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An In-Depth Analysis of Natural Resource Conflict in the Gambia: A Study in Sanyang Village

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Abstract

The study analyses the natural resource conflict in the Gambia with a case in Sanyang. One hundred and seventy (170) persons were involved as respondents to the basic questionnaire to establish the causes of conflicts in the community. Through a questionnaire, observations, and individual interviews, this paper seeks to analyse the conflict in Sanyang. Many natural resource-rich countries especially in Africa are battling violent resource conflicts leading to snail-pace economic growth, ecological and social disruptions, deaths, the emergence of armed groups, coups, and counter-coups. Data collected through the questionnaire was analysed using Microsoft Excel. This research concludes that unregulated fishing leads to over-exploitation of marine resources along the coastline where fishmeal factories are situated; environmental pollution and loss of jobs in the coastal tourism sector are the major drivers of conflict in Sanyang. Poor environmental governance and inadequate stakeholder engagement are the primary issues leading to the above-mentioned drivers of conflict in the study site.

Subject Areas

Natural Geography

Keywords

Natural Resource, Conflict, Over-Exploitation, Pollution, Jobs, Factory, Sanyang

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Many natural resource-rich countries especially in Africa are battling violent re-

source conflicts leading to snail-pace economic growth, ecological and social disruptions, deaths, emergence of armed groups, coups, and counter-coups. In some countries, natural resource disputes degenerate into disastrous wars and the emergence of armed groups (militias). This is the "African resource curse syndrome". These conflicts are the least popular in mainstream media. Some of these conflicts are fuelled by developed nations in exchange for resources. Natural resources are the lifeblood of many rebellions across the continent.

Natural resource-related conflicts are relatively new in the Gambia. Such conflicts are caused by the bargaining powers of politicians and businesspersons. Power and money are the driving factors of conflicts in many extractive industries. Resource-rich communities often bear the biggest burden of poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation while the few powerful—politicians and businesspersons continue to monopolize the sector for their gains. All over the world, there are more conflicts in resource-rich countries than in non-resource-rich countries (Humphreys, 2005) [1].

The global demand for natural resources is interlinked with global population dynamics, geopolitics, and socio-economic development for as long as history exists. The infrastructural and socio-economic development of nations is highly dependent on their natural resource basket. As a result, the demand and utilization of resources became a trigger for conflict in many countries including the Gambia (Lehmann, 2015) [2].

Company-Community Conflicts (CCC) are frequent in countries without strong environmental protection frameworks, high socio-economic inequality, poverty, and poor land tenure system. Dependable statistics on resource conflicts and their impacts in the Gambia is a huge challenge. However, incidental evidence suggests that the number of such conflicts is increasing in many parts of the country and predominantly along the coastal communities (Paul Stevens, 2013) [3]

Through in-depth stakeholder interviews, observations, and empirical case analysis, this study seeks to explore the causes and impacts of natural resource conflicts in Sanyang Village, Kombo South District from 2017 to 2021. In this community, there is a fishmeal factory and a sand mining site.

The Gambia is the smallest country in West Africa, surrounded on three sides by Senegal and the Atlantic Ocean. The former British colony has a population of 2.4 million in its seven administrative regions. It is one of the poorest nations in the world with limited natural resources. The nation's economy is highly dependent on agriculture and tourism. However, it is widely described as a tax-based economy. Though the country has a high unemployment rate with limited natural resources, visible poverty, and inequality, The Gambia is referred to as the "***Smiling Coast of Africa***" (GBoS, 2013) [4]. The country has an insignificant natural resource industry.

The natural resource sector in The Gambia is relatively very small. The country does not have large deposits of minerals but has an 81km coastline with sig-

nificant marine biodiversity. The main resources mined in the country are sand, gravel, and a few deposits of zircon while the marine ecosystem is exploited by fishmeal factories, the European Union, and the Senegalese based on agreements with the Gambia government. The sand and gravel mining are for domestic use in the construction industry while the zircon is exported overseas. However, the sector contributes insignificantly to the nation's economy.

