

CASE STUDY



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and three assistants, he conducted a survey of 480 fishermen on Uganda's largest lakes: Victoria, Albert, and Kioga. Their methodology also incorporated analysis of government data and a review of relevant policies. By investigating the fish value chain, they hoped to identify inefficiencies that influence the quality, quantity, price, and timely delivery of Nile perch—and to find out why, even when profits are up, so many fishermen struggle to meet their basic needs.

Sadly, they found that the sector's pursuit of short-term gains at the expense of long-term value had induced significant inefficiencies. Primary constraints in the value chain include information and power asymmetry among stakeholders, weak partnerships, and poor coordination among government agencies. Excess capacity is also problematic, with Uganda's total fish production surpassing the sustainable target level by 27 percent, a yearly surfeit of 90,000 tons. Mugabira has calculated the annual cost of these constraints to be US\$400 million. Removing them through the adoption of sustainable fishing practices, he says, could generate enough extra revenue to raise fishermen's incomes fourfold.

Based on his findings, Mugabira is calling on the public and private sectors to:

- Train and certify fishermen and issue distinct classes of fishing permits;
- Promote long-line fishing, a more sustainable alternative to using gill nets;
- Reduce the number of fish processing plants to match stocks of Nile perch;
- Process alternative species with high demand in regional markets; and
- Invest in aquaculture to raise other species for domestic and regional markets.

Setting a New Course

The government has incorporated some of these measures into pending legislation. It is also working to reduce the number of fishing boats by 20 percent and to rein in mismanagement of district offices and beach management units by centralizing the processes for vetting boats and issuing licenses and permits. "Studies like this change minds," says Wilson Mwanja, Uganda's Commissioner for Fisheries Resources. "Before people were thinking it's just an environmental problem. Now they see it's a business problem, too."

Mugabira takes heart in signs that the major fisheries are also changing course. The Uganda Fish Processors and Exporters Association has begun to sanction crews, boat owners, and fisheries that buy or sell Nile perch below the legal limit of 20 inches. It is also working with partners in Tanzania and Kenya to develop regional standards and mechanisms for sustainable fishing, prompting a recent move by the Lake Victoria Fisheries Organization to begin issuing single-species licenses.

These efforts alone won't save the Nile perch or stabilize the fisheries sector, because they apply mainly to exports to Israel, Europe, and North America—not regional traders who smuggle immature fish into the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, and southern Sudan, where protein is in high demand. But they're an important start, says the association's chairman, Philip Borel de Bitche. He and Mugabira, who now works for the Uganda Investment Authority, are exploring opportunities to develop the market for alternative products like dried fish heads, farmed fish, and less popular species like tilapia.

"Lake Victoria is the largest inland fishery in the world," says de Bitche. Stronger enforcement is essential, he says, but it must be coupled with better sensitization of fishermen and rapid development of viable alternatives to illegal fishing and trading. "This is a critical year," he says. "We can't afford to fail." ■

Read an in-depth report on this research project at www.trustafrica.org/icbe.