



FISHER ORGANIZING IN GHANA: A COUNTRY CASE STUDY

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**CONNOR MOYNIHAN
JUDY GEARHART
ERIC MAWUKO ATSIATORME**



Purpose

This report is one in a series of six country case studies which take stock of fisher organizing in six different countries in the global south. The other case studies are of Ecuador, Indonesia, Mexico, Taiwan, and Thailand. These case studies are produced by the Accountability Research Center in partnership with the Fisheries Governance Project's Enforcement and Victim Protection Working Group.

About the Accountability Research Center

The Accountability Research Center (ARC) is based in the School of International Service at American University. ARC bridges research and frontline perspectives to learn from ideas, institutions, and actors advancing strategies to improve transparency, participation, and accountability. For more, see www.accountabilityresearch.org.

About the Fisheries Governance Project

FGP is a funder-practitioner collaboration working together to build a shared understanding of issues and solutions at the intersection of improved fisheries governance and advancements in labor rights. They center their approach on international treaties, improved market action, and enforcement and victim protection.

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Cover photo

Elmina Harbor by Judy Gearhart

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Acronyms

ARC	Accountability Research Center
CaFGOAG	Canoe and Fishing Gear Owners Association of Ghana
CAOPA	African Confederation of Professional Organizations of Artisanal Fisheries
C 188	ILO Work in Fishing Convention (No. 188)
EJF	Environmental Justice Foundation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FiTI	Fisheries Transparency Initiative
GAWU	General Agricultural Workers' Union
GFRA	Ghana Fisheries Recovery Activity
GHS	Ghanaian cedis
GIFA	Ghana Industrial Fisher Association
GITA	Ghana Industrial Trawler Association
GNCFC	Ghana National Canoe Fisher Council
ICCAT	International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas
IEZ	Inshore exclusive zone
ILO	International Labor Organization
ITF	International Transport Worker Federation
MoFAD	Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture Development
MT	Metric tons
MSY	Maximum sustainable yield
NAFPTA	National Association of Fish Processors and Traders Association
NUSPAW	National Union of Seafarers, Ports, and Allied Workers
NUTEG	National Union of Teamsters and General Workers
VMS	Vessel Monitoring System

1. Executive Summary

Ghana's fishers have faced declining fish stocks for over two decades and international and national pressure has pushed the government to issue stronger regulations. Some steps include the consideration of International Labor Organization's (ILO's) Convention 188 (C 188) and participation in the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI). New policies attempt to tackle overfishing including a three-year moratorium on all new canoe entrants in the marine sector, a closed season, and gear restrictions. These new policies affect industrial and artisanal fishers, potentially adding to existing tensions between the two sectors. Artisanal fishers struggle with these regulations and report a lack of support given the pace of change set by the new policies. The Ghanaian government and environmental NGOs have conducted extensive community outreach, but the scale of the canoe fishing community and entrenched cultural practices will require more outreach and engagement. Ongoing and future efforts will require careful management and the support of worker organizations as they make this transition.

Several groups are organizing fishers, both educating them on their rights and advocating for them as these new policies enter into force. Most of the groups we spoke with represented the artisanal sector, where its leaders are pushing to formalize their organizational structures to advocate for their interests and build capacity to engage meaningfully once they have a seat at the table. In the industrial sector, we interviewed both organized workers and vessel owners. In that sector, worker organizers are challenging ownership structures and fighting for the right to organize.

The new policies, especially the speed with which they are being implemented, are changing fishers' traditional relationship with their livelihoods. These policies are likely to cause displacement, and care must be taken to ensure that fishers can access adaptation strategies ensuring a just transition. In the industrial sector, the ILO is facilitating dialogue around the ILO Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188), which has brought improved wages and working conditions. Union organizers report, however, that anti-union discrimination from vessel captains continues and investors hold greater influence over the captains than the Ghanaian vessel owners. In the entire sector, greater transparency and collaboration on governance are required to keep fishers in the loop and engaged in the development and implementation of solutions for the future of Ghana's fisheries.

2. Ghana Context

Ghana's fishers are amid a crisis. Fish stocks, especially the species targeted by the artisanal sector, have all but collapsed, dropping 80% over the past 20 years. Ghanaians are among the highest seafood consumers in Africa at 26 kg per capita per year, down from 34.2 kg per capita in 1997 (FAO 2016). The clear necessity for seafood has led Ghana to become a net importer, relying on international markets for 40% of its total consumption (Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture Development and Fisheries Commission 2015). The factors surrounding the decline of fish stocks are complex and have led to strong policy responses from governments and international supporters and trade partners, including a yellow card warning from the EU for a lack of IUU prevention. In addition, fisher organizers in Ghana are navigating the realities of a globalized world as it maps onto this highly traditional sector, which is leading to creative approaches to organizing in the sector. This report analyzes how fishers are organizing and what solutions they propose to improve the sustainability of Ghana's fisheries and secure their rights and welfare and those of their communities.

Box 1: Research Scope

This report incorporates desk research and field work. We conducted 17 interviews with representatives that cut across the actors in the sector. We also observed an organizing meeting led by NUTEG, one of the groups profiled here.

2.1 Sector breakdown

Fishers in Ghana are typically divided into the artisanal, semi-industrial, and industrial sectors. As of 2020, there are 14,275 canoes in the country, which typically employ about ten fishers each (MOFAD 2022).ⁱ They target small-pelagic fish like sardinellas, anchovies, and mackerel. The semi-industrial sector consists of about 224 boats that remain below 24 meters but are larger, have inboard motors, and increased capacity compared to canoes (FCWC 2020). Small semi-industrial boats, those below 10m in length, are allowed to fish in the Inshore Exclusive Zone (IEZ) while large semi-industrial boats are excluded from that zone (Government of Ghana 2002). They typically target demersal fish such as snapper and grouper. Finally, the industrial sector includes industrial trawlers and tuna vessels. In early 2024 there were significant tensions between the canoe fishers and the 76 trawlers flying a Ghanaian flag. Though new gear requirements had reduced the number of active vessels to 54, while nine were at port for maintenance and fourteen had disappeared from Ghanaian waters. In our conversations with civil society organizations and Ghanaians, tuna vessels were not often mentioned as they are heavily regulated by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). Ghana's Fishery Improvement

Project for skipjack, yellowfin, and bigeye tuna are rated A at Stage 4, and are therefore considered by environmental observers to be on the right track (Fishery Progress 2023).

