



Dire situation. Some of the main roads of Kacheera Sub-county. PHOTOS BY IVAN KIMBOWA

Rakai struggles with poor roads as district is split

Inherited troubles. Kyotera District assumed a life of itself on July 1, having been carved out of Rakai District. But, as **Ivan Kimbowa** reports, the biting road infrastructure problems that bedevil the greater Rakai area remain, but will the division of the district worsen or improve the situation.

"The ice melts and several tonnes of fish worth millions of shillings rots," says Mr Francis Ssekiwunga, a dealer in fish at Kasensero Landing Site. Mr Ssekiwunga and LCI Chairperson of Kagera village, Rakai District, narrates what he and his colleagues go through as they transport fish from Rakai to markets in Masaka and Kampala.

"We are forced to sell the little fish we save to fish smokers who usually offer us very low prices. The low income earners who cannot afford refrigerated vehicles incur more losses since their fish rots faster as they get stuck on the way for several hours, sometimes days, which gives them no chance of reaching market places."

Mr Ssekiwunga says they have been suffering this for years due to bad roads in the area. Recently, incensed residents blocked the road from Kasensero Landing Site until the Uganda National Roads Authority (Unra) hurriedly did some emergency grading on it.

Mr Joseph Bwanika, the district fisheries officer, says Rakai catches 3,500,000kgs of Nile perch fish, 300,000kgs of tilapia and 200,000kgs of mud fish, lung fish and other types of smaller fish every year from Lake Victoria.

Rakai's total population of half a

3500t

THE AMOUNT OF NILE PERCHE THAT MR JOSEPH BWANIKA, THE DISTRICT FISHERIES OFFICER, SAYS RAKAI CATCHES KGS OF NILE PERCH FISH, EVERY YEAR

million people, cannot consume all this fish. The poor road network in the district, which worsens during the rainy season, therefore becomes a significant hindrance to transporting the fish to far-away markets.

Rakai, before being divided into two with the coming into force of Kyotera District on July 1, had more than 850kms of unpaved (murrum) roads under the care of the district, and another 130kms under Uganda National Roads Authority (Unra). The district also had a total of 200kms of tarmac road.

Apart from fish dealers, several other road users, mainly agricultural producers and traders, incur double or triple their would-be transport costs to access markets due to the poor state of roads.

Mr Charles Njuba, the district secretary for production, says the district also produces 588,000,000kgs of bananas, 54,000,000kgs of Irish potatoes and 24,750,000kgs of coffee per year. It also produces 54,000,000kgs of cassava, 18,000,000kgs of beans and 12,000,000kgs of maize, in addition to increasing production of tomatoes, passion fruits and pineapples.

Mr Njuba estimates that Rakai loses more than 10 per cent of the local tax revenue that

would be levied from agricultural produce that fail to reach market places because of poor roads.

High-producing sub-counties suffer from very poor roads including Kyalulangira, Ddwaniro, Kagamba, Kyebe, Kirumba, Kacheera, Kibanda, and Lwamaggwa.

What makes the farmers in Rakai particularly unlucky is that the district in the recent past been hit by disasters including an earthquake and drought, when the farmers muster some harvest, they still cannot easily deliver it to the market because of poor roads.

Testimonies

"After graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration, I decided to return to my home village and concentrate on agriculture. But poor roads are frustrating the hopes of growing due to the little profits I end up getting from my produce," says Mr Abas Bukonya, 23, a farmer in Lwamaggwa Sub-county.

The prominent Irish potato, banana and maize grower says he almost incurs losses to a tune of Shs600,000 every season when produce rots as trucks get stuck in mud on the way to the market.

"I pay 200,000 shillings for a truck to ferry my produce to the markets. But when they break down or get stuck in the impassible roads, I again pay for another truck to transport the produce, which is a double cost," Mr Bukonya says.

And, he adds, the few produce he eventually delivers to the market will attract lower prices after the delays and loss in freshness.

Mr Joseph Ssebwana, a truck driver, says his vehicle often breaks down or gets stuck in mud as he ferries produce. He says he has

to incur repair costs for the truck almost ever after a trip.

"We invest too much in repairs and servicing trucks, so we have to increase the transport fees a bit in order to remain in business," Mr Ssebwana says.

Mr Chadrick Kizito, who transports bread, says they are sometimes forced to cancel their journeys when the roads become impassable, failing to deliver to their clients.

"Our clients sometimes lose trust in us because of failure to meet our appointments with them; sometimes products like bread and cakes end up rotting in stores," Mr Kizito says.

Shoddy work

In the 2015 Auditor General's report about the roads sector in Rakai District, millions of tax payers' money was wasted.