The mining of sand along the coastline has become an insupportable burden on coastal communities. Mining comes with serious and irreversible ecological damage and degradation. However, since the coming of the fishmeal factory, the community has been in conflict. As environmental consciousness increases, members of the communities are beginning to resist environmental damage through mining and fishmeal activities. Such resistance often results in violent conflicts between community members, mining companies, and fishmeal factories.

The natural resource sector can bring positive socio-economic change in communities where they exist as well as a conflict where undesirable environmental change and negative socio-economic trend manifests. Company-Community Conflict (CCC) can arise due to multiple factors among which can be lack of transparency, overexploitation of resources, mining activities crippling livelihood activities of natives, negative impacts on society, local economy, and the environment, the politics at play, incompatible interest, poor stakeholder involvement, marginalization among other factors (Franks, 2014) [5].

Sanyang has become a household name for natural resource conflicts in Kombo since the change of government in 2016. Over the years, the community has become a hub for sand and zircon mining and marine resource exploitation. These coastal communities are famous for tourism but have become the mining hub for the country crippling the tourism sector.

1.2. Site Description

This study is conducted in Sanyang Village in the Gambia. The Gambia is the smallest country in mainland Africa with a population of 2.4 million inhabitants. It is one of the poorest in the world. The community of Sanyang is located along the coastline in the West Coast Region. The predominant socio-economic activities of the people are subsistence farming and fishing. A good number of young people are self-employed in the coastal tourism sector. The village is famous for its coastal tourism.

2. Natural Resource Governance in the Gambia

Natural resource governance is one of the most critical sectors of government. It is mostly associated with conflict of interest and in some situations violent resource conflicts. According to Russell T. Osguthorpe (2003) [6], "*Natural resource governance refers to the norms, institutions, and processes that determine how power and responsibilities over natural resources are exercised, how*

decisions are taken, and how citizens—women, men, indigenous peoples, and local communities—participate in and benefit from the management of natural resources". Going by the above definition, there are key missing features in the Gambia.

The Gambia is not deficient in environmental laws and regulations. However, the implementation of the existing environmental regulations is the biggest challenge in the country. During the era of President Yahya Jammeh, the natural resource sector was monopolized and the Department of Geology was directly under his office. The following institutions and ministries are key stakeholders in environmental governance in the Gambia: (a) Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, and Natural Resources; (b) Ministry of Fisheries, Water Resources, and National Assembly Matters; (c) Ministry of Lands and Local Government; (d) National Environment Agency; (e) Department of Geology; (f) Municipal Area councils, etc.

The birth of a new dispensation after the December 1st presidential elections of 2016 in the Gambia gave renewed hopes to the people of the smallest country in mainland Africa. A military dictator from 1994 to 2016 ruled the country. During the period of the dictatorship, there were serious human rights violations including environmental exploitation and degradation by the leadership. It was risky to discuss the ills of the government publicly or stage protests against any government decision. Those who tried it before were tortured, jailed, and/or killed by state operatives.

The Department of Geology was directly under the former President who was directly involved in the exploitation of natural resources. His relatives and close allies took control of the mining sector with less compliance with the environmental laws and regulations of the country. Towards the end of his reign, fishmeal factories began to establish along the coast of Gunjur, Kartong, and Sanyang. The factories became operative soon after he lost elections to the current government.

The new dispensation is characterized as corrupt, and unjust in the plight of communities against factories and mining companies. Within the space of five years of the new government, there has been a series of tensions over resource ownership and use in the Kombo South District. However, insignificant efforts were made by the government to resolve these conflicts in these communities. Incidence of bribery took the space of the public discourse leading to the removal and prosecution of a Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Fisheries and Water Resources. A BBC report on the trade of Rosewood in Senegambia implicated the Minister of Environment, Climate Change, and Natural Resources. In the Faraba Bintang incident, a government commission of inquiry on the natural resource conflict concluded that it was mainly due to state negligence and deliberate refusal to follow due process leading to the death of three and loss of property. This led to the suspension of the Director of Geology, the Director of the National Environment Agency, and the resignation of the Inspector-General of Police.

The above-mentioned incident is an indication of unjust environmental governance in the country and the continuous desire to de-reserve protected parks for infrastructural development by the state. Court cases of communities against factories are prolonged beyond three years, and the government bargains out-of-court settlements with factories in which communities feel unrepresented. Such has led to increasing mistrust between the people and the government.

