

Regional News

From the shores of Lake Albert to landing sites on Lakes George, Edward, Victoria and Kyoga, fishermen are parking their boats and opting for alternative livelihoods.

BY MONITOR TEAM

Fishing communities across Uganda are grappling with a deepening crisis as soaring fuel prices push many out of a trade that once sustained thousands of households.

From the shores of Lake Albert in Ntoroko District to landing sites on Lakes George, Edward, Victoria and Kyoga, fishermen are parking their boats, abandoning daily expeditions and searching for alternative livelihoods.

The sharp rise in fuel costs, coupled with declining fish stocks, has made operations increasingly unsustainable for many fishermen.

In remote districts such as Ntoroko, the situation is even more severe due to limited access to fuel stations. Traders transport petrol from Fort Portal in jerrycans and resell it in small quantities at inflated prices, leaving fishermen paying between Shs8,000 and Shs10,000 per litre, nearly double the standard rate.

At Kanara Landing Site on Lake Albert, Mr Martin Bwambale says the economics of fishing no longer add up.

"Fishing has become too expensive: If you hire a boat at Shs20,000 and spend about Shs80,000 on fuel for 10 litres, that's already Shs100,000 in a day. Yet the catch is too small to cover these costs," he explains.

According to Mr Bwambale, fishermen who venture deeper into the lake require up to 10 litres of fuel daily, while those operating closer to shore use about five litres. Even then, shrinking fish stocks mean profits are minimal or non-existent.

The strain has forced many to scale back operations. Some have abandoned motorised fishing altogether and now operate along the shoreline, where fuel use is minimal but catches are significantly smaller. Others have exited the trade entirely.

"I have two boats, one for hire and one for personal use, but for a week now, no one is hiring," Mr Bwambale says.

"A boat costs about Shs5 million, an engine another Shs5 million, and good nets about Shs2 million. Now they are just parked," he adds.

Ripple through communities

The impact is being felt beyond the lakes. Reduced fishing activity has led to a decline in supply, pushing up fish prices in local markets.

In some areas, the price of fish has risen from Shs8,000 to Shs10,000 per kilogramme.

At Kasenyi Landing Site, Mr Julius Asiimwe says many fishermen have already given up.

"A litre of fuel is now at Shs10,000. For over two weeks, most boat owners have parked their boats because they cannot sustain the business," he says.

Mr Asiimwe himself has exited the trade.

"I stopped fishing and even sold my boat, although I still have my licence. Some boats need up to 20 litres a day—that's Shs200,000 just on fuel. With low



Boats at Kasenyi Landing Site on the shores of Lake George in Kaseses District. PHOTO/ALEX ASHABA

Fishermen struggle to stay float amid rising fuel prices

fish stocks, it's better to stop than to make losses," he adds.

A shift to survival

In Kagadi District, the situation is even more dire. At Ndaiga Landing Site on Lake Albert, fishermen report buying fuel at up to Shs12,000 per litre.

Many have abandoned fishing altogether and turned to farming as a temporary survival strategy.

Mr Luke Odaga, the chairperson-elect of Ndaiga Sub-county, says the rising costs have crippled livelihoods.

"Fuel prices have increased from about Shs7,000 to Shs12,000 per litre. On average, a fisherman needs at least five litres a day, but many have now parked their boats," he says.

He adds that those with access to small pieces of land have shifted to crop growing as they wait for prices to stabilise.

The effects extend to transport and trade. The cost of crossing Lake Albert between Kagadi and Ntoroko has doubled from Shs15,000 to Shs30,000, disrupting movement of both people and goods.

Mr Moses Okirwoth, the youth chairperson of Ndaiga Sub-county, says transport costs are placing additional strain on already vulnerable communities.

"Transporting fish to nearby markets like Kyaterekeru has increased from Shs8,000 to Shs20,000," he says. "Passenger fares have also doubled, which is affecting residents, especially expectant mothers who travel for healthcare services," he adds.

Busoga hit by shortages

The crisis is not confined to western Uganda. In Busoga Sub-region, particularly in Mayuge and Namayingo dis-

tricts, fishing activity has sharply declined due to both high prices and acute fuel shortages.

Mr Philemon Kudere, the head of the Search and Rescue Centre on Lake Victoria (East), says access to fuel has become increasingly difficult.

"In some areas, there is simply no fuel. Last week, we tried to secure 500 litres, but no fuel station in Jinja was willing to sell to us," he says.

Where fuel is available, it comes at a steep cost. Prices at stations near island communities have risen to around Shs8,000 per litre, while smuggled fuel now sells at about Shs160,000 for a 20-litre jerrycan, up from Shs100,000.

Despite the rising costs, the price of Nile perch has remained largely unchanged, making it difficult for fishermen to break even.

Transport costs have also increased. "A journey that used to cost Shs10,000 now goes for Shs15,000, while one that was

Shs15,000 has increased to Shs20,000," Mr Kudere says. Fishermen say they are unable to pass rising costs on to buyers due to limited bargaining power.

Mr Shadam Olwita, the chairperson of the Association of Fishers and Lake Users of Uganda (AFALU) Eastern region, says the structure of the fish market leaves fishermen vulnerable.

"Most landing sites don't have fuel stations, so fishermen rely on middlemen who resell fuel at higher prices," he explains.

"A litre now costs between Shs8,500 and Shs9,000. Yet fishermen cannot increase fish prices because factories dictate the buying price," he adds.

Market constraints worsen crisis

Currently, a kilogramme of fish sells for about Shs10,000 at factory level, and any attempt to increase the price is often rejected by buyers.

Mr Musa Dhikusooka, a fisherman in Mayuge District, says operational costs have nearly doubled.

"Previously, a fishing trip would cost about Shs80,000 in fuel. Now it costs around Shs150,000," he says.

He adds that fishing has become unpredictable, with some fishermen returning empty-handed after long trips.

Mr Dhikusooka has called for government intervention to regulate fish prices.

"The price of a kilogramme of fish should be between Shs15,000 and Shs20,000 to help fishermen recover costs and make a reasonable profit," he says.

Island communities under pressure

In Kalangala District, island communities are facing similar challenges. Petrol now retails between Shs9,000 and Shs10,000 per litre, significantly increas-

ing the cost of transport and trade.

Mr Yusiya Nkuningi, a boat operator, says the high fuel costs have reduced passenger numbers.

"In the past two days, I have only had four passengers on a trip to Buggala Island," he says. "Many operators are working under uncertainty due to high fuel costs and fewer people willing to travel," he adds.

Residents of Bukasa and Buggala Islands report both scarcity and rising prices, worsening already difficult living conditions.

On Lake Kyoga in Nakasongola District, some fishermen have resorted to non-motorised canoes to cope with rising fuel costs.

Mr Adam Omaidio, a fisherman at Zengebe Landing Site, says this shift poses serious safety risks.

"Many fishermen are stranded. Some are now using canoes, which are unsafe on the windy waters," he says.

"I used to spend about Shs25,000 on fuel per trip. Now I need over Shs50,000, which I cannot recover from the catch," he adds.

Livelihoods at risk

Across Uganda's major water bodies, the fuel crisis is reshaping livelihoods and threatening the sustainability of fishing communities.

With declining fish stocks, rising operational costs, and limited market control, many fishermen are finding it impossible to continue.

For now, boats remain docked, nets unused, and communities uncertain about what lies ahead.

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