Industrial trawlers are licensed to target demersal species and restricted from fishing inside the IEZ. They employ around 20-25 people each. While tuna vessels can be joint ventures with foreign owners, the Fisheries Act of 2002 prohibits foreign ownership of other types of fishing vessels (Sections 47(b) and 61 of Act 625). Trawlers have been highly scrutinized by industry watchdogs like the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), which reported that over 90% of Ghanaian trawlers are likely fronts with Chinese ownership (EJF 2018). This is compounded by trawlers' trade in *saiko*, or the sale of illegally caught small pelagic fish to canoe fishers at sea.

Table 1: Ghana's Seafood Sector

Total Seafood Production 2021 (Live weight MT) ^a	652,309
Total Fleet ^b	14,575
Employment (Capture and Aquaculture) ^c	273,000
Size EEZ (km ²) ^c	225,000
Percent Animal Protein ^d	45
Percent GDP ^c	4.5

Sources: a. FAO (2025), b. MOFAD (2022), c. FAO (2016), d. Ritchie and Roser (2024)

In addition to the estimated 225,000 fishers involved in live capture, there are the same or twice as many women and youth involved in fish processing (FAO 2016). In Ghana, women play a significant role in both financing and marketing the fish.ⁱⁱ In addition to analyzing fisher organizing in marine capture, this report also considers the important role women play in Ghana's fishing sector.

2.2 Overfishing

Ghana's catch reached historic lows in 2019 across the four major target species of the artisanal sector (Lazar et al. 2020). The factors contributing to this decline are the increased capacity of the fisheries sector, an increased number of fishers, and competition with other sectors. The capacity of fishers comes largely in the form of improved nets and outboard motors. Observers consider Ghana's artisanal fisheries open access, meaning there is no governing body preventing entry into the market. While technically the Fisheries Act 625 did restrict access to entry into the artisanal sector, it has been functionally open access. This legal permissiveness, combined with fuel subsidies for artisanal fishers,ⁱⁱⁱ has lowered the barrier to entry, increasing the number of canoes on the water to over 14,000. Competition with other sectors is perhaps the most contentious piece of this puzzle. However, in 2023 efforts on the part of the government to restrict access culminated in

the imposition of a three-year temporary ban (Moratorium) on new canoe entrants.

The effect of these intense market-driven pressures and anthropogenic climate change is that fish are less abundant, in the six nautical miles restricted for canoe fishing. This has led artisanal fishers to intensify their efforts through the illegal use of chemicals, light, and explosives. In addition, canoe fishers have had to travel further from shore and on longer



Elmina Harbor. Credit: Judy Gearhart

trips, heightening the risk of conflict with industrial trawlers.^{iv} During President Akufo-Addo's administration, the government introduced closed fishing season, but many canoe fishers took that as a reason to forego their tradition of not fishing on Tuesdays. President Mahama

government, which came into power in 2025, maintained the closed season for semi-industrial and industrial trawlers but exempted small-scale fishers.

2.3 IUU and *saiko*

Ghana has been plagued by Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported (IUU) fishing. Given the alarming collapse of fish stocks, the international community recommends keeping capacity at or below the levels of the previous five years (MoFAD 2021). In November 2013, the EU issued a Yellow Card (a formal warning that could lead to a seafood export ban to the EU, the most valuable fish market) for Ghana's insufficient legal framework to combat IUU fishing. The government swiftly created its first National Plan of Action to Combat IUU Fishing, which led to the EU rescinding the sanction in October 2015. However, in June 2021 the EU re-carded Ghana due to investigations revealing poor implementation and the prevalence of *saiko* (European Commission 2021; EJF Staff 2021). As of June 2025, Ghana is

still working to avoid the yellow card becoming a red card, which would ban the country's seafood exports going to the EU.

Saiko is a practice by which industrial trawlers package their bycatch while at sea and canoe fishers travel out to meet them and buy the fish, which is a form of illegal transshipment. Then the canoe fishers return to land their "catch." Canoe fishers have long complained that trawlers were fishing inside the six nautical miles reserved for artisanal fishers and/or using gear that further increased the amount of small pelagic fish they caught. Struggling fishers had to risk expeditions with little to no catch or trading with the trawlers, which often discarded bycatch fish rather than return to port with more than their limit of small pelagics. One fisher who admitted to buying and selling *saiko* noted that allowing the trawlers to dump the dead bycatch back in the water was worse. He argued it not only wasted a potential food source but also harmed the fishery.

In the past, *saiko* was at a very small scale with industrial boats only passing on small amounts of bycatch in return for necessities such as water and fruits. However, 2017 estimates showed that the trawlers caught around 100,000 metric tons (Mt) of *saiko*, which brought total industrial capture production on par with total canoe production (EJF and Hen Mpoano 2019). Based on analysis from Ghana's Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture Development (MoFAD), the 100,000 Mt of *saiko* constituted 32% of Ghana's total official capture production (about 300,000 Mt) for that year (MoFAD 2024).

The government and international community have been intent on stopping *saiko*, particularly after its broad publicization.^v Trawlers were required to use new nets that would exclude smaller fish, but trawler owners interviewed complained the nets were not effective. According to government and NGO experts interviewed, the practice of *saiko* has largely ended. However, on further probing, it appears most of this transshipment has stopped, but the available evidence suggests that trawlers continue to land small pelagic in the industrial ports. Therefore, while the illegal transshipment has ended, the overharvesting of small pelagic fish may not have. One environmental expert argued that landings make it possible to get a better count of trawlers' catch, but it was unclear how reliable that data is. Meanwhile, canoe fishers who used to rely on *saiko* for income see the policy as another affront to canoe fishers, who already believe the trawlers steal their fish. It should be noted that the EU threat of trade restrictions inspired

swift, but insufficient action that did not address the root causes of the problem.

