
Impacts of oil and gas extraction and carbon projects on communities in the Saloum Delta, Senegal

The Saloum Delta in Senegal is one of the largest wetlands of economic, ecological and social importance in West Africa. Covering more than 180 thousand hectares, classified on the list of Wetlands of World Importance and on the list of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, the Saloum Delta is home to Senegal's second largest national park (Parc national du Delta du Saloum), which covers almost 100 thousand hectares in the central area of the delta. The delta is home to around one million inhabitants of mainly Serers and Mandingos. The inhabitants of the Saloum Delta are economically dependent on its natural resources through fishing and the gathering of seafood, which is done by more than 5 thousand women. It is also a wetland of ecological importance thanks to its vast mangrove forests and very important biodiversity, concentrating 9 per cent of the plant species of the national territory. The animal biodiversity is seen in many species of birds, fish and land animals. A site rich in history due to its shell clusters.

The Saloum Delta has suffered the full burden of the climate change impacts, which has seriously affected the lives of communities that depend entirely on their environment and thus, accentuated the poverty of vulnerable communities. We observe the advance of the sea, coastal erosion, loss of beaches, desertification, reduction of mangroves and other spawning grounds, loss of arable land and other pastures, water salinization, and reduction or insufficient availability of water for irrigation and drinking as well as for other productive activities.

On top of this is the industrial overfishing, the aggressive growth of the fish industry, the fish freezing plants, and the toxic waste that results from these industries. These compete with artisanal fishing, which creates local jobs, empowers the population, especially women who constitute a very vulnerable group, contributes directly to the country's GDP and allows the economic survival of many families while ensuring their food security. The increased degradation and overexploitation of resources mean that today the communities of the delta, made up mainly of fisherfolk, are forced to practice rural exodus or to migrate, often illegally, to European countries. The scarcity of fishery resources means that today thousands of young people are swallowed up by the Mediterranean Sea, having preferred to take the risk of illegal emigration rather than continue to suffer the atrocious impacts of climate change and overexploitation of resources on their daily lives.

Reforestation and 'blue carbon' project in Saloum

Many adaptation and mitigation strategies are being implemented around the world in the fight against climate change, and the Saloum Delta is no exception. We note that the initiatives of the Senegalese government in Saloum aim to strengthen the resilience of communities as well as NGOs, civil society organizations, and internal committees formed by the community. The latter are involved in the restoration of degraded ecosystems in Saloum, which can be divided in two parts: the preservation and the reparation of ecosystems.

To better carry out preservation activities, it is necessary to put in place concrete actions that can

enable mangroves to maintain their capacity for renewal while continuing to meet the needs of dependent communities. In the Saloum Delta, awareness-raising activities are carried out to make people aware of the challenges of climate change and finally to avoid certain activities that degrade the resources and weaken the ecosystems. These include the prohibition of certain fishing practices, deforestation, extraction of beach sand and shell for commercial purposes, as well as water pollution from household waste.

Women in Saloum are guardians of their resources as they are responsible to bring these in their households (water, wood for cooking, food, etc.) Their main activity is the collection of seafood and forest fruits, which they transform and resell throughout Senegal. Some income-generating activities have been put in place to overcome the prohibitions, such as oyster farming on garlands, fish farming, beekeeping, or even the setting up of cooking structures that save wood (such as improved stoves or solar ovens).

For the restoration activities however, many more actors –and interests- are in play. The most important aspect is the large-scale planting of mangroves in 25 per cent of the total area. Several players are involved in such activities, such as the NGO Wetlands International, the French Development Agency through the marine protected areas policy project, the IUCN, the reforestation and carbon credit broker WeForest, among others. Reforestation activities are carried out by the population, who are paid either by the day or by the hectare. The supply of propagule is ensured by the community, more particularly by women, which allows them to generate considerable income during reforestation campaigns.

The large-scale mangrove reforestation programs are now turning into carbon projects, which is like committing suicide for Senegal, and Africa in general. These carbon projects are nothing but generating 'rights to pollute' to industries, knowing that studies have shown that among the 10 countries most vulnerable to the climate crises in the world, 8 are African. It is clear that carbon projects are put in place by polluters to continue their devastating activities and to restore their image.

This is the first fight that these communities in the delta must fight. The simplest understanding of this carbon project is that the carbon dioxide absorbed by the trees of the mangrove will be able to 'compensate' for the pollution of the polluting companies. Worryingly, the involved companies and NGOs have never told the local people who is managing or benefiting from the carbon program. This is the case of the WeForest organization, which has not informed that the one financing their large-scale plantation project in Saloum and Casamance is in fact the oil giant Shell.

The time has come for the African continent, especially for the vulnerable countries, to oppose the many carbon projects that are constantly exploding and which only benefit polluters (sometimes called REDD+, Nature-based solutions, offset programs, 'blue carbon', among others).

