

GLOBAL REACH, LOCAL CONSEQUENCES:

Impacts of Distant Water Fishing on artisanal fishing in Cameroon, Gabon and Nigeria



Shrimp tray from artisanal fisher in Douala, Cameroon
Cameroon's name originates from camarão, Portuguese for shrimp.
July 2021. Photos / JB BALLA OKALA/Overdose Design

A photo essay by Agnes Ebo'o and Social Action for Gulf
of Guinea Citizens Network (GGCN)



GLOBAL REACH, LOCAL CONSEQUENCES: Impacts of Distant Water Fishing on artisanal fishing in Cameroon, Gabon and Nigeria

Distant-water fishing (DWF) is a necessary practice to meet global fish consumption needs. However, as rich nations' fleets can count on technology and economic power to access fishing grounds in faraway – and often poorer – foreign nations, local populations in host countries that would not otherwise have access to fresh fish products are left to rely on small-scale fishers working with rudimentary equipment and limited resources. National laws and policies are also often not protective of artisanal fishers.

In Cameroon, Gabon and Nigeria, artisanal fishers are working in difficult conditions that include basic equipment, poor infrastructure and lack of financing. Despite declarations from governments about support to artisanal fishing, the sector is, like many others in these countries, barely surviving. It is only efforts and dedication from individual men and women that allows to sustain the artisanal fishing sector value-chain from boat-making to fishing, processing, and even transformation into smoked fish and sales.

In Nigeria, a project presented in the media as the construction of fishing port and processing zone by Chinese investors, and worth USD 1-2.5 billion turned out to be inexistence after verification on the ground. Nevertheless, such projects, if they are to be considered, should be strictly regulated by

authorities in concerned countries, and provided the necessary capital from investors in the region in full transparency

Researcher Agnes Ebo'o, accompanied by photographers from Cameroon and Gabon, and community organisers in Nigeria's Niger Delta, looked into the impact of DWF on the artisanal fishing sector in these countries. A deliberate and conscious choice was made to focus on the working conditions of fishers, rather than the more often documented conflicts that oppose artisanal fishers and industrial fishers or the environmental impacts of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the region.

This photo essay acknowledges that DWF is an indirect contributing factor to the neglect of local fishing in the three countries under study, and particularly the working conditions of artisanal fishers

It aims to encourage greater investment in the artisanal fishing sector, stemming from the belief that the different forms of fishing are not mutually exclusive and can sustainably co-exist, particularly at a time when countries that have so far been dependent on oil and other land-based natural resources exports are looking to the blue economy as a means to diversify their economies.

Credits:

- Photography in Cameroon (Douala and Kribi) by Jean-Blaise BALLA OKALLA
- Visits to Andoni fishing settlement in Rivers State, Niger Delta, Nigeria, by Green Isaac, Basil Nkpordee, Isaac Desmond of Social Action
- Photography in Gabon by Aaron Boubangou Ephraïm
- Research and texts by Agnes Ebo'o

What is happening at Andoni ?



Efforts to identify initiatives to improve livelihoods in coastal areas in one the three countries under study in this photo essay, led to several online reports pointing to a fishing port and processing zone in Nigeria. The project, located in Andoni LGA, a settlement of artisanal fishing villages in Rivers State, is presented as 'the Andoni fishing port and processing zone (...) the first of its kind to be built in the Gulf of Guinea'.

Although fishing ports already exist in other countries of the region such as Ghana, the 'Andoni project' boasts an alleged budget of between USD 1.5 billion and USD 2.5 billion at a 2,500-hectare site, and aims to create jobs and wealth in the region, with the support of Asian investors.

According to the online reports, the project will allegedly provide a single West and Central Africa-wide platform for landing and processing of various fish species destined to

the export market, as well as warehousing and ship maintenance yards for bottom-trawlers operating across West and Central Africa.

A visit to several villages in Andoni LGA by Social Action could not confirm the existence of this project. This might be a blessing in disguise for Andoni. A fish landing and processing port without the involvement of local communities would not address overfishing and illegal fishing by DWF fleets, but would just give the latter free licenses to openly access artisanal fishing zones.