2.3.1 Beneficial ownership

Another contributing factor to IUU is the opaque ownership structure surrounding the trawl sector. The reported 90% of trawl vessels subject to Chinese management (EJF 2022) is due to a legal loophole called a hire-purchase agreement. In essence, a Ghanaian national sets up a business that will do trawling and then signs a rent-to-own agreement that registers them as the official vessel owner, even though the vessel is still owned by a foreign (typically Chinese or Korean) company. The management, including high ranking positions on the vessel itself such as the captain, are vetted and de facto managed by the Chinese investor.

Trade union organizers report that the situation means they can't hold the decision makers accountable when they try to organize or report abuses. In addition to anti-union discrimination, Ghana's trawl fishers have reported various illicit activities such as fish dumping, targeting of small pelagic fish, and entering the IEZ as well as abusive conditions such as insufficient food, physical violence, and overwork (EJF 2022). Independent observers are also at risk with two disappearances, one in 2019 and another in 2023 (Pipernos 2024). Although ILO-facilitated dialogue around Convention 188 has brought improvements such as improved wages and working conditions, union organizers note that the tri-partite dialogue needs to also engage investors. Given beneficial ownership structures in the sector, they see investors as key decision makers in the industrial sector.

2.4 Oil and gas

The discovery of oil in 2007 led to massive economic development off the coast of Ghana. However, it also brought difficulties for fishers. Some fishers interviewed reported that the terrestrial development to support oil and gas workers (i.e. hotels, infrastructure) pushed them out of lands that they may have used for farming in the low season. However, more drastically, fishers sometimes ran into direct conflict with oil rigs and transportation ships. Some of these conflicts led to direct harm to fishers (Soper 2015).

Moreover, fishers are not allowed to fish near the oil rigs, which means that they lose out on their traditional fishing waters. Oil rigs use bright lights, which in turn attract fish (Owusu et al. 2023). Yet the surrounding waters prohibit fishing, especially because some fear the canoe fishers might use

TNT, which could be disastrous near an oil rig. Canoe fishers resent the idea that they are not allowed to engage in light fishing and yet compete with this unintentional fish aggregating behavior all while they are dispossessed of their territory.

2.5 Informality and traditional systems

Ghana's fisheries are connected to governance structures that predate colonization and persist to this day. Typically, local communities have a chief fisherman and seven advisors to the chief fisherman to govern fishing activity and settle disputes. A market queen, or *konkohemaa*, and seven of her advisors govern fishmongers and their processing activity. These leaders come from the community and have typically lived fishing or fish processing for all their lives. However, as these structures are external to the formal government and despite the government's weak attempts to implement Act 625, the fishery sector has been highly informal and unregulated, resulting in the label of open access. Some of the canoe fisher organizers interviewed noted that the informality of their sector, which exempts them from taxes, leads to a lack of respect and consideration from the government. They argued that the government favors the industrial sector, because it generates tax revenue, a dynamic also documented by other researchers (Nolan 2019).

These traditional systems operated largely on trust, not on contracts. This mode affects the functioning of the sector today. Canoe owners hire an average of ten workers, who are promised payment in fish based on the catch and a cash payment at the end of the year if profits are made. The predominant division of revenue sees a third go to the trip expenses, a third for the maintenance of the outboard motor, canoe, and gear, and the final third is divided between owner and crew.^{vi} Some fishers complain that the canoe owner takes two-thirds and also his share of the last third, but canoe owners emphasize that the first two-thirds are needed to run the boat and more importantly the fishers expect the owners will take care of certain needs during the off season, such as contributing to the funeral expenses for crew members' family members. In turn, workers are trusted to go to sea and report their catch honestly. When there are disputes, the chief fisherman mediates. These relationships, like so much in the canoe fishing sector, are centuries old, but not formalized in a contract. Organizers are seeking to work with the old social structures rather than dismantle them. For example, one union described below (NUTEG) is organizing both canoe owners and canoe fishers who are technically their employees. This is a somewhat

uncommon strategy for union organizing, which appears to incorporate, rather than discard, traditional social structures.

In addition to the lack of legitimacy in terms of government regulations, some interviewees from NGOs and fishing communities are concerned that the chief fisherman title is becoming politicized. While in some communities the role is hereditary, others complain that the inheritance continues in spite of the fact that many of the new chiefs have no fishing experience. As a result of these changing times, new organizations are emerging.

2.6 Subsidies

Fishing has become an expensive activity for many canoe fishers. Some of the rising costs are due to declining fish stocks, forcing fishers to make trips further out to sea for longer periods. Nolan in his ethnographic study of one community estimated that one fishing expedition costs 500 GHS – 100 times the cost of some daily food budgets (Nolan 2019). Fishers and fisher organizers interviewed talked about the cost of fuel and outboard motors as the primary driver of cost increases. For example, the price of the subsidized fuel jumped 150 percent in 2023 from 10 GHS to 25 GHS per gallon (about \$1.00 to \$2.50) (Abu-Baidoo Addo 2023).

Pre-mix fuel has long been subsidized for artisanal fishers, but the subject today is politically charged since the government instituted a quota system to regulate distribution. Some fishers allege that governing party affiliates have taken control of the Premix Committees at the various landing beaches, which distribute the fuel, allowing them to exclude non-party members.^{vii} Even leaving the political party favoritism aside, it seems that the subsidies are being co-opted by middlemen who raise the price further (Nolan 2019).

2.7 Industry leaders

The Ghana Industrial Trawler Association (GITA) and the Ghana Industrial Fishers Association (GIFA) represent owners in the industrial trawl and the semi-industrial sectors respectively. GITA has several important roles to play in the sector. For example, they are promoting a more active role for Ghanaians in the management and ownership of the businesses through better financial arrangements. Trawl owners typically need to take on massive debt to pay for the upfront costs of starting their businesses. By the time they pay off these debts, however, they usually need to purchase new equipment or make other improvements that send them back into debt to the original (mostly Chinese) owners. GITA is advocating for better financing

models to improve Ghanaian control over their investments. They are also advocating for the return of training programs that would see more Ghanaians as captains of trawl vessels. They would also like to have greater capacity to assess Ghana's fisheries and to participate in developing better gear. They noted that they were required to buy different nets to reduce the volume of bycatch, but that the nets were not working. For these reasons, they have asked the government to help them finance a Ghanaian research vessel, presumably so they can have more input.