The district carried out works on Kagamba-Bhaale-Lwentulege road, for instance, at a cost of Shs 58,621,200. But during the inspection, it was observed that culverts valued at Shs 7,896,000 were not installed.

The road was therefore substandard, making it tricky for road users, especially farmers and transporters.

The same thing happened during the construction of the Lwanda-Kiwenda road, which cost Shs 43,601,000 but turned out substandard and almost impassable shortly after construction because culverts worth Shs 19,493,000 were just dumped by the road side and not installed.

Much as the Auditor General advised the accounting officer to rectify the anomalies, until now most of the culverts have not been installed.

"The road is getting back to the worst poor state it used to be before; culverts were left alongside over years now and some need to be exchanged before they are installed due to the developed cracks," Ms Hasifah Namiiro, the woman councillor for Kagamba and Ddwaniro sub-counties, said during the district council sitting held on April 20.

An official in the district engineering unit told this reporter that the money to install the said culverts was passed and released and they are following up the matter with the contractor to complete the project. But no tangible action has been carried out until now.

Mr Robert Benon Mugabi, the Rakai District chairman, says such sectors mainly trade; agriculture and fisheries need good roads if the district is to develop.

"As the district we try to construct most of the budgeted roads though not to best required standards due to limited funding; but the central government has been reluctant to construct and complete the roads within its jurisdiction," Mr Mugabi says.

Mr Amos Mandela, the chairperson of the Rakai District Roads Committee, says most of the roads in the district need to be upgraded from earth to murrum and culverts installed to enable proper drainage.

He says the existing murrum roads also need to be reconstructed to better standards in order to last longer.

Mr Mandela advises that at least some productive roads such as Kyapa-Kasensero road should be tarmacked to ease transportation of fish from which the district earns a lot of revenue.

"It is quite absurd that Kasensero road has been undergoing regular maintenance over the years by Unra and was recently sub-contracted to a company which re-graded it and left before upgrading it with murrum and is now in most rotten state," Mr Mandela says.



Evaluation. A team headed by Amos Mandela (left), and other district officials inspect CAIIP team at Kagamba.

Mr Mandela says they contracted Community Agriculture Infrastructure Improvement Programme (CAIIP) to upgrade three community roads at a cost of over Shs 750 million. The roads include Kyondo-Kyakalasa (10.4km), Lwentulege-Mpaama-Kakenke-Nabizzi (6km) and Kagamba-Kizira-Kibindi (5.6km).

Although the roads were expected to be completed by February 2017, Mr Henry Wangi, the Rakai District engineer, says they couldn't embark on the project earlier this year due to heavy rains.

Protests over poor roads

Because of the poor state of roads, Rakai has experienced a series of protests, especially in the sub-counties of Kagamba, Ddwaniro and Kyebe.

In some communities where roads have been constructed, residents complain that a very thin layer of murrum is splattered on top of the road, making its lifespan much shorter. Also, residents say, the trenches that are dug to drain runoff water are too small and the culverts that are used are cracked.

"We were told that the contractor was supposed to put four inches of murrum on our road, but they put only one inch. And when it rained the little murrum was also washed away, leaving the road in a deplorable state," Mr Crepon Kamanyire, a resident of Kizira village, says.

Mr Christopher Kateregga, a resident of Kimindi village, says the roads are too slippery and impassable due to lack of enough murrum and enough culverts. He says transporters are forced to hike the fares since they spend a lot of time to reach their respective destinations.

Mr Wangi, the district engineer, however, insists that they are doing all in their powers to improve on the road sector. He says they are tightly supervising the contractors, saying that the contractors will only receive payment after the roads have been fully inspected and their standards verified.

But on some roads under government control, such as Kyapa-Kasensero road, residents of Kyebe and fishermen from Kasensero Landing Site have had frequent demonstrations and strikes against the increased potholes.

The most recent strikes happened in April this year after vehicles failed to cross from the landing site to access Mutukula road.

The angry residents and fishermen planted banana stems in the middle of the road to express their displeasure. This is the only road connecting to Kasensero Landing Site, one of the leading fish production sites on Lake Victoria in Uganda with a population of over 7,264 residents.

The existing murrum coating was cleared off by the sub-contractor, who then left without laying new murrum. When it started raining, gullies were created by

running water. Potholes multiplied.

As a remedial action, Unra took over from the sub-contractor and did emergency grading to enable the fishermen and other users run their businesses, although the sub-contractor was expected to resume the work and complete their paid task.

What is clear, however, is that this is not the best way to fix the road network in Rakai, on which the livelihoods and chances of prosperity for thousands hinge.

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