What is wrong with Uganda's water transport?

BY SAMUEL BALAGADDE AND ANGEL NABWETEME

The Government has announced that the Kampala-Port Bell railway line will be revamped to link Kampala and Mwanza port in Tanzania, as well as Kisumu port in Kenya. The rehabilitation work, which is being undertaken by the Uganda Railways Corporation (URC), is in the final stages of completion.

According to Charles Ruzige, the officer in charge of the marine transport department at URC, the wagon ferry, MV Kawa, is now in sound condition and is expected to resume normal operations between Port Bell and Mwanza.

But, while that will be a step in the right direction, it is also a drop in the ocean of the things to do about Uganda's water transport, which is one of the most underutilised resource that has nothing to write home about.

Uganda is endowed with many water bodies, most of which are navigable. If water transport was developed, Uganda would have a direct route to the Mediterranean Sea, through South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt, on River Nile. Passengers and goods would be ferried on Lakes Victoria, Albert and Edward, linking countries, businesses, islanders and tourists better, and at a cheaper cost.

Water transport is cheaper, has a big carriage capacity, opens access to remote shorelines, leads to development of ports and connects villages along the banks of rivers, which cannot be crossed by road.

WHAT IS THERE?

Uganda has about nine inland ferries: the Masindi ferry (Masindi-Lango route), Nakiwogo ferry (Mpigi-Entebbe route), Buvuma ferry, Bukakata-Kalangala ferry, Kiyindi-Buvuma ferry and Lake Bisina in Soroti. Others are Kayunga-Mbulamuti in Busoga, Obongi-Moyo and Nakasongola-Teso route on Lake Kyoga.

But that seems to be all. After the 2005 mid-lake collision of Lake Victoria wagon ferries, MV Kaawa and MV Kabalega, Kabalega submerged. The other, MV Pamba, was also grounded for non-conformity to seaworthiness and needs about $4m (about sh14b) rehabilitation to operate. The country had been relying on only MV Kalangala and Tanzania's Umoja ferry for over six years.

MV Kawa was rehabilitated in 2012, but still lies idle at the pier because the Port Bell-Kampala railway collapsed. There are two private players: MV Amani, a passenger ferry plying the Port Bell-Kalangala route, but without a steady schedule.

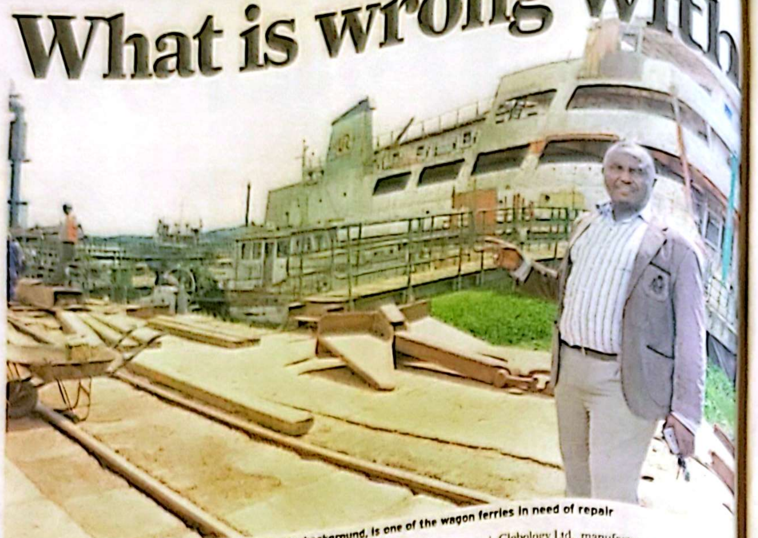
THE PROBLEM

Uganda has no river ports. The only inland ports, the Jinja pier, Port Bell and Kyoga Port, lack handling equipment, storage capacity and can hardly attract any investor.

The Rift Valley Railways, which has the concession to operate Uganda Railways, has only three wagon ferries on Lake Victoria, with a maximum capacity of 880 tonnes. The ships are old fashioned and not attractive for passengers or luxury rides. Travelling from Port Bell to Mwanza, a journey of 864km, takes a day and Port Bell to Kisumu, 13 hours.