GITA is also important as the nexus through which government policy travels to the trawl sector. They supported the implementation of the new gear restrictions by running the pilot on four or five vessels. Yet, they feel the government should be doing more to support the restrictions that the government itself is imposing.

3. Policy Responses

The government has made several strong efforts to combat the problems in the sector. These policy responses have largely had an environmental focus. The government has sought to implement reforms in the sector through a co-management process which aims to engage fishers in policy planning – a challenging and labor-intensive process given the size of the industry. The Ghana Fisheries Recovery Activity (GFRA) funded by USAID has led the reform process and the consultations in fishing communities. Broadly, the policies aim to limit the amount of fishing and to require more sustainable fishing methods (Sarpong 2022).

3.1 Co-management policy

Ghana passed a co-management policy in 2020 which was slated to begin in 2021. The policy is designed to provide the framework for consultative stakeholder engagement and decision making with respect to defining strategic measures for rejuvenating the fisheries sector with active participation and defined roles for all stakeholders. The policy also aims to promote voluntary compliance with management regulations, standards and interventions by fishers. The policy is subject to a two-year review following implementation. The structure seems to include many of the groups that ought to be represented. While some of the groups interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the process. Although the GFRA led extensive community consultations, they could only reach a fraction of the communities, and it remains unclear how effective this mechanism is for incorporating input from

fisher organizers on an ongoing basis. In addition, funding after the first two years for the policy is still uncertain.^{viii}

3.2 Moratorium on new canoe licenses

Ghana's fleet of canoes includes 14,275 boats according to the government's 2022-2026 National Fisheries Management Plan (MOFAD 2022).

Interviewees speculated, however, that many of the canoes no longer present in Ghana are fishing in neighboring waters. A study estimated that Ghanaian fisheries can support only 9,000 canoes with its maximum sustainable yield (MSY) (MOFAD 2022). In response, the government has decided to cease issuing registration numbers for new canoes for a period of three years (Anku and Amankwah 2023). This policy is aimed at addressing the problem of overfishing by limiting open access.

Fishers interviewed had mixed views on the moratorium. The President of the Ghana National Canoe Fisherman Council (GNCFC) acknowledged the need to take drastic action in light of the depleted fishery and expressed acceptance of the moratorium and the closed season. Other canoe owners raised concerns, however, that at some point the government will expand its efforts to draw down the total number of artisanal canoes. Indeed, it is the government's intention to eventually reduce to 10,000 canoes, perhaps viewing this as a more realistic goal than the scientists recommended 9,000. Since many crew members often dream of owning their own boats as a form of social mobility and retirement planning, the moratorium on new canoes inspires high levels of trepidation among fishers. It's also important to note that reducing the number of canoes on the water by 2,000 means displacing the livelihoods of 20,000 fishers and about 20,000 other community members directly engaged in fish processing or selling.

3.3 Seasonal closure

In 2019, the Fisheries Commission began attempts to institute seasonal closures for both the artisanal and industrial sectors. The first year they decided against implementing it. The next year, they closed the fisheries for the month of June. In 2024, artisanal fisheries were closed for the month of July and industrial fisheries are closed in July and August. The rationale underpinning the closure was to protect the spawning period of fish which lasts from July through September. Following President Mahama returning to power in 2025, the government lifted the 2025 closed season for artisanal fishers but maintained it for the industrial sector.

Artisanal fishers understand the need to protect the resource that provides their livelihoods. However, several fishers raised concerns related to the seasonal fishing closure. First, they believe that the traditional practice of not fishing on Tuesdays constitutes more time for fisheries to recharge than the single month (52 days of the year vs 31). Second, the most productive season of fishing is from July to September, so fishers fear a steep loss of annual income. Some feedback suggests that a large number of fishers are open to a closed season if the government can provide some form of alternative livelihood (Apetorgbor 2018). Third, they note that fish being migratory raises the need for international cooperation—it may not matter if neighboring countries do not also close their fisheries. These responses have been reflected in another study as well (see Owusu and Andriesse 2020).

3.4 Gear restrictions

The primary regulation placed on the industrial trawling sector has been to require more stringent limits on the gear they use, especially their nets. The main thrust of these parameters is to prevent industrial trawlers from targeting juveniles and other small pelagic fish. Of the 74 trawlers registered prior to these regulations, only 54 are active while nine are at port for maintenance. Initial reports from trawler landings showed a reduction in reported small pelagic bycatch, but not a reduction in juvenile fish caught. Since then, reviews on the implementation of the gear directive have suggested that the new gear has led to an increase in both small pelagic and juvenile demersal fish. Therefore, it is likely that the gear restrictions have done more harm than good. GITA, the Ghana Industrial Trawler Association noted that they are asking the government to give them a research vessel so they can test and inform the gear regulations directly.

Trawl business owners are frustrated with the rollout of the gear restrictions. Primarily, they feel a lack of government support as they bore most of the costs of the pilot and the transition to new nets. Additionally, of the 30 vessels that have not passed the new gear inspections, 14 have gone “missing” from the harbors of Ghana. Official reports say that the vessel owners have gone away for repairs, but some believe that they could simply be fishing elsewhere. Research from the Center for Advanced Defense Studies that reviewed vessel tracking data strongly suggests the possibility of vessels carrying more than one satellite signal and are quite likely flying more than one flag, thus making it difficult to be certain the official reports are correct. In fact, one of the canoe fishers’ biggest complaints is that the trawlers are fishing in waters designated for them, and the satellite data analyzed by C4ADS showed several vessels turning off their tracking while

they were very close to the 6 nautical-mile perimeter where they are not meant to fish.^{ix}

4. Organizations

The research team interviewed several membership-based organizations related to the fishing sector. Each was unique in its history and goals. The organizations featured here help to show the different views of the artisanal and industrial sector from an organizing perspective. The descriptions include a description of fisher union organizations, employer associations, and the notable hybrid approach of the canoe fisher associations, which are organizing fishers and canoe owners together.

