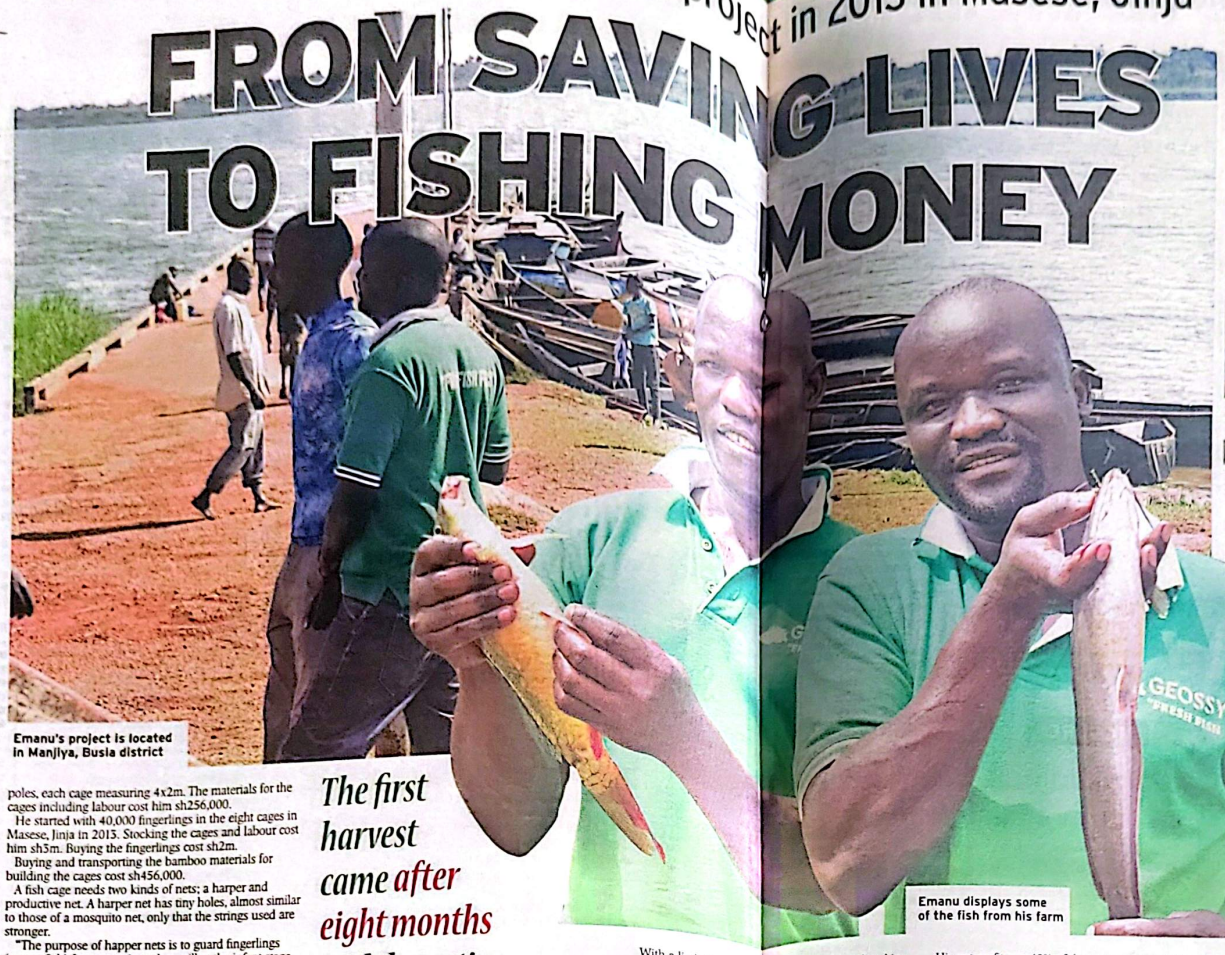
HARVEST MONEY

FROM SAVING LIVES TO FISHING MONEY

Emanu started the cage fish farming project in 2013 in Masese, Jinja

Vision Group, in partnership with dfcu Bank, the Netherlands Embassy in Uganda and KLM Airlines, is searching for Uganda's best farmers. Every Tuesday, we shall profile nominated farmers until October when a panel of judges shall select the best. Sh150m and a trip to the Netherlands await the best farmers to be announced in November.



Emanu's project is located in Manjiya, Busia district

Emanu displays some of the fish from his farm

The first harvest came after eight months and the entire stock weighed 40,085kg

By Moses Nampala

It is quite unusual today for one to join the civil service only to quit the job five years later to start his own business. This is what Georwell Emanu did.