3. Triggers of Natural Resource Conflicts in the Gambia

Inadequate social and environmental protections, insecure land rights, and capacity constraints are key issues leading to conflicts in communities in The Gambia. Poor environmental governance and failure to engage communities as relevant stakeholders in natural resource management and appropriately address legal, social, environmental, and technical aspects of natural resource projects are the main causes of social tension, with issues around the control and use of resources sometimes exacerbating conflicts. Most environmental protest in The Gambia is related to sand mining, fishmeal factories, infrastructural development causing ecological damage in sensitive sites (protected areas), and poor waste management in urban areas. However, this paper will focus on sand mining companies, government, and fishmeal factories vs communities.

3.1. Fishmeal Factories

Three fishmeal factories are operating in The Gambia. They are Golden lead factory in Gunjur, Nessim fishmeal factory in Sanyang, and JXYG factory in Kartong. All three are located in the three neighbouring coastal villages in the Kombo South District. The factories over the years have led to the eruption of violent conflicts in these communities. However, some cherished the coming of the factories with expectations that the factories will create jobs, improve income earning potential, and increase socio-economic activities to reduce poverty in the communities. Therefore, it is important to examine the causes of conflicts related to the operations of the factories in the area.

3.2. Nessim Fishmeal Factory

Nessim fishmeal factory is located in Sanyang Village, Kombo South District in the West Coast Region. A community famous for its beautiful sandy beach and flourishing local tourism with a fish-landing site is highly affected by environmental pollution by the Nessim factory.

In early 2018, the factory got all its license and environmental approval from the relevant authorities to operate in Sanyang without exhaustive consultations with community stakeholders. Months into their operations, members of the community, civil society actors, and other stakeholders identified the following problems;

- Over-exploitation of fisheries resources leads to the dumping of fish along the coastline.

- Loss of jobs in the local tourism industry. Air pollution in the area made it difficult for tourists to visit the beach thereby crippling local tourism businesses in the area.
- Discomfort in the community due to air pollution-causing schools near the beach to shut down.
- Dumping of fish and wastewater in nearby ecologies and women's vegetable gardens causes crop damage.

The persistence of the above-mentioned challenges led to a series of engagements between community members, the government, and the factory. However, government interference in the process made matters worse as community members felt neglected in their quest for a solution. This led to a protest against the actions of the factory. However, there was no swift response from the government leading to a violent protest in 2020 after the murder of one Gibril Ceesay by an employee of the factory. Members of the community burnt down the community police station, part of the factory, and over 10 fishing boats, fishing nets, and boat machines.

All the consulted stakeholders characterize the violent protest that led to the arrest and detention of over 29 young people mainly from the tourism sector as a natural resource conflict. Protesters claim that the government is siding with the factory to destroy their lives and livelihoods through environmental pollution, and over-exploitation leading to the loss of jobs in the tourism sector, destruction of women's vegetable gardens, and disregard for national laws.

The protest messages bear statements such as "Say No to Fishmeal", "Government protects our livelihoods", "End Pollution", and "We don't need factories". The messages are directed at governments' inaction towards solving the challenges faced by the community. Artisanal fishermen described the coming of the factories as dangerous. Their catch dwindled leading to a hike in the price of fish in the local markets. Fish availability and affordability became an insupportable burden on locals whose only source of protein is fish. It was observed that the factory since its establishment does not have a functional wastewater treatment facility. Waste dumped in nearby vegetable gardens led to the loss of crops for women gardeners. An interviewee claimed that;

"*The factory is not only overexploiting our marine resources to make fish unaffordable for us but dumping fish on the river bank and wastewater in our gardens where we feed our children. The smell drives tourists away and the youths cannot do business. It is crippling our livelihoods. They are taking all our fish, we will not accept it*".

The conflict between members of the community and the factory is over resource exploitation and environmental pollution.

There were 170 persons interviewed during the research in Sanyang out of whom 60% were male and 40% female (**Table 1**). Overall, people of all age categories participated as respondents. About 68% of the respondents either obtained secondary or tertiary education while 19% had no formal education and

the rest stopped at primary school. 34% of the respondents are civil servants, 14% are activists, 9% are fishermen, 17% are unemployed, 2% are employees of the factory and 24% were self-employed.

