

The Case of KATOSI WOMEN DEVELOPMENT TRUST (KWDT)

1. Introduction

Mukono district has 73.4% of its area covered by open water¹ (Lake Victoria especially), making it very attractive for both local and foreign investors, and suitable for various kinds of investments such as tourism, large scale fish farming and agriculture activities, among others.

Large scale land acquisition is increasingly leading to the restricting of fishermen to only certain parts of the lake, squeezing community members to occupy only limited space on the landing site, and the reported mistreatment by known and unknown individuals is a major threat to the livelihoods of people in these fishing communities and worst of all, efforts undertaken by the local people to seek the attention of the leaders to address these problems have so far been futile.

Most of the land in this area in these fishing communities is either customary or public (government) land. A lot of the customary land is being converted into titled land so that the owners might feel more 'secure' over the land and to avoid 'quick' transfers of the same land.. The public land in this place is increasingly being titled too.

KWDT, with support from International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and in partnership with FIAN and TNI, has conducted a study on the rampant land conflicts among the fishing communities of Mukono district, where KWDT works.

2. The struggles of fishing communities in Uganda

Currently, the challenges and conflicts related to large-scale land acquisitions are increasing much more than the period when the project was initiated. Findings reveal that lawlessness, ignorance, forceful evictions, as well as conflicts are increasingly emerging. The selling and buying of vast pieces of land around the lake, for other forms of investments other than traditional use such as agriculture, small scale fishing is on the increase. Consequently, many are being displaced, and majority is now living under fear and uncertainty.

Landlords, people that either; bought land adjacent to the lake, but actually extended their ownership to the lake, or those that are said to 'own' (actually grabbed) the landing site! (Owning the landing site is not something recognised or acceptable by the land and environmental laws) are known and almost recognised by the local government leadership in these communities. They collect the land fees (*busulu*) from people and pay a fee to the sub counties. This is recognising and officialising lawlessness and unfair mistreatment of the poor fisher folk who operate and work along the lake shores.

¹ National Statistical Abstract, Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) 2013

Land lords and so called investors have often extended their influence from the land to the water too. They put flags in the water to demarcate certain areas where local people are not allowed to go and fish, because these areas are turned into their “private property”. Taking advantage of the current efforts to curb illegal fishing on lake Victoria, the so-called investors bribe officials to arrest people too who choose to cross the boundaries set in water by these ‘investors’, that obstruct fishermen to access parts of the fishing grounds. This harassment is disguised under “fighting illegal fishing”. Due to the difficulties and conflicts on the land that they occupy, and restrictions to access the lake, livelihood strategies in these farmer fisher folk communities are under threat and challenged. Making certain parts of the lake inaccessible for fisher folk and confining them to one particular part by the land buyers, makes their work impossible and constitutes a major threat to their livelihoods and traditional/ customary way of life.

It is important to stress that these fishing communities’ livelihoods depend on land to access the lake and its resources therefore we can not continue to separate loss of land and its implication on loss to access to fishing grounds. Non-fisher households and the local economies also depend on these fishers to sustain their livelihoods, for instance through selling food to the fisher people. Those who supplemented their livelihoods from agriculture especially women have lost agriculture land and restriction of fisher to access fishing grounds has resulted into lack of fish in the communities for the market and for home consumption. Often times, priority while catching fish is given to the fish for sale because they also have to meet other household demands such as school fees for the children, health care and service credit for fishing equipment. One female respondent noted during the household interviews; *“if your husband is not a fisherman, you cannot eat fish these days. And even when he is a fisherman, sometimes he cannot get fish for selling”*

Many of the investors’ activities have been noted to be detrimental to the social economic and environmental fibres of these rural economies. In light of the new trend of displacement from land and enclosures of the lake there is a rise in conflicts between tenants and land lords.

