

The crackdown against illegal fishing has disrupted livelihoods for thousands of households that rely on fishing and related activities at landing sites on Lake Victoria.

BY TAUSI NAKATO

The suspension of fishing activities at major landing sites in Mayuge District has pushed hundreds of families deeper into poverty, with education officials warning of a worsening school dropout crisis, child labour and rising teenage pregnancies linked to collapsing household incomes.

In 2017, President Museveni directed the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) to deploy on Uganda's lakes to curb illegal fishing practices and protect rapidly declining fish stocks.

Former chairperson of the Association of Fishers and Lake Users of Uganda (AFALU) eastern region, Mr Phillimon Kudera, defended the continued enforcement operations, saying they remain necessary to restore fish breeding grounds and eliminate destructive fishing methods that once threatened the survival of the fishing industry.

"Despite the poverty and hardships many fishing communities are currently facing, the operation is still necessary to protect fish stocks and secure the future of the fishing sector," he said.

However, the crackdown has also disrupted livelihoods for thousands of households that rely on fishing and related activities at landing sites along Lake Victoria.

Many parents can no longer afford school fees, scholastic materials, or basic needs, forcing children out of classrooms and into survival work.

Local leaders and education authorities say the crisis has triggered a worrying trend, with children abandoning school for fishing-related labour, petty trading in items such as bananas and snacks, sand mining, and farming activities, while others, particularly girls, are falling into early motherhood.

Families losing livelihoods

Bwondha Women League leader Amina Namigambo said the suspension of silverfish (*mukene*) trade has devastated household incomes.

"We used to earn a living from selling silverfish, but now we can no longer afford school fees or even basic needs for our children," she said.

Ms Namigambo warned that girls who drop out of school are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation and early pregnancies.

"Some have been impregnated because they are no longer in school. Men lure them with chapati and later defile them," she said.

She added that the economic pressure has also increased domestic violence in households.

"Domestic violence is very rampant because of poverty. If you ask your husband to look for money for school fees, he insults you," she added.

Fishing restrictions blamed for poverty

The LC1 chairperson of Bwondha A, Mr Twaha Kalulu, said many fishermen are struggling after government opera-

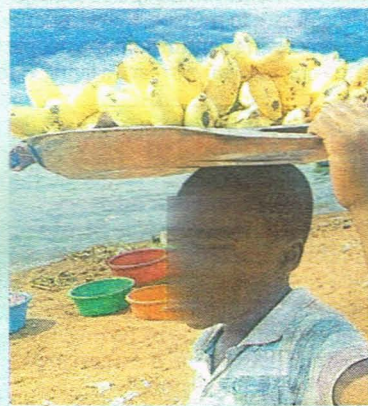
How fishing ban is fuelling school dropouts in Mayuge



A child loads fish onto a truck at Bwondha Landing Site in Mayuge District, where the fishing ban has fuelled school dropouts and child labour. PHOTOS/TAUSI NAKATO

CHILD LABOUR

At Bwondha Trading Centre in Bwondha Town Council, a 15-year-old was found among adult workers loading fish onto trucks instead of attending school. Barefoot and visibly exhausted, the teenager said he earns between Shs15,000 and Shs20,000 a day. He hands it to his mother to support his siblings in a struggling household where his father is unemployed and battling alcohol addiction. While he desires to study, he says family survival is important. Therefore, he continually struggles while loading heavy baskets of fish onto trucks. He is among dozens of school-going children now engaged in child labour at landing sites, inclu-



A child vends bananas at Bwondha landing site in Mayuge District.

ding fish loading and vending bananas and snacks, as education increasingly competes with survival needs.

tions against illegal fishing cut off their main source of income. He admitted that destructive fishing practices had previously worsened fish stocks, including use of poison and paraffin.

"Some people used to engage in illegal fishing because they thought it would make them rich quickly. Some fishermen used poison and paraffin, which depleted fish stocks and pushed many families deeper into poverty," he said.

Mr Kalulu added that after Nile perch and tilapia declined, communities turned to silverfish fishing using illegal nets and "hurry-up" methods, which were later banned.

"The suspension of fishing activities

has created widespread poverty, and many parents can no longer afford to take their children to school. Cases of teenage pregnancy have also become common in the area, with some girls becoming child mothers as early as 12 years old," he said.

Education system under strain

Mr Hawali Isabirye, the Uganda Taxi Operators and Drivers Association (UTODA) chairperson in Bwondha Town Council, said the area has only one government primary school. This serves six parishes, and Jagusi Island, leading to severe congestion.