When the 32-year-old, qualified as an entomologist from Mulago nine years ago, he was posted at Tororo Hospital. His qualification meant he specialised in handling patients with ailments contracted after being stung by insects or vectors.

However, after five years of service, Emanu left that to try his hand in fish farming.

The decision attracted criticism and pity from his peers, with some saying he was insane.

Starting the project at Masese, Jinja

He started the cage fish farming project in 2013 in Masese, Jinja on the shores of Lake Victoria, with sh4m he had saved while working at Tororo Hospital. Four years down the road, Emanu's cage farming enterprise has grown tremendously.

Fish cages are placed in lakes, ponds, rivers or oceans to contain and protect fish until they can be harvested. The method is also called off-shore cultivation. Fish are stocked in cages, artificially-fed and harvested when they mature.

The cages vary in size. Each of the cages is about 5x5 metres. The boxes are interlinked by pipes and a wooden bridge on which caretakers use during harvesting and feeding. The interlinked structure can be as long as 100 metres.

Notable among Emanu's income-generating projects arising from cage farming, is his consultancy firm GEOSSY, which generates not less than sh52m annually. The firm offers advice on cage fish farming.

Others are his mirror cap and catfish enterprise he runs alongside his hatchery at Agururu in Tororo.

He has since established an aqua-feeds factory at his home in Orioyi, as well as, a tilapia fish hatchery unit that supplies over a million fingerlings annually.

Early this year, he ventured into cultivating cereal crops, particularly maize. He grew on a hired 200-acre land in Utro zone in Tororo.

He won $200,000 from a concept paper on cage fish farming, which he presented at a global conference for young entrepreneurs held in Seattle, US in February last year. He won after his concept was not only considered among the best, but the cheapest for young entrepreneurs. He also got another $5,000 from the Tony Elumelu Young Entrepreneurs conference in Lagos, Nigeria last year.

How he started

Emanu started with eight fish cages made from bamboo poles, each cage measuring 4x2m. The materials for the cages including labour cost him sh256,000.

He started with 40,000 fingerlings in the eight cages in Masese, Jinja in 2013. Stocking the cages and labour cost him sh3m. Buying the fingerlings cost sh2m.

Buying and transporting the bamboo materials for building the cages cost sh456,000.

A fish cage needs two kinds of nets; a harper and productive net. A harper net has tiny holes, almost similar to those of a mosquito net, only that the strings used are stronger.

"The purpose of happer nets is to guard fingerlings (young fish) from escaping when still at the infant stage into the lake," stresses Emanu.

Emanu says he started by buying old harper nets from fishermen and hired people to mend them before stitching them.

"A harper net that could fit on each of the cage frames, plus labour cost me sh30,000," recalls Emanu. The total expenses for the happer net was sh240,000.

Unlike the happer net, the productive net has considerably bigger holes.

"Just like the happer nets, the productive nets guard the fish stock from escaping from the cage as fish grows bigger until harvest time," Emanu explains.

Mistake

The beginning of every business is usually challenging and one is bound to make mistakes.

"Prior selecting the right species in January 2013, I suffered a grave loss. Initially I had rushed for cheap fingerlings from a hatchery in Kaijansi in Wakiso district, only to rear the fingerlings for two solid months without showing any growth. I abandoned the stock and the feeds and start afresh, but this time round looking for reputable hatchery (Bamukwasi hatchery in Tororo)," he regretfully attests.

Fresh fish stock start in March 2013

The rough experience compelled him to look out for reputable fish suppliers.

"Owing to the big quantity of fingerlings that required to stock the eight cages, I was able to obtain a discount as the management of the hatchery accepted to supply me with a total of 40,000 fingerlings each fingerling at sh50 from their original price of sh200," he recalls. The total cost of the fingerlings was sh2m.

Feeding stock

Part of the extensive research he had undertaken both before the inception of the cage fish farming project and after, had been the feeds mixture.

With a limited resource envelop, he considered making his own aqua feeds, a mixture that includes maize brand and animal blood, among others.

According to Emanu, in the first one month, the stock per cage in a month ate four meals a day and the fingerlings would feed on 100kg per month. "The quantity of feeds consumed would go up to three bags per bag, per cage in a month as the stock grows up. Each bag weighs 100kg," he explains.

Turning point

As months went by, the stock in the cages grew bigger so much so that whoever visited the cages would want to be educated on cage fish farming, to which Emanu obliged, but for a fee. The demand for people seeking to start cage farming compelled him to establish a fully-fledged office for consultancy services. "I started reaping from the consultancy shortly after my first stock turned four months. Four months later, the consultancy had brought in sh30m," Emanu says.