If Africa wants to win this climate fight, it must start with the prohibition of carbon projects in the continent and focus on climate debt, climate justice, the fluidity of the Green Climate Fund, which is a fictitious amount for the African continent. Added to this is the urgency of leaving fossil fuels underground since these are the source of these troubles.

Although the restoration of mangrove forests is a priority in Saloum in order to increase the resilience of communities in a context of severe climate change impacts, unfortunately, these forests now also have to deal with the exploitation of oil and gas on Senegalese waters.

Negative impacts of oil exploitation on communities in the Saloum Delta today

Senegal is on its way to becoming a major oil and gas producer in Africa, with three major oil and gas projects underway: (1) the gas project of British fossil-fuel-giant BP Grand Tortue Ahmeyim (GTA), (2) also operated by BP company, the Yakaar-Teranga gas project, intended for consumption, and (3) oil project at Sangomar, operated by the Australian company Woodside. The extraction of gas is planned for 2023, prompting BP to say that the project is "creating a new energy hub in Africa". Alongside these fossil fuel giants is Shell, which has secured a new block between Mauritania and Senegal (GTA).

The Sangomar oil well is located 70 km off the coast of Saloum Delta, and is expected to be exploited over a period of 30 years, near the Sangomar and Joal-Fadiouth Marine Protected Areas, an area rich in marine and ornithological biodiversity. Oil exploitation is a high dangerous activity and involves many different stages that will have an impact on biodiversity and the basic socio-economic activities of vulnerable communities. From the drilling, installation and operation phases to the dismantling of the rig, the consequences will include changes in the quality of seawater, disruption of reproductive cycles, immense losses of biodiversity, reduction of fishing areas, and an increase in poverty.

The Saloum Delta is a fishing area for communities and fishing is their primary source of income. Fish are already scarce nowadays due to the effects of climate change and the foreign ships that continue to plunder our resources. Fisher families are forced to go as far as the border waters, where they are imprisoned or even killed.

Therefore, the current oil exploitation will further reduce the fishing areas and its encroaching of the environment will further accelerate the lack of fish for these vulnerable communities. The major concern of these communities is how they will be able to coexist with the exploitation of oil for the years to come, since the process of marine biodiversity loss is only accelerating over time.

It was with these concerns that the late Alimatou SARR left us. A guardian of the Saloum Delta's natural resources, who very early on alerted the community about the risks to come with the oil exploitation. An ongoing cry from the heart of the Saloum Islands' women is asking for the safety of their environments. According to them, since the drilling of the twenty-three oil wells off Sangomar, a rapid rise in sea level has been observed in the area, accentuating coastal erosion and threatening to disappear their basic socio-economic activities, which include oyster farming, mangrove beekeeping, seafood harvesting, fishing, salt production, fishery products processing, and ecological tourism.

The government of Senegal has always spoken positively about the exploitation of oil and gas by evoking the business profits and the positive impacts on the life of communities. The negative impacts on biodiversity and communities, according to the government's impact study and the speeches they held, are not significant. Sometimes it is mentioned the distance between the place of exploitation and the fishing areas, which are quite distant. But if distance would have a positive impact on environmental pollution, Africa would be lucky today, because we contribute less to pollution and suffer more from the negative impacts. There are no ecological boundaries.

It should be remembered that these fishing-dependent communities are vulnerable on two levels:

In terms of the climate, there is increasing scarcity of natural resources, poor soil, land salinization, famine, reduced rainfall, reduced catches, coastal erosion, loss of biodiversity, displacements, and illegal emigration. This accentuates poverty and desperation within vulnerable communities whose basic socio-economic activities come from the mangroves.

In terms of the government and companies' commitments, the new oil and gas legislation only takes

a slight consideration of environmental protection, which is the legal limit. The commitment of companies is, as usual, on CSR (corporate social responsibility), with no binding text that directly links the company to the community in the event of loss or damage. Provisions at the national level for local communities are local content (LC). Local content means that operating companies can integrate local companies and labor into their production process at the country of execution.

With the future oil and gas exploitation, we can expect that the mangroves of Saloum will be affected as well as the neighboring mangroves of Gambia and Casamance. Also, that the basic socio-economic activities of the communities will be affected by the decline of the mangroves, water pollution, considerable loss of biodiversity, drop in catches, the disappearance of certain habitats as well as of cultural and historical heritages of the Saloum Delta.

Vulnerable communities suffer the burden of the adverse effects of climate change, even though they are not being the cause. Added to this is the rush to exploit oil and gas without considering the social and ecological impacts on communities and the mangroves. Multinational oil and gas companies, which are causing climate change, will further exacerbate the hardships communities in the Saloum Delta face. Additionally, companies like Shell are selling a 'green' image by funding large-scale plantations of mangrove trees under a blue carbon program that gives them the right to continue their extractive activities.

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