As a contribution, Mr Isabirye said

transport operators provide free boat transport for pupils. However, he said the situation is unsustainable due to congestion and limited learning space. For instance, some classes accommodating up to 300 pupils.

Ms Juliet Kyebogola, the senior Community Development Officer of Bwondha Town Council, said unemployment caused by the fishing suspension has exposed deep education gaps.

She said Bwondha has no government secondary school, forcing learners from six parishes to walk up to three hours to attend classes. The nearest secondary school is about 16 kilometres away, a distance many parents cannot afford due to financial hardships worsened by the suspension of fishing activities.

"The highest level many children attain here is primary education. Parents no longer have money to take their children to expensive private secondary schools, nor can they afford transport to government secondary schools outside the area. Therefore, many children end up dropping out," she said.

Ms Kyebogola added that although enrolment stands at about 2,000 pupils, nearly 90 percent fail to transition to secondary school. She called on the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) to intervene and ensure equitable access to affordable education services.

Declining performance

Mr John Muyinda, the headteacher of Bwondha Primary School, said the school has an enrolment of about 2,050 pupils and continues to face severe congestion.

He said absenteeism is high, with between 300 and 400 pupils missing school daily due to engagement in informal work. Moreover, some classes, especially Primary Four and Primary Five, have up to 380 pupils, making teaching extremely difficult.

Currently, the teacher-to-learner ratio stands at about 1:90, far above acceptable standards, with 20 teachers instead of the required 25. Mr Muyinda added that infrastructure is overstretched, with pupils in Primary One sitting on the floor due to lack of desks.

"At one point, out of about 2,000 pupils, only 60 contributed food for school feeding. Most children come without anything to eat," he said.

Mr Muyinda said this has affected performance, with last year's Primary Leaving Examination results showing only three first grades out of 240 candidates.

"The rest were in second and third divisions or failed," he said.

He warned that without a secondary school nearby, many pupils drop out after Primary Seven.

"The nearest secondary school is far and expensive. Many children stop after P7 or join fishing and boda boda work," he said.

District alarm over dropout rates

Ms Allen Jalia Nabirye, the Mayuge District Education Officer (DEO), said the suspension of fishing activities has worsened school dropout, child labour and teenage pregnancies in landing site communities.

She said education access remains se-

verely constrained, with about seven sub-counties lacking secondary schools and many primary schools overcrowded.

"In some schools, one classroom has up to 300 learners, making teaching and learning very difficult even for experienced teachers. In some cases, desks are removed to create more space for learners," she said.

Ms Nabirye revealed that the transition rate from primary to secondary level stands at only 22 percent in the entire district.

"This low transition rate is largely due to distance, poverty, and the lack of nearby government secondary schools," she explained.

She added that child labour is widespread, with children engaged in drying and cleaning silverfish, farming, sand mining, and plantation work, particularly in sugarcane fields.

"Some children are involved in drying silverfish, cleaning fish, digging in gardens, and sand mining. Others are taken to plantations or rice fields to work," she said.

Ms Nabirye noted that many children drop out due to hunger and financial constraints.

"When we talk to learners, they tell us that at school, there is no food, but when they go for sand mining or other work, they earn money, sometimes Shs1,000 or even Shs3,000 per day," she said.

She added that hunger in schools is a major driver of absenteeism, with many children attending classes without food after only taking supper the previous night.

"This leads to children abandoning school because they are hungry, yet at work they can earn something to survive," she said.

She further linked the crisis to teenage pregnancies.

"Because of poverty and time spent out of school, we are seeing increased cases of teenage pregnancy and early motherhood," she said.

Equal Opportunities Commission intervention

Speaking at a sensitisation meeting at Bwondha Landing Site, EOC spokesperson Yusuf Muziransa said research by the commission showed that education remains poorly prioritised in fishing communities due to poverty, long distances to schools and negative perceptions about its value.

"Many parents in fishing communities believe education is not beneficial because some people study and still fail to get jobs," he said.

Mr Muziransa said the commission had deployed a team to investigate rising school dropouts, teenage pregnancies and early motherhood in Bwondha Town Council, noting that many affected girls never return to school after becoming pregnant.

Mr Muziransa further noted that the area has only one health centre serving several islands, with limited staff and resources, including a single midwife.

He said the commission would compile its findings into a report for relevant ministries and stakeholders, warning that teenage pregnancies and early motherhood could worsen if urgent intervention is not made.