4.1 Ghana National Canoe Fisherman Council (GNCFC)

The GNCFC, founded in 1993, represents the entire artisanal sector from canoe owner to crew. The body is made up of the chief fishermen from Ghana's 200+ fishing communities. It is the oldest and largest of the organizations we interviewed. Due to this status, they are deeply entrenched as the primary stakeholder that represents the artisanal sector. Nana Jojo Solomon, the GNCFC President, voiced his support for the Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture Developments' difficult policy decision when she announced the moratorium on new canoe registration and the one month fishing close season for the artisanal sector starting from July 1st to August 1st, 2023. He recognized the urgent need to reduce fishing to sustain the fishery. When asked about the risk of displaced livelihoods, he noted that "In a state of emergency, some people will be hurt."

GNCFC has two initiatives of note for this report. The first is its ongoing effort to register its members in order to formalize membership. Owners will pay an annual registration fee per canoe (GHS50 or \$5), and a monthly fee for each crew member (GHS 5 or \$1). The fees will go towards the costs of the organization, especially those associated with participation in stakeholder meetings. Thus far, GNCFC has registered about 20,000 fishers with the support of EJP, which is printing identity cards. With an estimated 12,000 canoes on the water, however, the potential membership is 120,000 if they all register with the GNCFC.

The second initiative that GNCFC supports is the Fisher-2-Fisher program, which is training up to 2,000 fishers all along the coast who can train their peers. This program is also supported by the government and international actors like USAID. In this program, fishers are trained in the various best

practices for sustainable fishing determined by the government and then they disseminate this knowledge to other fishers. The logic is that fishers are more likely to listen to trusted peers as opposed to bureaucrats from Accra. This can be seen as a transparency measure as well, intended to facilitate consultations and training on fishery improvement measures. Fishers interviewed in Elmina, however, expressed concerns that the consultations were not done effectively. They reported being given difficult choices to make and little time to weigh their options.

4.3 Canoe and Fishing Gear Owners Association of Ghana (CaFGOAG)

The theory of CaFGOAG is that the artisanal sector needs more representatives at the table than the chief fishermen. This is especially apparent to them as the Chief Fisherman is no longer required to have a history as a fisherman. They believe there needs to be drastic change to resuscitate Ghana's fisheries and this will require greater direct engagement by the canoe owners and the fishing gear owners.^x This organization was founded in 2021 after breaking off from GNCFC, which they view as too broad a tent. Nana Kweigyah, head of CaFGOAG, emphasized the need for separate, empowered representative bodies for crew and chief fishermen respectively.

CaFGOAG has brought a strong critique of the way that the Ghanaian government does stakeholder engagement. They are included in the co-management plan, with two members chairing two of the regional committees on small pelagic fish. As much as they are engaged and have had a seat at the table, however, CaFGOAG is pushing hard for new and better processes. They have been quite outspoken in meetings and insistent on needing more lead time to review and consult members on government policy proposals and reports. In the words of Nana Kweigyah:

Why should we come – if we don't have access to the [relevant] report...In our case they will not give you a report, they will do a presentation of the summary with their projector, and how do we participate in that?"

CaFGOAG's membership in 2022 reached over 2,200, representing about 15-18% of the canoe owners in Ghana.^{xi} They are collecting dues with higher rates for higher ranking members of the association. They are also looking at organizing the captains (bozun) of the canoes as they are the primary

recruiters of the crew. CaFGOAG has also said that the division of profits needs to be fairer and more clearly explained to crew members.

4.4 National Union of Teamsters and General Workers (NUTEG)

NUTEG is working with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) to organize crew members on canoes. They are advocating strongly for the passage and implementation of ILO Convention 188 (C 188) and focused on improving the situation for crew such that turnover on canoes is lessened. They also believe that C 188 will help to address social security and health and safety concerns. They have over 3,000 members though they are not yet collecting dues. Of note, NUTEG is organizing members of the entire artisanal sector, from crew members to canoe owners, and fish processors. This is different from the Global North conception of a labor union, which would typically not see owners and workers in the same organization. However, the structure may be reflective of the closer community ties that still exist within the artisanal sector.

The union has many aspirations, including regional leadership. For example, they say that the workers in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal are more advanced in their organizing. On the other hand, many workers in the fleets of those countries are Ghanaian migrants. NUTEG is also working hard toward the formalization of the sector, pushing for the artisanal sector to be well organized and under a single umbrella. This will make adaptation to new measures and regulations easier, sparing more workers hardship in the process.

4.5 National Union of Seafarers, Ports and Allied Workers (NUSPAW)

NUSPAW was founded in 2016 and started working with fishers in 2017 to organize on the trawlers. The problems fishers face include: an informal recruitment process that leaves them with no employment contract; no security of retaining the job after a trip; little social security; no respect for their rights to form or join trade unions. In addition, living and working conditions on vessels were abysmal, due to extremely unsanitary facilities, no PPE or safety measures in place.

NUSPAW joined the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) and began engaging the government to push for changes. But it was only in 2022 when the ILO initiated its 8.7 Accelerator Labor on Forced Labor that

things started to change. Prominent among the changes that happened was the ILO signing an agreement with the Ghana Maritime Authority on January 24, 2024, to promote ILO C 188. NUSPAW saw an opportunity. They are meeting with the vessel owners, and they have developed a contract for trawler crews. They have the Work in Fishing Committee (coordinated by the ILO). As covered in the contract, recruitment is done through licensed agents, living conditions have improved, food and drink are better, PPE is supplied, and the maximum time at sea is 30 days instead of 45 to 60 as it was previously. Most importantly, wages were increased by 400% (Di Rosa, Potter, and Nasri 2023).

To ensure compliance, NUSPAW proposed a tripartite inspection process. At first it was rejected, but the process bore fruit in 2023. The parties involved in inspections included the Ghana Maritime Authority, the Labor Department, the Fisheries Commission, GITA, the Ghana Tuna Association, and NUSPAW. At the time of the interviews, it was still unclear how regularly the joint inspection team would conduct inspections.