This shows that coastal countries need to invest sustainably in fisheries, before other actors, foreign or local, with unclear and purely mercantile motives come and further impoverish local fishers and communities.

RICH & DIVERSE MARINE RESOURCES

Cameroon, Gabon and Nigeria are countries rich in marine resources, including fisheries. Unfortunately, these resources benefit principally foreign nations, particularly China, which accounts for over 60% of distant water fishing fleets in the world.

1. Artisanal fisher's catch of the day, Douala, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / JB BALLA OKALA/Overdose Design



2. Fish displayed at Bambochine fishing settlement, Libreville, Gabon
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraïm



SHRINKING SPACE FOR LOCAL FISHERS & CONFLICT

Cameroon, Gabon and Nigeria have extensive Exclusive Economic Zones, which are allocated principally to DWF fleets. Gabon is also home to some of Africa's largest marine reserved areas. This contributes to the shrinking of artisanal fishers' operational space, and leads to conflicts between local fishers and state agencies, and also between local fishers and DWF fleets.



1. River mouth and mangroves between Bambochine and Bikele, Libreville, Gabon
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraïm



2. Atlantic Ocean view in Kribi, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / JB BALLA OKALA/Overdose Design

LOW QUALITY EQUIPMENT

Small-scale fishers in Cameroon, Gabon and Nigeria use locally-built artisanal boats, derelict equipment such as rusty freezers and old and patched up fishnets. Despite the low quality of these equipment, fishers can barely afford it due to the low level of income that they generate from their fishing activities.

1. Artisanal fishing boat under construction, Kribi, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / JB Balla Okala/Overdose Design



2. Artisanal fishing boat under construction, Bambochine, Libreville, Gabon
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraïm



Although artisanal fishers have to travel increasingly further into the sea, sometimes for several days, they continue to use canoes designed to fish closer to shore.



1. Artisanal boat anchored at CAPAL landing area, Libreville, Gabon
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraïm



2. Artisanal fishing boat returning from sea loaded with fish in freezers
Douala, Cameroon. July 2021 Photo / Jay-C NGON /Overdose Design

Artisanal fishers rely on small rusty freezers that cannot sustain significant catch.

1. Rusty freezer on artisanal fishing boat at anchorage
Bambochine, Libreville, Gabon
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraïm



