

Uniform licensing fuels exodus

Your Excellency, for generations, indigenous communities across Uganda have depended on nature for survival. In Buganda and Bugisu, coffee farmers have traditionally looked to land to grow the crop. Elsewhere, pastoral communities, like the Kari-mojong and Basongora, have relied on grazing land for animal husbandry before their total displacement from today's Kidepo Valley and Queen Elizabeth national parks, respectively. Likewise, indigenous fishing communities around Lakes Edward and George and the Kazinga Channel, including a section of the Basongora who turned to fishing after government-induced displacement from their ancestral grazing lands, have historically relied on the lakes as their "gardens" and "open fields" for their livelihood, identity and survival.

Today, your government has proposed a "one-size-fits-all" licensing approach—particularly the reported cap of 33 fishing vessel licences (FVLs) per landing site on controlled lakes. I wish to discuss this proposal because it threatens to economically suffocate long-established communities that have depended on lakes for generations.

While it is true that government has a duty to regulate fisheries and protect fish stocks from depletion, there is growing concern that this approach has become excessively restrictive, punitive in a colonial-era fashion and detached from the realities of indigenous communities. The FVLs on these lakes are not mere commercial permits in the ordinary sense. In many families, they have existed for decades, albeit differently, passed from one generation to another with little change in ownership. Families have raised children, educated generations and sustained entire communities through fishing.

Your Excellency, at a meeting with selected fishing communities and other stakeholders on August 7, 2025 in Jinja, you indicated that

Government should conduct public participation with the affected communities...



management and control of these lakes and others would gradually return to indigenous communities, as it were before 2017. That statement gave hope to many, as it appeared to acknowledge that certain destructive fishing practices were largely associated with migratory, illegal actors who entered the lakes without historical attachment to them.

Unfortunately, recent directives communicated through security and fisheries structures seem to move in the opposite direction. At all five landing sites in Kasese, Kitagwenda, Rubirizi and Rukungiri districts, there are deeply disturbing realities. Fear, uncertainty and hopelessness are increasingly visible among the licencees, particularly the elderly. These have no realistic alternative source of livelihood. To them, the lake is not simply water; it is their garden, their inheritance and their economic foundation. Yet today, communities are being informed of drastic reductions under a uniform policy framework that appears to disregard population differences, economic realities, historical dependence and even comparative lake sizes.

The concerns become even more serious when one examines the comparative geography of lakes Edward and George vis-à-vis the allocated FVLs. Uganda's 29 percent share

of Lake Edward translates into roughly 675 square kilometres of water surface under its jurisdiction, making it nearly three times larger than Lake George, which measures about 250 square kilometres. Yet despite this disparity in size, the proposed allocation framework would grant Lake Edward only 165 FVLs, while Lake George's landing sites would collectively receive 297 FVLs.

Your Excellency, there is growing fear that this directive unintentionally fuels displacement, poverty and social instability among indigenous communities. Many Basongora families have already suffered historical displacement through conservation policies that led to the creation of Queen Elizabeth National Park. Restricting long-standing fishing livelihoods without carefully designed transitional measures risks forcing many into another cycle of economic exile.

Instead, government should conduct public participation with the affected communities to inform a needs-based and lake-sensitive licensing framework, consider fish stock assessments and prioritise indigenous fishing communities with historical dependence on the lakes before implementing drastic policy changes.

Your Excellency, the Basongora and other communities around these lakes are not enemies of conservation. They are among the people most interested in preserving the lakes because their survival depends on them.

I therefore humbly appeal to Your Excellency to reconsider the current fisheries directives and ensure that Uganda adopts a fair, consultative and proportionate licensing system that protects both fish stocks and indigenous livelihoods.

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