

Employment. According to Mr Nicholas Arinaitwe Kagongo, an environmentalist, at least 5,000 people are involved in salt mining in Lake Katwe.

Salt mining leaves bitter taste for Kasese residents

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KASESE. Salt mining remains one of the major sources of livelihood for the people of Kasese residing around Lake Katwe.

Salt mining, however, comes with enormous challenges that have affected the way of life for Kasese residents.

Ms Agnes Nyangoma, 25, a salt miner at Lake Katwe in Katwe-Kabatooro Town Council, has been mining salt for 10 years.

She is among hundreds of women working at the salty lake who outlined to *Daily Monitor* in an interview some of the challenges they face.

"We believe we have made a commendable contribution to the development of this country, but we have lost our sexual appetite due to the dehydration caused by salt. Our men have abandoned us for other women who do not extract salt. This leaves us to bear the burden of single motherhood," Nyangoma says.

Nyangoma's experience is shared by other women in the area who despite the challenges can still afford a smile.

According to Mr Nicholas Arinaitwe Kagongo, an environmentalist, at least 5,000 people are involved in salt mining in Lake Katwe.

He says among the Shs5,000, about 60 per cent are women.

The women scrap the bottom of the salt pans to scoop the salt. They use their feet to crash the salt to form small/fine crystals and then wash the crystals forming edible salt. The men walk far in the waters to extract the rock salt in the shallow lake.

Ms Paskazia Queen, a single mother of 11, says she has spent 40 years in salt extraction. Queen, 50 narrates that she started extracting salt as a young girl at the age of 10.

"I work for Shs4,000 or 5,000 daily. We have health complications as a result of this job. We have body sores. We don't have protective gear," Queen says.

"It is from the Shs5,000 daily that I must feed my family and do any other domestic needs. I do not have a husband. I look after those children single handedly," Queen adds.

She says all the women in salt extraction business have to wear heavy knickers and thick pads before they go in the salty waters to protect their private parts from getting into contact with salt.

She also says they put on socks to protect their legs from getting cut by salt crystals since they do not have gumboots.

"We are dehydrated because of the salt. Our uteruses have problems, we sustain body wounds, but all in all, we have to work since we have no other source of income," Queen says.

But Dr Peter Kibingo, the Kas-



Earning a living. Women extract salt at Lake Katwe in Kasese District recently. PHOTO BY ENID NINSIMA

ese Municipality health officer, dismisses arguments that salt is responsible for their injured uteri reasoning that salt is a disinfectant that cannot affect the uterus.

"How can salt affect the uterus and yet it is a disinfectant. That is a pure lie, it can cause other health hazards but not that," Dr Kibingo says.

"We have lost our sexual appetite due to the dehydration caused by salt. Our men have abandoned us for other women who do not extract salt. This leaves us to bear the burden of single motherhood."

AGNES NYANGOMA, SALT MINER

Dr Kibingo acknowledges that salt contains hydrogen sulphide which causes allergies to some people.

"It is true salt has hydrogen sulphide that causes allergies depending on the skin type. Salt is like any other thing where people react differently," Dr Kibingo adds.

Mr Moses Balyebuga, a salt extractor, says uncircumcised men must put on condoms before they enter into water because salty water affects their private parts



Awaiting sale. Nicholas Kagongo, an environmentalist, shows heaps of rock salt on the shores of Lake Katwe recently. PHOTO BY FELIX BASIIME

more than those of circumcised men.

"We go in the middle of the lake to extract salt rocks (locally called *mahonde*). We get injured in the process, our private parts are affected," Balyebuga said.

Help

The Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) Kasese Branch manager, Ms Charity Nahabwe, says URA has decided to give the salt miners gumboots and overalls.

Mr Sulait Mabula, the acting sub-county chairperson for Katwe-Kabatooro Town Council, says the salt lake is a major source of revenue for the district local government.

"The town council gets Shs100 million per quarter as local revenue," Mabula says.

He calls upon the central government to revamp the salt industry.

"As government promotes tourism, we want it also to market our salt. We have engaged the ministries of Trade and Tourism over the same but nothing much has come up," he says.

"I believe this salt lake is the highest source of local revenue and I hope if it is developed it can help government to earn a lot of revenue," Mabula adds.

FACTS

The lake: Lake Katwe has a salt rock that lies on a contour line that connects lakes: Katwe, Muryanyange, Nyamunuka and Kasenyi (Bunyampaka).

Fresh water from the streams goes through the vents and dissolves the main rock to become a salt solution which quickly turns into salt due to evaporation.

Mining salt: The communities at Katwe-Kabatooro Town Council are surrounded by Queen Elizabeth National Park and rely on traditional solar salt mining and fishing in Lake Edward and tourism for their livelihood.

For the lake to continue the processes that leads to salt production, it needs a constant supply of fresh water from streams uphill. The fresh water then seeps into the sodium chloride rock at the bottom of the lake, dissolves its particles, and changes into salty water that is commonly called brine or saline. When this salty water returns to the surface due to pressure from the volcanic activity underneath, the water evaporates and leaves behind salt.