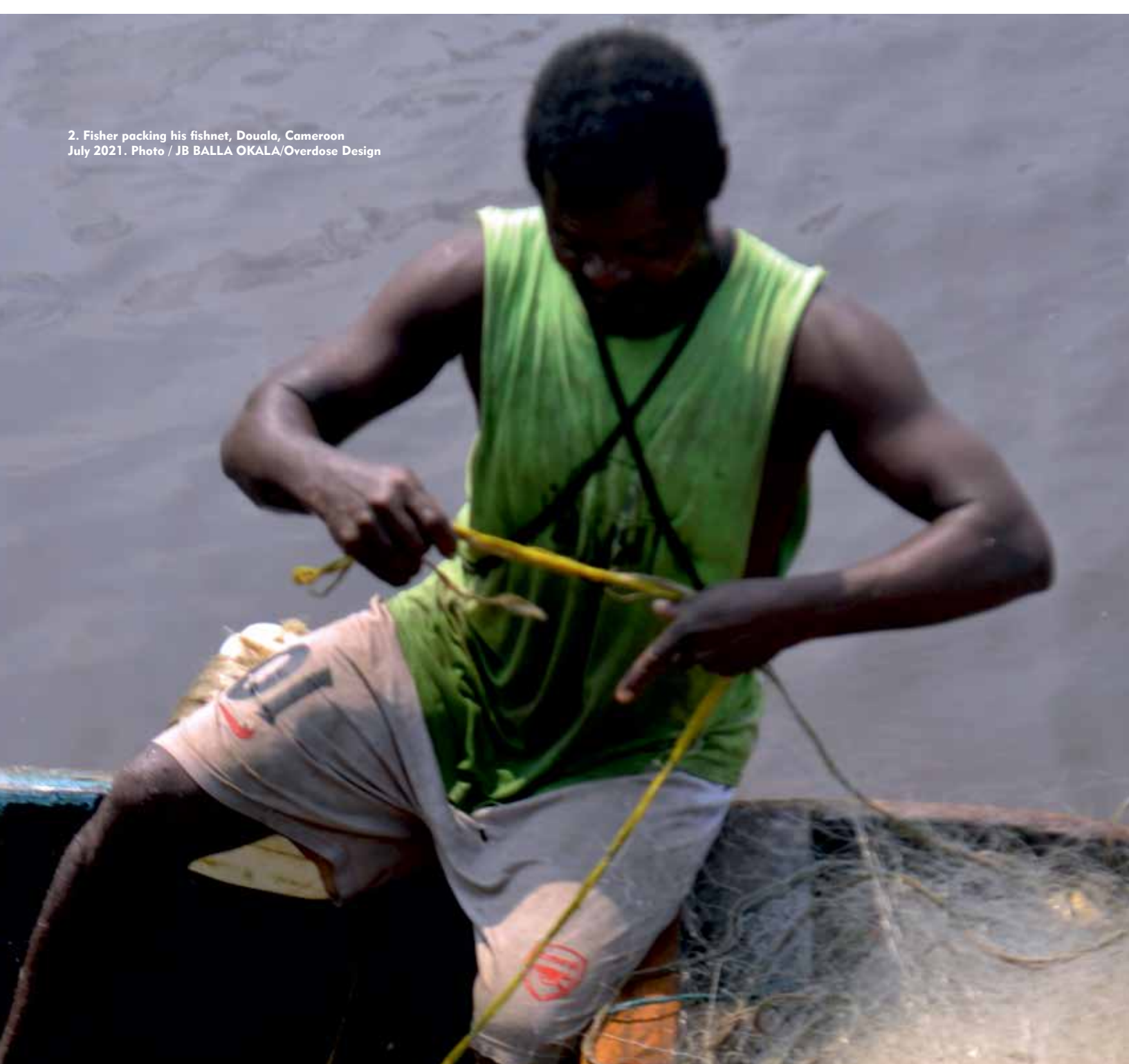
2. Derelict artisanal fishing boats at anchorage in Douala, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / Jay-C NGON/Overdose Design

Artisanal fishers complain that they are made to use regulated fishnets, while Chinese DWF fleets go unpunished even when caught using nets that swipe fish of all types and sizes.

1. Rusty freezer on artisanal fishing boat at anchorage
Bambochine, Libreville, Gabon
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraïm



2. Fisher packing his fishnet, Douala, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / JB BALLA OKALA/Overdose Design



INFRASTRUCTURE

In Cameroon, Gabon and Nigeria artisanal fishers lack adequate infrastructure. Governments through international cooperation partners – notably Japan – have set up artisanal fishing support centres, which are ran by industry actors such as fishers in cooperatives. They principally provide cleaner and more organised environments for selling fish to bulk buyers/resellers (although individuals are allowed, and may buy at slightly higher rates as is the case in Gabon). Many other small-scale fishers however, for example those operating in river mouths and creeks, sell their catch directly from their boats, in unhygienic conditions and at much lower prices.

1. Libreville Centre for the support of artisanal fishing (CAPAL) Libreville, Gabon.
Established with the support of Japan.
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraïm



2. Buyers awaiting fishers at landing area at Kribi, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / JB BALLA OKALA/Overdose Design

1. Buyers at fish landing area, Bambochine, Libreville, Gabon
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraim



2. Buyers awaiting returning artisanal fishers, Douala, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / JayC NGON/Overdose Design



1. Artisanal fisher anchoring at CAPAL, Libreville, Gabon
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraim



2. Artisanal fisher anchored at Kribi, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / JayC NGON/Overdose Design



FINANCING

Artisanal fishing entrepreneurs are generally self-financed. They raise funding through tontines, personal savings or family support. There are no dedicated financial institutions for small-scale fishing, and traditional banks do not see any value in artisanal fishing and do not fund it. Outboard engines are particularly expensive assets for these entrepreneurs. The seed funding to get into business is approximately US\$ 20-25k, to acquire a canoe, an engine and fishnets. The majority of small-scale investors own only a couple of boats or so, and even though many West African fishers are single canoe owners, most fishers cannot afford to own boats and are employed by small investors.