In Soroti, a small village near Buleebi landing site, over 60 families (with permanent houses) were given money worth UGX 3 million so as to leave the land. One would call this compensation, but too meagre to enable them find alternative land to settle. In fact according to the district land valuer, the compensation appropriate in this place would be not less than UGX13 million for each of the families. As a result of failing to find alternative places, the families returned to the land, which they had been asked to leave, and conflicts arose, between them and the landlords.

3. **How loss of land in fisher communities impact women**

Women are the most disadvantaged and affected much more with the ongoing displacements from the land due to their limited opportunities to enter alternative sources of livelihoods and yet they represent the majority in the fisher landing sites. For many women, their access rights are largely dependent on the husband.

Family conflicts, illegal arrests of fishermen for ‘trespassing’ on private fishing grounds, where women are required to pay large sums of money to bail them out, losing of spouses and consequently being denied access to land are becoming more often and these greatly affect women’s development and frustrate their efforts too. Loss of source of firewood, loss of cultural burial grounds, as well as the religious and spiritual significance of the lake (for worship) as well as families having to split for lack of a shelter.

The restriction of fishermen from accessing fishing grounds hampers women’s access to fish in which they trade. With no measures to address loss of productive resources, poverty and hand-to-mouth livelihood has contributed to the low quality of life for women.

Women in this area are mainly engaged in smoking fish or sun drying of fish. Whereas men need more access to the water to catch the fish, most if not all the activities that women do, require them to have space on the land. Silver fish is sun dried on land, smoking is done on land, agriculture and all the domestic work and their caring roles can only be done when they are settled on the land. For example when the people in Buleebi, were evicted from the land which they occupied and relocated to another piece of land that was much smaller, many women had no space to sun dry silver fish. They fight for this space and it is on the basis of ‘first come first serve’, meaning whoever can bring their silver fish faster will be the one to take the space to dry her silver fish. And the rest then have no space. Because they cannot keep it fresh for long, then they have to sell it immediately for lower profits to other people from neighbouring communities. This way, women are pushed out of the fishing activities and have to resort to other means of survival, which are often much more complicated to learn and sustain. Women that were engaged in small scale farming were also greatly affected, as they couldn’t farm on the land any more, since they are only allowed space enough for their small house.



Use of Land by the women to sun dry silver fish at Buleebi landing site

Many women have now resorted to operating very small shops/ kiosks, with an average capital of UGX 50.000 (equivalent to 15 USD) yet many still complain that they can't afford the cost for constructing the kiosk, let alone paying the land lord for it on a monthly basis. If the kiosk burns down, one has to pay the landlord a different fee to be allowed to reconstruct it. And thereafter pays monthly for the land/space where this kiosk stands.

Most of the women in these communities are 'second wives' since a number of men in fishing communities are polygamous. They have a home (with a wife) at the landing site, and a home (with a wife) in other part of the country where they came from (applicable to fishermen who settled in these areas for fishing). In the intense of land wrangles, when men are forced to migrate and leave the lake, they leave the women and children there as homeless since they cannot take this second family to the first family. This makes women more insecure and more vulnerable in such evictions.

Other community development projects implemented by KWDT too have been greatly affected. The community of Bulebi, with a population of more than 1,508 people had no latrine. Being close to the lake, it is impossible to dig and keep a pit latrine, which is the most common and most affordable technology. With support from KWDT, the community acquired an ECOSAN latrine of 6 stances for the community members. The community members put a management committee for the effective use, operation and maintenance in place. When the landlord shifted people from the piece of land, they were re-located to another piece but the latrine was not re-built in the new place. Despite several complaints from the people, and the promises of the land lord to re-build the latrine, signs show that this will not happen and the people have therefore resorted again to open defecation all over the place and in the nearby bushes.

Absence of security on land has failed the KWDT supported fishing farming projects, in which women had acquired skills and struggling to increase their incomes through fish farming.



The community of Kiziru Landing site confined to land closer to the lake

Environmental effects: Mining of sand along the lakeshores, using the excavators destroys fish breeding grounds, displacing the fish and reducing the amount of fish that can be caught in those particular parts of the lake. Fishermen in these parts of the lake are complaining of the continuously reducing amount of fish that they are able to get from the lake.

