant species being caught.

With the advent of the 'Blue Economy' in early 2000, the world hoped it would bring economic growth and development to the coastal communities around the world. The emerging sectors such as oil and gas exploration were projected to be the engine of growth for job creation for the population living near the coast. However, this has not been the story around the globe, especially in the African countries. This chapter uses Ghana's oil exploration and access to fish as a case study to illustrate blue justice.

Ghana discovered oil in 2007 in the western region where most of the Ghana's fisheries production is done. Nearly 75% of the Ghanaian fishers and fishing activities are located and operated in this area. The oil production started in 2010 and, based on the information provided directly by fishers as well as from the scientific community, the production has been negatively affecting the communities located in the area.

Photo: Addressing fisheries governance and the concerns of fisher folks with regards to oil and gas extraction activities in Axim, Ghana. 2016 @Moses Adjei

Location:

Ghana

Ecosystem type:

Marine

Main gear:

Dredge, Cast net, Gillnet, Hook and line, Lift net, Seine net, Surrounding net, Traps, Trawls

Target species:

Pelagic species (Round and flat sardine)

No. of small-scale fishers:

124,000

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Justice in context

Types of justice:

- **Distributive**
- **Social**
- **Economic**
 - Market
 - Infrastructure/wellbeing
- **Regulatory**
- **Procedural**
- **Environmental**
- COVID-19 related

In 2012, fishers from six coastal districts (i.e. Shama, Sekondi, Takoradi, Ahanta West, Ellembelle and Jomoro) have carried out a number of street protests and demonstrations to express their anger about the low catch. The fishers stressed that since the start of the oil explorations they have been experiencing poor catches even during bumper fishing season in August. The annual catch report for small-scale fisheries (SSF) from 2004 to 2018, published by the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture, confirmed the decrease of the SSF catch. The fishers attributed the low catch to the ban that prevents them from fishing in 500 km radius around the oilrigs. They argue that this ban keeps them away from areas where they used to fish and contributes to a low catch. They spend long hours at sea and incur high operational cost while catching fewer fish. The fishers also accused the oil companies of pushing fish stocks away from Ghana's territorial waters into those of the neighbouring countries.

The fishers have categorized fishing effects from the oil exploration into six 'capitals', as follows:

1. **Natural capital:** Fishers have now limited access and fishing opportunities as opposed to what they had in the past;
2. **Financial capital:** Their low catch and high operational cost such as fuel has resulted in low-income generation. Their wives, women fish-smokers and sellers can't save money since they can no longer sell fish;
3. **Physical capital:** Their canoes and fishing equipment are being destroyed due to increased amount of hours they spent at sea at each trip but also because they use their equipment less since they don't go out fishing as often as before;
4. **Human capital:** There are more injuries during fishing because fishers have to work harder to catch the fish to offset their investment cost, while also needing to feed their families;
5. **Social capital:** They clash with the oil companies' staff who they don't trust anymore;
6. **Cultural capital:** Some of the fishers had to leave their families in Ghana and travel to other countries to fish, which is breaking these families apart.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

Small-scale fishing in Ghana is done by fishers operating within the Ghana EEZ with dugout canoes powered by outboard motors with engine power of up to 40 hp. Fish and fish products produced by small-scale fisheries in Ghana are predominantly used for household consumption, local and domestic markets.

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... Effective fishing governance and management should be established to ensure that the community-orientated, fisheries-based management policies are implemented in the communities affected by the oil exploration...

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Dealing with justice

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Ghana's oil exploration is, without a doubt, contributing greatly to the national GDP. However, it should not be at the expenses of the fishers. Oil sector should not cause suffering and loss of livelihoods to the fishers who are the indigenous people in the area and depend on the marine resource for the survival and income. The fishers and women fishmongers have reported that the ban, which prevents them from fishing in some areas, is consequently preventing them from earning enough money to pay for their children's school fees and meet other social demands (e.g. funeral expenses).

Stakeholders meetings should be organized to facilitate a dialogue towards finding a lasting solution for the affected fishers and communities. Effective fishing governance and management should be established to ensure that the community-orientated, fisheries-based management policies are implemented in the communities affected by the oil exploration. Practices for alternative livelihoods should be established to support the fishers and women fish-sellers in these fishing communities. Navy officials in Ghana should guide and train the fishers on how to fish near the oil fields in a way that will prevent any damage to the oil facilities while at the same time allow them clear access the fisheries resources.

Photo credit: CitiNewsroom.com, 2012



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