The biggest problem is the number of people who drown as a result of this rudimentary transport use and management. According to a study titled: *Drowning in the Great Lakes of Uganda: a Neglected Problem* by Mable Nakitto, Boniface Mutatina, Bonnie Wandera and Ronald Lett for the Canadian Network for International Surgery, drowning is the leading cause of injury deaths in Uganda.

The study says the phenomenon is so common that there are neither community studies nor mandatory death registrations to drowning-related data. The study had, therefore, to record only those deaths from print media reports in four English newspapers published between January and July 2010. It revealed that of the 98 cases, a total of 61 (62.2%) drowning deaths were confirmed, while a total of 21 (21.4%) survived. Survival and rescue of the capsizing incidents stood at 5.3% and drowning trauma affected 2,834 people.



Renovation work going on at the Port Bell Pier. In the background, is one of the wagon ferries in need of repair

The study noted that there was no systematic process to record and track drowning-related incidents and deaths. And hospital-based trauma registries greatly underestimate the burden of drowning.

Vincent Ssebuggwawo, a boat builder at Ggaba landing site in Kampala, attributed the capsizing incidents to boat quality.

"The Government has not supported us to improve on our skills or acquire capital to inject into building better boats," he said.

"The cost of production of boats has also shot up, with increased timber prices. With shortage of better timber, boat building standards have been left in the hands of commercial dealers whose interests are mainly profit-oriented," he said.

INVESTOR FAILURE

Such problems have caused the failure to attract investors. The latest to give up was Globology Ltd, manufacturers and operators of modern water vessels from Kisumu, Kenya. They brought MV Captain Dan, a water bus at Masese landing site in Jinja, but closed business hardly a year after acquiring an operator license from the Ministry of Works and Transport.

Their modern vessel was designed in passenger bus format, spacious and comfortable. It was plying different islands on Lake Victoria as a pilot project to gauge the viability of the business with a projection of expanding services to other islands on Lake Victoria and other navigable waters in the country. They started operating the Masese-Sigulu route, Masese – Buvuma and other routes, charging almost the same fares with the local motorable boats, but rudimentary boats.

But a few months after commencement, operators of engine boats organised a syndicated competition. They teamed up to lower the fares in order to throw the water bus, which was a threat to their trade, out of business. Some started charging the fare of one way for to and fro, while others offered credit services mainly to traders who would pay later, after selling their fish. The water bus could not compete. It closed business.

Moses Musana, a businessman at Sigulu islands, said as soon as it announced closure, wooden boat operators resumed their old ways of operation; mainly overloading, hiking fares and poor customer care.

LIMITED GOVT ATTENTION

Water transport has been neglected by the Government, giving rise to local boat operators to dominate the industry with rudimentary boats, no navigation systems, no docking facilities, no organised routes and no accident prevention means.

The Minister of Works and Transport, Monica Ntege Azuba, attributes this to lack of funds. She, however, says the Government has stabilised the current water transport capacity and only awaits usage by the public. She says Port Bell and Jinja piers will be rehabilitated and upgraded, to attract more and modern vessels for both passengers and cargo. The ongoing plan for the new port at Bukasa is among the modern facilities in the region and is expected to put Uganda at the forefront. "More ferries are being procured and this signals progress in the industry," she said.

Ruzige says the main problem has been solved. "When Uganda privatised cargo transportation, things worsened. In fact, Tanzania faced the same problems, but reacted faster to terminate their concession. For us, MV Kawa, which was rehabilitated in 2012, has been lying idle at the pier, despite the numerous business opportunities," he said. "MV Pamba has been grounded since 2005 and awaits rehabilitation at about $4m (about sh14b) to operate, along with MV Kawa. Each of these has an average of 44 goods containers, of 20ft. When fully functional, they can make 11 round trips per month," Ruzige added.

Economists estimate that ferrying goods from Kisumu to Kampala would cut costs of transport to 30% and enable lower prices for Ugandans who depend on Kenyan domestic products by 77%.

David Muwanga, the central corridor country media co-ordinator for Uganda, said the Government signed a memorandum of understanding with Tanzania in July last year, revamp water transport between Port Bell and Mwanza.

Rukara said there is a law, enacted by the East African Legislative Assembly, which seeks to streamline the registration and licensing of vessels on Lake Victoria, safety of passengers, cargo, and competence of vessel crew, among others. It empowered each member state to enforce the regulations for the area of the respective lake it shares.

