

Why fish is expensive

Inside fish trade: Why Ugandans are priced out of their own fish



A fish trader displays one of the Nile perch at Ggaba market. Fish remains one of Uganda's key export commodities alongside coffee, tea, gold and flowers. PHOTO/MICHAEL KAKUMIRIZI



A man displays a Nile perch at Ggaba market on April 8. As Uganda's fish gained popularity in international markets, fish processing factories emerged with a focus on exports. PHOTO/MICHAEL KAKUMIRIZI

COMMODITIES RONAH NAHABWE

Whole Nile perch has become increasingly unaffordable for many ordinary Ugandans, largely because it is one of the country's most sought-after exports to Europe.

At the busy landing site of Port Bell in Luzira, the reality of Uganda's shrinking fish stocks is no longer hidden beneath the waters of Lake Victoria—it is now written on the price tag.

I had just paid Shs30,000 for a small tilapia when a fishmonger, watching the exchange, shook his head.

"The fish are no longer there," he said quietly. "What you see is very little compared to before. That is why the price keeps going up."

He paused, then added that many fishermen now hesitate to venture too far into the waters, as tighter restrictions and enforcement have made fishing increasingly risky.

Around him, the lake that once symbolised abundance now tells a different story—one of scarcity, where a staple food is steadily slipping beyond the reach of ordinary households.

Latest inflation data from the Uganda

Bureau of Statistics shows how quickly fish prices are rising.

Prices of fish—particularly smoked tilapia—have surged in recent months, with annual inflation reaching 14.3 percent in February 2026 after remaining flat in January.

Over the same period, the average price per kilogramme rose from Shs36,882 to Shs40,894.

The shift has placed fish among the key drivers of rising food inflation, alongside staples like maize flour, adding fresh pressure to already strained household budgets.

Before sunrise, Kato Musa, a fish off-cut seller in Nakawa market, carefully arranges fish heads, bones and small trimmings on his wooden stall, waiting for the first customers of the day. For many families that stop by, these off-cuts are no longer a secondary option but the only affordable way to put fish on the table.

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creasingly unaffordable for many ordinary Ugandans, largely because it is one of the country's most sought-after exports to Europe.

Its strong international demand is driven by its quality and appeal—valued for being mild in taste, easy to prepare, and versatile across different dishes forcing households to buy what remains after processing. "People come very early," Kato says. "They fear these small pieces may get finished." But why is fish expensive one may ask?

Depletion and strained supply

According to Dr Henry Opolot Nakale, Commissioner for Agriculture Extension and Skills Management at the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, the rising cost of fish is largely driven by supply constraints and growing demand.

He explains that in the 1990s, fish was abundant and sourced from nat-

ural water bodies.

However, increased commercialisation and export demand have accelerated harvesting, pushing extraction beyond natural replenishment rates.

"As Uganda's fish gained popularity in international markets, fish processing factories emerged with a focus on exports. This increased demand, while supply from natural water bodies could not keep pace," he notes.

He adds that illegal and unsustainable fishing practices—including the use of undersized nets and destruction of breeding grounds—have further depleted fish stocks, while aquaculture has not expanded fast enough to close the gap.

"With a growing population and changing diets, demand has increased, further tightening supply," he says.

Traders note that prices for whole fish continue to rise as factories purchase large quantities for export and industrial processing. The best fillets are directed to foreign markets, leaving local stalls largely stocked with heads, bones, skins, and other off-cuts.

Quality

Beyond rising prices, concerns are also emerging over quality. Some consumers

Takeaways

- Latest inflation data from Uganda Bureau of Statistics shows how quickly fish prices are rising. Prices of fish—particularly smoked tilapia—have risen in recent months, with annual inflation reaching 14.3 percent in February 2026 after remaining flat in January.
- Over the same period, the average price per kilogramme rose from Shs36,882 to Shs40,894. The shift has placed fish among the key drivers of rising food inflation.

say fish on the local market no longer tastes the same. One resident in Mutungo describes certain fish as "plastic," saying it lacks natural taste and contains more bones than flesh—an observation traders link to declining stocks and overfishing.

A market characterisation study by Kilimo Trust on the fish sector in the East African Community (EAC) shows clear differences across member states.

Tanzania has the most advanced value chain in the region, while Uganda produces higher volumes compared to its neighbours but remains less formalised.

Kenya, on the other hand, is still largely focused on domestic consumption and is less industrialised in fish processing.

The study also notes that, despite Uganda dominating intra-regional fish trade, it still exports largely low-value fish products.

Overall, the East African region records the smallest share of fish exports in Africa, highlighting limited regional competitiveness in the global fish trade.

Illegal trade and industry losses

Beyond natural supply constraints, industry data points to significant losses within the value chain.

The Uganda Fish Processors and Exporters Association (UFPEA) estimates that the sector is losing about \$1.4 billion (Shs5.5 trillion) annually due to illegal fishing activities, including smuggling of juvenile fish, trafficking of fish maws and the use of destructive "kokota" nets.

The association further reports that fish processing factories are operating at only 22 percent capacity while nearly 98,000 tonnes of fish are estimated to cross Uganda's borders untaxed each year, undermining both sustainability and export revenue.

Export strength amid scarcity

Despite domestic supply pressures, fish remains one of Uganda's key export commodities alongside coffee, tea, gold and flowers.

Latest figures show that Uganda exported about 8,427 tonnes of fish in 2024, generating approximately USD 58.8 million in earnings. New European Union market access is expected to further boost export opportunities in the coming years.

Government interventions are focusing on restocking water bodies, enforcing sustainable fishing practices, and promoting aquaculture through improved feed systems and innovations such as automated feeding. Sector projections indicate that Uganda intends to produce up to 1 million tonnes of fish annually by 2030. But current aquaculture output remains at just over 130,000 tonnes, highlighting a significant production gap.