

Making change possible

A comprehensive development approach has multiplied the livelihood options for women in Uganda's Lake Victoria region, leading to a sense of empowerment and hope

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Katosi, a fisher community north of Lake Victoria in Uganda, has undergone transformation that has changed the lifestyle of its members. Earlier, fishers from Katosi went out to fish every day; but now many go fishing to islands far away from Katosi, where they spend months before returning to their community. There are, therefore, only a few women left in the fish-smoking business in a community where once the majority of the women used to be employed in smoking and drying fish.

For the fishing communities, the growth in export-oriented fishing is part of the problem. Further, these communities continue to attract people seeking self-employment. This has increased the population depending on fisheries resources, thus exacerbating the pollution of the lake ecosystem and leading to overutilization of the wetlands and forests.

There is a decline in the quality of life in many fisher families, with the household population comprising mainly women and children. In a community where infrastructure, health and access to basic services are limited, this leads to hardship in day-to-day existence.

The Katosi Women Development Trust (KWDT) was started in 1996, organizing

women to enter the male-dominated fishing sector. It adopted a comprehensive development approach to be able to address the challenges women faced in fisher communities. This approach was premised on the belief that "You can't tell a poor person to conserve the environment; your approach must meet the basic needs of the people in the fisher community". Diversification of fisherfolk livelihoods to reduce dependency on fisheries resource is the key objective for KWDT, coupled with ensuring that all activities contribute to the conservation of Lake Victoria's fisheries resources and ecosystem, and the empowerment of women.

Supporting women to enter diversified economic activities helped create alternatives to employment lost in smoking and drying fish due to export of fish fillets. Most women could not afford to purchase fish, whose price had increased because of exports that made processed fish unaffordable for many rural families. The Lake Victoria basin is a rich but very fragile ecosystem, susceptible to overexploitation of resources. Animal rearing, fish farming, beekeeping, mushroom farming and fruit-tree planting are complementary activities established to create employment for women in fishing communities, and help sustain the ecosystem.

With declining fish stocks, there is less fish available for the fisher communities who cannot afford the investment in improved fishing gear. Many desperately resort to use of undersized nets that catch immature fish, thus exacerbating the problem. The trade in juvenile fish, though illegal, is flourishing in many rural fisher communities. However, if they are caught, women lose all their investment as the fish is confiscated and destroyed. Despite the risks, the activity still lures many who want to make quick money, especially when they face economic needs like paying tuition fees for children. KWDT supports women to shift from the trade in illegal juveniles and enter legal economic activities through access to credit and awareness campaigns.

KWDT has been instrumental in changing the economic situation of many women in Katosi. Working with 405 women organized in 16 groups, KWDT has been able to divert their dependence on the lake, and move to other livelihood options. KWDT members undertook removal of water hyacinth from the lake, an activity that was later taken on regularly and systematically by the Beach Management Units (BMUs). According to

KATOSI WOMEN DEVELOPMENT TRUST / UGANDA



Community dialogues enable KWDT to engage communities in decisionmaking on the access and use of their fisheries resources

Nalongo Joyce, a member of the Katosi Women Fishing and Development Association, “They used to call us whenever hyacinth spread across the lake, to please come and remove it, but now they have a schedule to manage manual removal of the invasive weeds”.

Access to water and sanitation was a challenge in Katosi, particularly with the increase in population. The situation was more acute because of the high HIV/AIDS prevalence in the community: 20-30 per cent as compared to the national prevalence rate of seven per cent. KWDT supported women to increase their access to clean safe water and adequate sanitation, and has made steady strides with over 250 households benefiting from the support.

With economic empowerment and access to basic facilities like water tanks and toilets, many women feel capable to participate in decisionmaking in their communities and at the local government; to take up leadership and political positions; to participate in economic development activities; and to exercise the right of access to property. KWDT provides the training needed for the women to effectively play these new roles.

Community dialogues, where KWDT groups mobilize their communities and engage them to discuss important issues that affect their livelihoods, have been key in bridging the gap between the leaders and the community. Having been successful in water and sanitation management, KWDT is also exploring the platform to engage communities in decisionmaking on the access and use of

their fishery resources. Women who have been trained in advocacy formed Women Advocacy Clubs (WACs) that are now ably utilizing their skills in lobbying and advocating for improved service delivery across the sectors that are relevant to their livelihoods. This has created transparency, accountability and inclusion of the rural women in decisionmaking. Women are engaged in community budget-making exercises, and this has bridged the gap of communication and information between the leaders and local people. However, illiteracy is high in fishing communities, and female illiteracy hampers progress towards empowerment of women.

Isolation of fisher communities is an impediment to the women being part of debates around their problems and development alternatives. KWDT sought to join an international network of small-scale fisher organizations, the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers, to engage in the formulation of policies that are vital to fisherfolk livelihoods. In 2011, KWDT led the civil society consultation towards the development of international guidelines for securing rights of small-scale fisheries and fishermen. Today KWDT is recognized by fisherfolk as an important resource for advice on issues of fishing communities and their livelihoods. With land near the water attracting real-estate development and many other development projects that threaten livelihoods of fishers, the focus for KWDT is to ensure that the women not only know, but can also defend, their rights to access and use of land and fishery resources. ❏

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