First harvest

The first harvest came after eight months. The entire stock that he harvested weighed 40,085kg. He sold a kg of fish at a farm gate price of sh4,000. He earned sh160m after the sales.

His net profit was 40% of the gross earnings (sh64m). The 60% (sh96m) covered the costs.

After the first harvest, Emanu's immediate priority was to acquire his own hatchery. "Around that time, Bamukwasi were going through a serious financial crisis and were considering floating all their shares," he says.

In 2014, Emanu jumped on the opportunity, buying the entire hatchery at sh40m. He spent another sh10m to rehabilitate and increase the number of nursery ponds from 10 to 25.

Second fish stock

In 2014, Emanu consolidated all his saving, including the ones he got from consultancy and doubled the number of fish cages to 16.

Only that, this time round, he also relocated his fish cage farming site from Masese to Majanji in Busia district. He moved to Majanji because this was near his fingerling ponds in Tororo. After eight months, he harvested 90,034 kg of fresh tilapia. This earned him a gross of sh361m.

Market for fish

Before he relocated to Majanji, he sold his fish to local fish dealers. "Since I relocated my enterprise to Majanji, the biggest percentage of my clients have been Kenyan fish traders. Their offer for a kilogramme of fish is much higher than what our Ugandan traders offer," Emanu explains.

Dealing with fish theft

Emanu says to succeed in cage fish farming, one has to appreciate the fishing community, otherwise they can work against the enterprise.

He argues that to counter the threat, he hires former fish thieves to guard his cages as they usually know the culprits.

"As long as you pay them well, they will never touch your fish, let alone allowing their counterparts to plunder the cages," he stresses.

How to grow fish in cages

With more savings, Emanu increased the size of the cages from the 4x2 metres to 5x5 metres. This increased the productivity of the enterprise, as each of the cages would have a holding capacity of 10,000 fingerlings.

For the last two years, his investment has scaled up from 16 small fish cages, each with a holding capacity of 5,000 fingerlings to 109 bigger fish cages (5x5m) with a holding capacity of a stock of 10,000 fingerlings. The gross stock in the two occasions in 2015 and 2016 was at 1,090,000 tilapia fish.

Cost of production

"In summary, 80% of the gross turnover goes to production inputs, taxes, wage bill, while 10% goes to capital development and 10% goes to savings," he says.

He employs 87 workers.

The enterprise has also created another indirect opportunities to 500 people.

Among the labour force on his farm, are species analysts and aqua-feed analysts.

"They evaluate the growth and content nutritional values," stresses Emanu.

WHAT OTHERS SAY

Geoffrey Ssali 28, agronomist
He is such an outgoing employer devoid of the fond pomp employers his age would exude. He is indulgent and treats his employees like his brothers

Peter Manyasi, agronomist
He creates a sense of re-newed hope to crest-fallen young men like us.

Emanu with his family in Tororo

ACHIEVEMENTS

Consultancy work

Besides the principal cage fish farming enterprise, his dynamism and innovativeness has not only turned him to be more resourceful to other people, but he has been able to create a cage fish consultancy firm boasting an annual turnover of about sh52m.

Emanu has also bought a a 10-acre piece of land in a the prime area of Tororo, where he intends to establish an ultra modern fish hatchery. He is also a big taxpayer in the area.

"The Busia district local council authority leadership has allowed me to utilise Majanji landing site facility that had long outlived its usefulness because the conventional fish folk had run out of business," he says with a beaming smile. Among the key issues the enterprise has offered has been to build an aspiratory attitude among the youth, he has 20 youth groups to start cage fish farming at Majanji in Busia.

Challenges

With the natural fish stock depleted due to poor fishing methods on the lake, operating cage fish farming on the virtually empty lake puts cage fish farmers in the firing line of predators, these include birds and bigger fish species such as the Nile perch.

Emanu says cage fish farmers ought to commit money to guarding the stock from preying birds.

Plans

"I want to work the Government to develop cage fish farming and train the scores of the unemployed youth across the country to embrace this enterprise. It could also boost the economy as the volume of fish export would increase," stresses Emanu.

Background

Georwell Emanu is the third born of George E a retired primary school teacher and Susan E a nursing sister of Orioyi in Osukuru sub-co Tororo district on August 12 1985.

He went to Manjasi High School and Toror Progressive Academy for O' and A' level resp He then joined Mulago Paramedical School entomology. Emanu is married to Martha A Emanu and the couple has four children.

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