1. Outboard engine inside artisanal fishing canoe, Douala, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / Jay-C NGON/Overdose Design



2. Artisanal fisher carrying his canoe's engine outboard upon return from sea
Bambochine, Libreville, Gabon. July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraïm





1. Artisanal fishing boats in Kribi, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / JB BALLA OKALA/Overdose Design



2. Artisanal fishing boats in Kribi, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / JB BALLA OKALA/Overdose Design

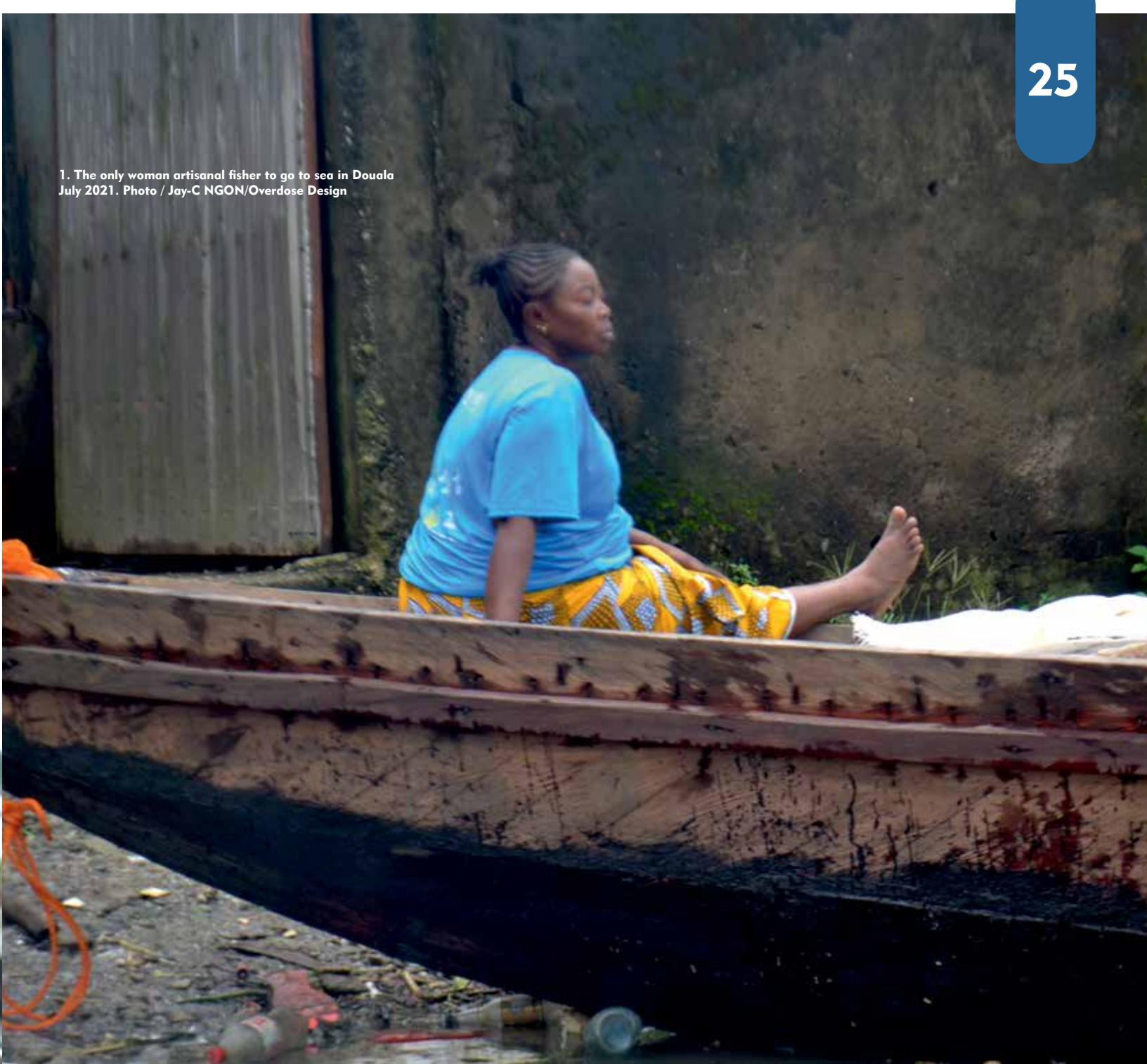
AN UNATTRACTIVE SECTOR

Given the difficult working conditions and the low return on investment, small-scale fishing is an increasingly unattractive sector. As a result, the artisanal fishers are essentially ageing males. Women do not go to sea, although one exception was found in Douala, Cameroon. Entrepreneurs prefer to invest in bulk buying and resell of fresh fish.

1. Old Togolese fisher at CAPAL, Libreville, Gabon
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraim



1. The only woman artisanal fisher to go to sea in Douala
July 2021. Photo / Jay-C NGON/Overdose Design



PERIPHERAL JOBS OF THE ARTISANAL FISHING SECTOR

Women and younger men are involved in side-activities around fishing, including as bulk buyers of fish, small-scale resellers and even fish cleaners at landing areas and centres. Unfortunately, working conditions and environments are inadequate most of the time.



1. Woman bulk buyer of Artisanally-fished tuna in Douala
July 2021. Photo / Jay-C NGON/Overdose Design

1. Large fish displayed on the floor by bulk buyer waiting for resellers
Douala, Cameroon. July 2021. Photo / JB BALLA OKALA/Overdose Design



1. Woman reseller at sea market, Douala, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / Jay-C NGON/Overdose Design





1. Men selling fish in market, Douala, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / Jay-C NGON/Overdose Design



2. Women fish vendors and buyers at CAPAL, Libreville, Gabon
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraïm

1. Fish cleaner at Douala market, Cameroon
July 2021. Photo / Jay-C NGON/Overdose Design



WEST AFRICAN EXPERTISE