About 35% of the respondents believed that the primary cause of conflict in Sanyang is the over-exploitation of marine resources (Table 2 and Figure 1). However, they also claimed that overexploitation led to other challenges in the community. 29% of the respondents argued that environmental pollution is the primary cause of conflict. The factory dumps untreated wastewater in vegetable gardens causing crop damage to women gardeners. The stench from the operations of the factory has compromised the air quality in the area leading to the closure of nearby schools, restaurants, and recreational facilities along the coast. Because of this bad stench mentioned above, over 25% of the people alluded to the loss of jobs in the coastal tourism sector as the cause of conflict while 6% and 4% of the respondents think that poor governance and other issues are the causes of conflict respectively.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Male	102	60.000
Female	68	40.000
Age		
15 - 25	55	32.353
26 - 35	52	30.588
36 - 45	41	24.118
45 and above	22	12.941
Education		
None formal	33	19.412
Primary	20	11.765
Secondary	67	39.412
Tertiary	50	29.412
Employment		
Civil servant	58	34.118
Activist	23	13.529
Fishermen	16	9.412
Unemployed	28	16.471
Fishmeal factory employee	4	2.353
Self-employed	41	24.118
Total	**170**	**100%**

Table 2. Causes of conflicts in Sanyang.

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Over-exploitation of marine resources	60	35
Environmental pollution	50	29
Governance and partisan politics	10	6
Loss of jobs	44	26
Others	6	4
Total	170	100%

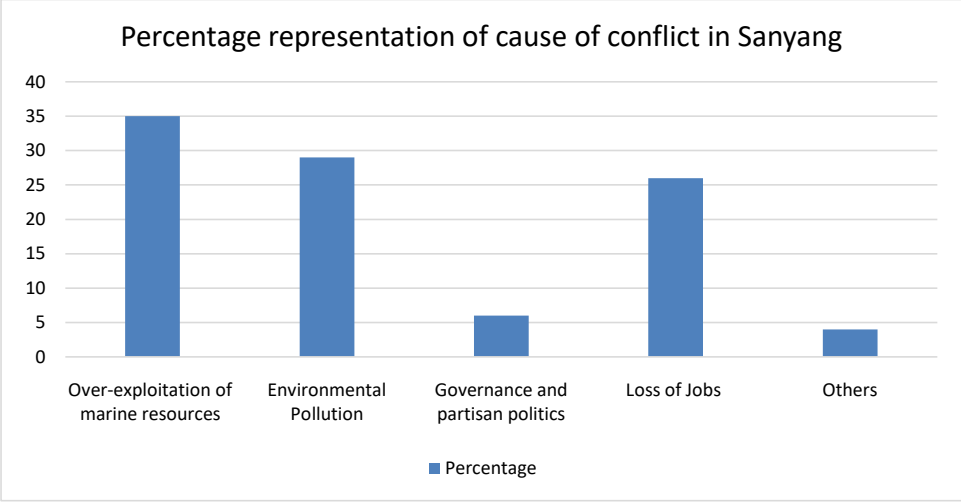

Figure 1. Conflict representation bar chart.

This indicates that the presence of the factory has caused loss of jobs, environmental pollution, loss of livelihoods, and over-exploitation of resources in the community. This is not to suggest that the factory does not create jobs. However, an insignificant number of people are on their payroll. It creates significant indirect employment through fish transportation from the boats into the factory. The labourers are paid per basket carried into the factory.

4. Conclusion

There are growing challenges of resource conflicts in the Gambia leading to violent clashes between members of the community and companies. This research concludes that unregulated fishing leads to over-exploitation of marine resources along the coastline where fishmeal factories are situated; environmental pollution and loss of jobs in the coastal tourism sector are the major drivers of conflict in Sanyang. Poor environmental governance and inadequate stakeholder engagement are the primary issues leading to the above-mentioned drivers of conflict in the study site. 35% of the respondents considered the over-exploitation of marine resources to be a substantive cause of the conflict while 29% and 26% argued that environmental pollution and loss of jobs are the main drivers re-

spectively. However, these three major causes are all interconnected and interdependent. The conflict is purely environment and resource-related.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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