



Cameroon Economic Policy Institute

HENRI KOUAM FOUNDATION

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Fisheries Subsidies: *How Does Cameroon Stack Up Against Global Standards?*

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46%

of animal protein needs
supplied by fish

60K

Direct jobs
in fishing sector

95K

tons of illegal
catch per year (2000s)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Fish is Cameroon's most important source of animal protein — accounting for 46% of intake — yet the sector faces severe threats from overfishing, illegal fishing, and poorly structured subsidies.
- Cameroon ratified the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies in 2024, becoming the 3rd CEMAC country to do so, but faces significant implementation challenges including weak maritime surveillance and inadequate data systems.
- This brief examines the structure and impact of fisheries subsidies and assesses Cameroon's readiness to align with global WTO standards — and the reforms needed to get there.



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Section 1: Overview of Cameroon's Fishing Sector

Economic and Social Importance

Fish is the most important source of animal protein for Cameroonians, with an annual per capita consumption of 13.6–19 kg, representing 42.3% of animal protein intake and covering 9.5% of total nutritional needs. The fishing sector contributes 3% of GDP — equivalent to approximately US\$39 billion of Gross Domestic Product. 83% of production comes from marine sources and over 80% comes from small-scale fisheries, supporting the livelihoods of thousands of Cameroonians — especially women who process and sell fish across Cameroon and at border towns.

Organization of the Sector

The fishing sector employs 60,000 people directly, with 180,000 employed in secondary fishing activities. Of those directly employed, 20,000 are in artisanal maritime fishing and 40,000 operate in inland fishing. Notably, 80% of the documented 34,355 artisanal fishers are immigrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, and Togo, who operate 300 artisanal fishing ports along Cameroon's 402km coastline.

Resources and Fishing Zones

Maritime fishing is concentrated in the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic coast, with a seafront of 360 km. Inland fishing covers three main zones: the forest zone, central zone, and northern region. The 35,000 km² of continental waters — covering 7.4% of national territory — are separated into floodplains (86%), natural lakes (4%), dam retention (7%), and rivers (3%).

Section 2: Industrial Fishing — Operators, Trawlers, and Foreign Presence

Industrial fishing began in Cameroon in the 1970s with 42 industrial vessels engaging in shrimp fishing. As yields fell from 1973, shrimp boats converted to fish, but the number of trawlers has decreased dramatically — from 17 vessels in 1979 to 6 by 1991. At present, eight shipping lines operate 35 vessels, including 6 trawlers and 29 shrimpers. However, only 6 companies were granted authorization by January 2020.

The Illegal Fishing Problem

Illegal fishing has grown from 2,300 tons in the 1980s to 95,000 tons in the 2000s — and this likely understates the true scale. Artisanal fishermen in Idenau report that Chinese industrial fishermen using sophisticated twin trawlers — not permitted under Cameroonian law — fish within three nautical miles, reaching mangroves and fish spawning grounds. Tax revenue loss from illegal fishing is estimated at US\$9,000–\$14,000 per violation.

Section 3: How Fisheries Subsidies Are Impacting Cameroon

Types of Subsidies

Fishing subsidies in Cameroon are both direct and indirect. Direct subsidies primarily support small-scale fishing through the provision of equipment and assistance from MIDEPECAM. The government also invests in infrastructure — landing docks, fish markets, and storage facilities. However, the most significant subsidies are indirect: tax breaks, import facilitation for equipment, and the low level of oversight of fishing activities.

Type of Subsidy	Importance	Impact
Artisanal equipment support	Moderate	Positive — improves small-scale productivity
Infrastructure (docks, markets)	Moderate	Neutral — reduces post-harvest losses
Inputs (fuel, gear)	High	Risk of overfishing
Implicit subsidies (low oversight)	Very High	Highly problematic
Sustainable management subsidies	Low	Insufficient — underfunded

Positive Effects

Fisheries subsidies in Cameroon contribute significantly to food security — fish accounts for 46% of animal protein intake and is an essential source of affordable protein in Douala and Kribi. The sector employs more than 60,000 people directly or indirectly. Subsidies through MIDEPECAM equipment distribution have helped improve small-scale fishermen's production capacity, while investments in landing and storage infrastructure help reduce post-harvest losses.