- *Physical environment.* Roads have been spoilt as a result of sand mining in road reserves and small paths used by the people in these communities. Two roads have greatly been affected by sand mining and the investors do not care despite numerous requests from community members to rectify the situation. For example the road from Sanjo village, through Mbazi to Buleebi, estimated to have 6 kilometers, and the road from Nsanja to Mivo in Kiziru landing site, estimated to have 13 kilo meters, being used by the fisher community in transporting their fish from the landing site to the markets.
- Sand mining has affected the water table with some wells proximate to the sand mines drying up and others demolished in the process of sand mining undermining access to clean water for the communities and making it harder for the women who have to search for water for domestic use.
- Mining close to residential areas is one form of harassment that result into evacuation of the houses by residents fearing collapsing walls due to weakened foundations. Sand mining in Buleebi, and in Kiziru has been done right close to the houses. Hardly 10 meters away from the houses. This forces the people to leave even when the sand miners pretend not to have evicted the people.

Effects on income and food security: Loss of land for cultivation of food crops which is an alternative livelihood strategy to fisheries has intensified worries in the communities for source of food as some parts of the land is fenced up and people are no longer allowed to access it to cultivate food even when the investor has not started to utilise it for intended purpose of purchase.



A respondent at Buleebi reported how this valley used to be cultivated by the people in the community and now all of them are evicted. *“This explains the shortage of food in the community and I think the increase in food prices, I wonder if we will all not starve to death”.*

The frequent arrests on the lake are forcing some households to stay without food in some cases. During the focus discussion groups, men expressed concern that the money they use to buy food directly comes from the fish caught that day. When they are arrested, either due to “illegal fishing” or extending to fishing grounds given to an investor, then that day the family will starve. Over 1600 people have been reported to have been arrested in the year 2015 prior to the elections from the landing sites in Buleebi, although the same practice is said to have been done in many other sub counties outside the study area.

“Over 1600 people especially men, have been arrested from this sub county during the last year. When they are arrested, most of the time they are not even taken to police. They are taken to some isolated landing site in Bunakijja, we call it “omwalo gwa kalitunsi” (meaning the landing site of eucalyptus- because there is a lot of eucalyptus trees). On this landing site, they are tortured until they pay money to be released. People have complained of having to sell their household

items to pay in order to be let free". (Interview with the Chairperson LC 3 Mpunge sub county).

Slow but sure evictions. In all the 4 landing sites, when one's house gets burnt (because they temporary wooden structures with grass thatched roof), they are not allowed to re-construct a new house, but they are supposed to vacate the land. Additionally, for men and women that live alone with no other member in the house, if they leave their houses for a number of days, say 7 days, the land lord will lock the house and will not allow them to get back to it. So they are evicted. This puts people on tension that they have to keep around and keep watch over their houses. These houses are owned and constructed by the people themselves. So the land lord ideally should have control over the land and not over the house.

The project has enabled community members themselves to be involved in investigating the conditions, causes and consequences of loss of access to land and water, which are the key resources for sustaining rural livelihoods. This has presented rural communities with the opportunity to organize and confront the threats to rural livelihoods.

As an action based research project, the study was supplemented by actions to build the capacity of community members, both to understand and to take progressive steps in addressing land grabbing challenges in their communities. As a result, the land pressure group was formed and comprises of volunteers selected from each landing site, with an aim of making concerted efforts to possibly resist exploitation and illegal displacements. Their efforts to learn and understand the land laws have caused counter reactions from the landlords, land buyers and investors: for the first time the later invited community members for a dialogue instead of the earlier approach of forceful evictions. The communities have been given legal support although inadequate to address the current concerns and land conflicts in this area. But the scope of the project could not allow for effective intervention in the community and there is an urgent need to continue and support the zeal of the community members in addressing these issues, and build on the knowledge and exposure that the people acquired through the project.

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