Despite this progress, NUSPAW faces significant challenges in organizing workers due to strong anti-union discrimination and contracting practices. Captains find crew members through another actor formerly called a crew manager, called an operations manager under the new licensing requirements. This method has been openly discriminatory against trade union members and organizers. Two participants in the NUSPAW interview shared how they were fired because they organized with the union. This discriminatory and retaliatory behavior makes it impossible for NUSPAW to collect dues. This is because union dues in Ghana come via a check off system – in which dues are paid through a paycheck deduction. Thus, union members must openly declare their membership to the captain and operations manager who simply refuse to hire them as crew members next time they port out.

NUSPAW has ambitious goals, including to increase Ghanaian fishers' skills through training, challenge ownership and management structures, and properly regulate recruitment services. This first goal is important because they want to see Ghanaian trawlers captained by Ghanaians. Their problem is not with the legal loophole (the Hire-Purchase Act), but with the fact that the shadow partners on the boats are able to dictate the matters on the ships.^{xii} Because the 'shadow owners' *de facto* own the ship, they determine who is the captain, which makes it impossible for Ghanaians to attain that role. Unfortunately, their calls for better management, ownership, and

recruitment conditions have so far only resulted in credentials for the operations managers, which according to the fishers act the same as the crew managers just with formal registration.

4.6 National Association of Fish Processors and Traders Association (NAFPTA)

The women leaders of NAFPTA project strength and a strong sense of the leadership role they play in the industry. They noted that by their estimates women make up 70% of the fishing industry because they invest and manage the logistics behind the fishing expeditions, process the fish, and sell it. They called themselves Fish Mothers and explained the central role each Fish Mother plays. She needs to know the customers and have the ability to move the fish fast from the boat to the processors. They noted that women even help finance the building of the canoes and to buy the gear – all to secure an informal agreement that they will have the right to buy the fish.

They explained a deep web of relationships that exist, all of it based on trust rather than contracts. They noted that once they invest with a canoe owner, they agree on how much of their investment they can deduct from the price of the sale of fish to them. When the canoe lands they agree on the price for the fish and deduct their investment expenses accordingly. Most importantly, the amount of the deduction has to be agreed on in advance, otherwise the fisher might return and cut them out by not selling to them. When asked how often it is that they are cut out and thus lose their investment, they estimated that might happen one time out of ten. But they noted that nine out of ten times when the system works, they make good money.

NAFPTA was originally started with grants from a World Bank project.



Fish drying racks. Credit: Connor Moynihan

They exist in 12 regions across the country. As of 2024, they have 17,600 members spread among 52 groups. Their leaders are elected with each region electing a President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer for eight-year terms. From that leadership, there are ten elected to serve as national executive board members. Members pay dues (five GHS per month) at the local level and ten percent of what they collect goes to the national office.

It was only when asked about the day-to-day work that the women of NAFTPA revealed how hard they work. When a vessel goes out to sea, they have to remain attentive to when they are coming back. Sometimes that can mean waiting near the port all night, constantly being near their phone. As soon as the vessel gets close to shore, the fishers call them and then the fish mother has to be able to get all the different players in action quickly. They noted that for them the month-long fishing close season was a relief because it meant they could take some time off.

In 2021, a group of women splintered off of NAFTPA and joined the regional body, the African Confederation of Professional Organizations of Artisanal Fisheries (CAOPA for its initials in French). They count at least 20,000 members and are the women's wing of the GNCFC. Their leader in Ghana, Her Excellency Maama Cynthia Komley Adjetei, was appointed by President John Mahama to the council of state in early 2025.

4.7 General Agricultural Workers' Union (GAWU)

Ghana's Lake Volta has over 10 times the shoreline of its coast and supports many livelihoods, biodiversity, and aquaculture. However, the region is also largely impoverished and faces issues such as social insecurity, a lack of retirement stability, and child labor and trafficking. The General Agricultural Workers Union of Ghana (GAWU) has organized in the informal sector for decades and has a membership of over 23,000 workers (ITUC 2025). GAWU's innovative approach focuses on child-labor free zones and Community Child Protection Committees.

GAWU's initial efforts were met with skepticism from community members. They believed that unions were primarily about strikes and higher wages. GAWU started by changing the framework – rather than organizing against an employer, fishers needed to collectively demand that the government fulfills its duties. While fishers had associations as a form of social organization. GAWU sought to strengthen fishers' ability to make

government and market authorities listen to them. GAWU's initial strides were in explaining to community members the benefits of solidarity and collective action and convincing them that the trade union model was relevant when organizing to demand the government fulfill its duties.

GAWU organizers identified community needs, such as greater representation, solidarity, and improved value for their products. They also learned that community members have aspirations for their children that were directly limited by child labor. For example, fishers hope that their children will become doctors and lawyers so that the children can support them in their old age – an especially important goal because fishers often do not have access to social security. Andy Tagoe, who became GAWU's general secretary in 2024, noted that if children are working, and therefore not in school, this goal will never bear fruit.^{xiii}

After sensitizing locals to the benefits of a trade union, GAWU set about showing those benefits. Their program focused on capacity building, demanding social security, and improving the profitability of their products. By taking this approach, GAWU directly addresses the root causes of child labor: poverty, insecurity, and ignorance. Since 2007, they have implemented a child labor free zone approach, which designates a village or community to be free of all forms of child labor. Enforcement of these zones is led by Community Child Protection Committees, which complement government enforcement mechanisms. In addition, GAWU partnered with the ILO to bring bridge schools to help transition child laborers to formal education in the village of Torkor (RESPECT International 2016). The Torkor model was then integrated into the government of Ghana's "Strategy on Anti-Child Labour and Trafficking in Fisheries." This powerful model was refined in the fisheries sector and then applied to the cocoa sector as well, where they have protected over 4,000 children (Butler 2024).

Andrews Addoquaye Tagoe, GAWU General Secretary and recipient of the US Department of Labor's Iqbal Masih Award (2024) discussed the source of GAWU's power:

"We don't have guns as a trade union. We don't have bullets...but we have human beings. And they are a source of power. Our numbers are a source of power." (Tagoe 2024)

5. Solutions

Throughout our various conversations, the groups interviewed brought up a range of solutions to the ailing Ghanaian fisheries. The majority recognize the need to fish less, but there is considerable debate about where and how those restrictions should be applied, who is primarily responsible for the decline in fish stocks, and how to create alternatives for workers dependent on the industry. What follows is a discussion of some of those solutions with some commentary.