West African fishers dominate the small-scale fishing sector in Central Africa. Nigerians particularly are well-established in Cameroon and Gabon and can be found across the artisanal fishing value-chain, from boat-making to reselling. Ivorians, Togolese and Beninois are visible in the sale of smoked fish and crustaceans, and also fish cleaning at sales points. In Gabon, West African small-scale fishers and business owners complain harassment by authorities, as well as excessive taxation and high cost of residency permit papers (carte de séjour). It costs about CFA Francs 800K (USD 1 500) to establish a carte de séjour, which must be renewed every two years for about CFA Francs 300K (USD 600).



1. Nigerian fishers at their settlement in Bikelé, Libreville, Gabon
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubanga Ephraïm

1. Cyril, Nigerian carpenter and artisanal boat builder at work
July 2021. Photo / Aaron Boubangou Ephraïm



WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

All three countries under study in this photo essay have pledged efforts to diversify their economies and have identified the blue economy as a key medium to achieve such. The fisheries sector provides a clear opportunity to get there. Coastal countries in this respect should embrace all forms of fishing, i.e., industrial and semi-industrial fishing, artisanal fishing and aquaculture. These are not mutually exclusive and can contribute to improving local productions, create sustainable jobs and generate income for treasuries. They can also address the issue of insecurity in the maritime sector in the Gulf of Guinea. But states need to take specific measures to attain these results, including:

- **Invest in all types of fisheries** and build fishing industries through financing, infrastructure and technology
- **Improve legislation** that regulates access to fishing zones in the EEZs and artisanal fishing areas, as well as legislation pertaining criminal activities associated to fishing
- **Develop policies** and legislation on transparency and accountability in the fishing sector, notably with respect to fisheries agreements and licenses
- **Build local expertise** by taking advantage of existing knowledge from West African fishers to develop local fisheries