Negative Effects

Subsidies encourage increased fishing activity, exacerbating pressure on already fragile stocks. The FAO (2009) found that Cameroon's coastal demersal resources are heavily or even over-exploited. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing is a major problem — Cameroon has received a red card from the European Union, highlighting weaknesses in control and governance. Some foreign vessels operating under the Cameroonian flag have been implicated in underreporting of catches. Furthermore, subsidies and tax benefits primarily benefit industrial fleets, creating unfair competition with artisanal fishermen.

Section 4: Cameroon's Readiness to Implement the WTO Fisheries Subsidies Agreement

Institutional and Legal Framework

The fisheries sector is primarily overseen by MINEPIA, supported by technical agencies such as MIDEPECAM for small-scale fisheries. Cameroon relies on the following national laws:

- Law No. 94/01 of January 20, 1994 — on the regime governing forests, wildlife, and fisheries
- Decree No. 95/413/PM of June 20, 1995 — implementing regulations for the fisheries regime
- Law No. 2018/005 of July 11, 2018 — establishing the Fisheries and Aquaculture Code
- Ministerial orders regarding fishing licenses, zones, and authorized gear

At the international level, Cameroon ratified the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies in 2024, becoming the 3rd CEMAC country to do so. The Agreement prohibits subsidies for IUU fishing and those related to overexploited stocks.

Implementation Challenges

Maritime surveillance capabilities remain weak, facilitating IUU fishing and complicating enforcement of the subsidy ban. The Agreement requires states to provide detailed information on subsidies, fish stocks, and fishing activities — but Cameroon's statistical system remains inadequate. Governance in the sector is fragile, with a lack of institutional coordination and limited financial resources (Beseng M., 2021). The strong presence of foreign actors in industrial fishing adds to the complexity of monitoring vessels and catches.

An Opportunity in the Agreement

The WTO Subsidies Agreement serves as a catalyst for reform — encouraging a shift in public policy toward sustainable practices. Cameroon can receive technical and financial support under the WTO mechanism established to assist developing countries. This could modernize the sector through stronger fisheries monitoring systems, improved data collection, and a more competitive blue economy.

Policy Recommendations

To align Cameroon's fisheries sector with global WTO standards and protect the long-term sustainability of its marine resources, CEPI recommends:

1. Gradually Reduce Harmful and Implicit Subsidies

Redirect subsidies away from activities that encourage overfishing — particularly fuel subsidies for industrial fleets — and toward sustainable measures including research, resource management, and ecosystem restoration.

2. Strengthen Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance (MCS)

Build maritime surveillance capacity to effectively combat IUU fishing. Invest in patrol vessels, satellite monitoring, and cross-border intelligence sharing with Gulf of Guinea partners to close the EU red card.

3. Improve Data Collection and Transparency

Develop national systems for fisheries data collection, management, and publication to comply with WTO notification requirements. Strengthen MINEPIA and MIDEPECAM statistical units with dedicated funding and technical staff.

4. Build Targeted Support for Small-Scale Fisheries

Establish dedicated financing mechanisms, technical training, and value chain development for artisanal fishers — especially women processors and traders who represent the sector's largest employment group.

Conclusion

Cameroon stands at a critical crossroads in the management of its maritime heritage. While the 2024 ratification of the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies signals a high-level commitment to sustainability, the path to full compliance remains steep. The sector grapples with an EU red card and a pervasive foreign industrial presence that threatens local artisanal fishers.

To successfully align with global standards, Cameroon must transform its institutional framework — moving beyond equipment distribution toward robust monitoring, control, and transparency. Only by eliminating harmful implicit subsidies and prioritizing resource preservation can Cameroon secure the long-term food security and economic stability of its coastal populations.

Cameroon's fish stocks are a national asset. Managing them sustainably is not a choice — it is the only path to a viable blue economy that serves all Cameroonians, from the artisanal fisher in Idenau to the consumer in Yaoundé.

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Henri Kouam is the Founder of CEPI at the Henri Kouam Foundation. He is a contributor to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), was an Economic Expert for NATO, and has consulted for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

About the Cameroon Economic Policy Institute (CEPI)

CEPI is a think tank at the Henri Kouam Foundation improving economic development through fact-based research, policy advocacy, and events. CEPI has successfully led two verifiable policy reforms.

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