5.1 Alternative livelihoods and fisher displacement

Throughout our visits to Ghanaian fishing communities, it became increasingly clear that the official push in fisheries regulation is towards a gradual reduction in fishing effort. This is mainly through the closed fishing season and a reduction of the total number of active canoes on the water. If, on average, each canoe employs about ten fishers and supplies work to another ten fish processors, then the government's proposed decrease for sustainability from over 14,000 to 10,000 canoes risks displacing about 85,500 livelihoods.

This does not include the ripple effects of lost business for vendors, canoe makers, and others. The FAO estimated up to ten percent of Ghana's population – approximately 2.6 million people – are directly or indirectly dependent on the industry (FAO 2016).

Advocates for the reduction of canoes argue that the

transition would occur over time and there may already be a natural trend towards a declining number in the sector. However, both advocates and critics of the policy noted the need to support fishers in finding alternative livelihoods. When asked who was working on this topic, pretty much all those interviewed mentioned that USAID was funding an alternative livelihoods program. Several people preferred to call it a supplemental or diversified livelihoods program, registering their awareness of challenges faced by similar programs in the past.^{xiv}

Table 2: Estimated Fisher and Fish Processor Displacement

Number of canoes	14,275
Avg. fishers per canoe	10
Avg processors dependent per canoe	10
Directly dependent livelihoods	285,000
Target number of canoes	10,000
Livelihoods at risk of displacement	85,500

The only livelihoods program that we learned about in the country is indeed run through a USAID sponsored program called Feed the Future Ghana Fisheries Recovery Activity (GFRA), which is managed by Tetrattech. GFRA is under the umbrella of programs geared toward economic development and food security. In speaking with the Chief of Party of the GFRA in January 2024, however, she noted that the program was primarily intended for youth. In 2023, they had trained 1350 youths (about 30% young men and 70% young women) in supplemental livelihoods (USAID 2023).^{xv}

5.2 Formalize the sector

Another thread running through our discussions was the widespread effort to formalize the artisanal sector. As mentioned above, some believe that formalization will garner more attention and respect from the government. GNCFC and CaFGOAG are both issuing ID cards and collecting dues. NUTEG is focused heavily on uniting the entire sector across fishers and processors and pushing for stronger recognition as well. Efforts to formalize Premix fuel subsidies are also utilizing ID cards.

Formalization is likely an adaptation strategy to the previously “open access” fishing waters. The pressures coming from international measures like the EU yellow card or competition from the Chinese-owned trawlers and the ecological reality of collapsed fisheries stocks are forcing fishers to search for alternatives to their traditional models of governance. While there are certainly some benefits to formalization, those benefits are at the expense of traditional and indigenous systems and some fishers expressed a concern about losing these structures and traditions.

5.3 Improved transparency

According to the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI), Ghana’s government has a wealth of information on the fisheries sector. However, Ghana’s national authorities have not prioritized sharing this information with the public, despite strong demands from national and international stakeholders (Biermann 2023). Even measures such as releasing a vessel list are limited in their scope.^{xvi}

One way this impacted our interviewees is in conflicts between canoes and trawlers. In some instances, advocates attempted to prove that trawlers crossed into the IEZ. However, the government officials reviewing the case said that the Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) data on the trawler showed that the vessel had stayed on its side of the line. The VMS data was not

released, and there are even conflicting descriptions of where that line is. This lack of transparency impedes fishers' access to remedy and leaves conflicts festering.

Several of our interviewees also discussed ways to take politics out of fuel subsidies. The government is installing automated systems in many landing beaches with the intention of tamping down on corruption and favoritism (Tetteh 2023). This system shows some promise, but it is too early to evaluate. Some interviewees also advocated placing technical experts on landing beach committees who would be disconnected from the political party system.

5.4 Research vessel and national capacities

Trawler owners emphasized the need for the government to keep its former promise to obtain a national research vessel. Ghana's scientific data on its marine ecosystem comes primarily from the vessel *Dr. Fridtjof Nansen*, a Norwegian research vessel. However, this ship works regionally and is therefore not a constant presence in Ghanaian waters. In addition, the President Akufo-Addo did secure funds for a research vessel in 2021 (MyJoyOnline 2021), but it was apparently never purchased.

In addition, many interviewees cited the need for better pathways for national Ghanaians to ascend the ranks on trawlers. This would include training for potential officers and captains, for which there may be financial and institutional barriers. However, it would also include ensuring that the materials on trawlers, including signs and instruction manuals are in a language that Ghanaians can read as opposed to Chinese as it is displayed.

5.5 Continued dialogue and deepening co-management

Most interviewees agree that the problems in fisheries must be solved collectively – no individual fisher or company can make the changes needed unilaterally. To that end, Ghana has been making efforts to have all the stakeholders at the table. Two processes have helped advance this goal: the ILO's 8.7 Accelerator Lab and the nation's own co-management policy.

The 8.7 Accelerator Lab is the ILO's effort to move the needle on Sustainable Development Goal 8 target 7.^{xvii} Their efforts in Ghana began with the fishing sector in 2022. The ILO process was critical to initiating the talks between NUSPAW and GITA leading to the historic increase in wages and conditions. In addition, the Accelerator Lab has promoted ILO C 188, which

was ratified by the Parliament of Ghana on March 7, 2024 (though the instrument of ratification is yet to be deposited with the ILO), and many of our interviewees talked about their hope that these international regulations would spur change.^{xviii} These dialogues where actors come together for good-faith dialogue hold promise for driving inclusive change.



Fishing boats by Cape Coast Castle, Ghana. Credit: Tom Ward (CC BY-NC 2.0)

This attitude is further embodied in the country's co-management plan. The commitment to including all affected actors could improve Ghana's approach to its ailing fisheries. However, the government's capacity for meaningful stakeholder engagement must be improved. The critique leveled by CaFGOAG – that

information for engagements must be distributed with enough lead time for review – has been leveled in other arenas as well. Stakeholder advice, even if genuinely sought, cannot be meaningful if there is no time to review information or consult with the members of stakeholder groups. Further research and review will be needed to understand Ghana's strengths and opportunities in the implementation of participatory solutions, but the country has taken important steps to foster dialogue.

6. Persistent Challenges and Questions

This research has revealed the significant time, care, and effort being poured into the fisheries sector. Clearly, Ghanaian government officials, industry members, labor representatives, and academics are all on board to improve Ghana's fisheries. However, there are several issues that urgently need to be addressed as Ghana attempts to reverse the damage of over two decades of overfishing. The following is a recap of those issues.

6.1 Beneficial ownership

Beneficial ownership in the trawl sector seems to benefit no one in Ghana. Fishers are forced to deal with the interests of a shadow partner, weakening

their ability to negotiate with their employers. Further, they are denied upward mobility in the form of higher-ranking positions on ships as they would not replace the foreign crew members who answer to that shadow partner. Trawl business owners are trapped in a cycle of debt that they cannot escape due to the high capital investment required to keep their business afloat. The government loses its ability to protect its citizens and therefore loses legitimacy as their citizens continue to endure hardships. And the environment suffers as foreign actors extract the natural resources from Ghana's waters.

The specter of beneficial ownership should haunt every conversation about overfishing and fisheries management in Ghana. Not only does it impede the ability of Ghanaians to exercise control over their ships, but it also dampens the impact of the ILO's efforts to engage all of the relevant stakeholders. Until this problem is solved, Ghana's fisheries are subject to the whims of actors that are unregulated by the very bodies that are responsible for protecting the fisheries and the rights of those that depend on them.

6.2 Fisher displacement

Fishers view their livelihoods not as a job, but as a way of life. This was a sentiment that was echoed in the words of many of the fishers interviewed. Therefore, as the government tries to limit fishing effort in Ghana, this must also be understood as limiting many people's way of life. We should not expect them to simply take up alternative livelihoods in construction, cocoa farming, or coffin making. If their ability to fish is restricted, most will try and remain in their industry, except this newly displaced population will be more vulnerable. Rather than changing sectors, many will either accept a smaller share of canoe profits, take work on industrial boats, or take risks on work abroad.

Moreover, trawlers have been, and are still, targeting the species that are supposedly threatened by artisanal activity. To reiterate, some estimates show that trawlers' bycatch of small pelagics may account for a third of the official marine fishing. Given the questionable showing of regulations on the trawl sector and canoe fishers' allegations that trawlers are to blame for the decimation of their fisheries, greater attention should be given to this problem.

The question of what happens to fishers is one of just transition; ecological necessity calls for rapid change, which leaves some folks behind. The adaptation strategies they can access leave them vulnerable to exploitation

and abuse. Further effort and care must be taken to ensure that fishers are not stranded without a means to earn a living.

6.3 Stakeholder engagement

The Fisheries Commission's process for stakeholder engagement is strong progress toward a policymaking process that centers on fishers. As implementation develops, there are many opportunities for meaningful stakeholder engagement with canoe fishers and workers. An example of a window to improve is in timely notification of procedures. Stakeholders have complained that materials needed to meaningfully participate in meetings are given too close to (or even not until) the meeting. This violates one of the fundamental tenants of engagement with indigenous and local peoples. With more time to review information, parties can consult with their members, making more meaningful contributions to the ultimate policy. Ghana's government can make strides in areas like this to capitalize on the excellent signs of progress that the co-management policy represents.

ⁱ Fleet size is constantly in flux and it is notable that this statistic is from 2020 which is a year greatly affected by the pandemic. In our interview with CaFGOAG in January 2024, Nana Kweigyah suggested the number of canoes was around 12,000. However as of July 2025, we could not verify any more up to date number.

ⁱⁱ For a more in depth look at the role of women in the sector, please see reports from Friends of the Nation i.e. (CARE Denmark, Friends of the Nation Ghana, and Oxfam International 2020)

ⁱⁱⁱ In the Ghanaian context, "artisanal fishers" and "canoe fishers" or "artisanal boats" and "canoes" will be used interchangeably.

^{iv} Fishers report running into trawlers' nets, which they allege are inside their fishing zone, and in some cases, trawlers have threatened the canoe fishers.

^v In its notification, the European Commission clearly referred to *saiko*, "The identified shortcomings include illegal transshipments at sea of large quantities of undersized juvenile pelagic species between industrial trawl vessels and canoes in Ghanaian waters..." (European Commission 2021)

^{vi} Canoes that use drift gill nets use a 50-50 split with one half going to the expenses and maintenance cost and the remaining half split between the owner and crew.

^{vii} See for example (Opoku 2023) in which John Mahama, winner of the 2025 election and then presidential candidate for the opposition party, stumps on the politicization of premix and makes promises to depoliticize.

^{viii} This policy will be one of the subjects of future research from this team on stakeholder engagement.

^{ix} The law requires that trawlers always keep their VMS on. However, it is impossible to verify this data as the Government of Ghana does not make its VMS data available.

^x In Ghana, canoe fishers might start a joint venture in which one person purchases a canoe, and another purchases an outboard motor. This is a way of lowering the up-front costs.

^{xi} Depending on whether you calculate with 14,275 canoes used in MoFAD's 2022 National Action Plan or CaFGOAG's estimate of ~12,000 canoes.

^{xii} Ironically, although there is no way for Ghanaians to earn credentials to become ship captains, no one in Ghana checks the credentials of the foreign captains.

^{xiii} Interview with Andy Tagoe in Accra, 2025

^{xiv} The terminology surrounding alternative livelihood programs is subject of debate among practitioners. In the mid-2010s, the IUCN called for studies of the effectiveness of these programs. Many question their effectiveness, not only in providing for those affected, but also in accomplishing their conservation objectives. For more, see (Roe et al. 2015; Wright et al. 2016; Abere and Lameed 2018)

^{xv} Interview with Heather D'Agnes, Chief of Party in Accra, 2024.

^{xvi} Ghana officially joined FiTI in July 2024 after this report was composed. It submitted a letter of intention that said it would collaborate with FiTI to foster a more transparent sector.

^{xvii} This goal is to "take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour including recruitment and use of child soldiers and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms."

^{xviii} The next steps in this process lie with the ILO.

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