"Currently, we are mobilising all boat operators on all navigable waters to register their vessels with us. We want to inspect them to ascertain the seaworthiness and later issue them with the operator license," Rukara said.

Outdated regulations

In Kalangala district, out of the 84 islands, only Bugala can be accessed by a ferry from Entebbe and Masaka. The vast part of water transport is dominated by informal sector operators with individually owned boats and canoes, known as *Kinaala*. They carry everything, from people and animals to merchandise and motorcycles. They are often overloaded, risky and are operated by unskilled labour.

However, these boats are also few, costly and slow. Sometimes, expectant mothers and the sick are forced to hire them to access professional medical care, at exorbitant rates.

Education also suffers, since most islands do not have schools and it is impossible for the children to commute daily. Health workers and teachers working on various islands also spend a huge fraction of their meagre salaries travelling to Kalangala district's mainland for their money. The same applies to Lake Bunyonyi's 29 islands.

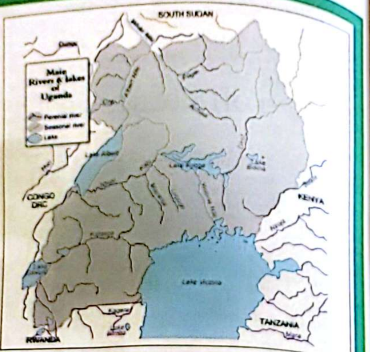
According to George Rukara, the commissioner for maritime administration in the Ministry of Works and Transport, the country does not have a transport policy that is relevant to the modern needs of the country and technology.

"Some of the existing water transport regulations are over 100 years old, with the latest being the 2007 Lake Victoria Transport Act, which only applies to one lake. The ministry is trying to amend some of the outdated regulations and some Bills are already in Parliament," said Rukara.

Alexander Buaberg, an International Maritime Organisation consultant, agrees with Rukara,.

"Some of the current conventions are outdated and need to be reviewed, to match the modern situation," he said. "The current water vessels are controlled by semi-skilled people and the vessels are not of international standards."

Bernard Khabakha, an inspector of vessels in the Ministry of Works and Transport, said there are no modern vessels, and



yet, the locally built wooden boats are not supervised. Without enforcement, boat operators overload and deliberately refuse to use life-jackets.

"The Government also does not know how many boats there are in the country, how many are water worthy, how many carry cargo or passengers, and which ones should be taxed. There is no money, staff, interest or assistance at navigable waters to assist new investors or upgrade old transporters. The lake is an open resource for anybody to try their luck," he said.

Other problems include the water hyacinth, insufficient navigation aids and the fall in water levels.

Individually owned boats tend to overload and hike prices since there are no laws to regulate them

MV Captain Dan, a water bus at Masese landing site in Jinja. It closed business a few months later after engine boat operators launched a synchronised competition strategy against it

MV Kalangala ship is undergoing service at Port Bell port in Luzira. It is expected to be back on the waters of Lake Victoria by end of April

Master plan in the pipeline

As Uganda's population takes an upward curve, more business opportunities are opening up. Cross-border trade is becoming more lucrative than local trade, and development is increasingly being dependent on a better transport network.

Minister Azuba says the Government has created a good environment for investors and rehabilitated Port Bell and Jinja piers. The ministry is also undertaking development of the New Kampala Port as a joint venture with Tanzania to serve Arusha, Musana and Bukasa.

"We have carried out studies to assess how to create an integrated road, rail and water transport. The recommendations in the study report are summed up into a 20-year water transport master plan, with a capital investment of $484m (about sh1.7 trillion). We are just waiting for the funds to be released," she said.

According to the minister, the Government has also procured ferries to work as "road bridges" between different road systems severed by water.

Rukara says the process of amending outdated water transport regulations is already underway and before Parliament. He said currently, they are mobilising all boat operators to register for inspection to ascertain the seaworthiness and get an operator licence.

"With enforcement, only licensed vessels will be allowed to operate, translating into reduced accident and unfair competition among operators," he said..

"Elimination of vessels that do not meet the requirement will facilitate fair competition among those willing to invest in water transport with modern and convectional vessels."

Azuba, minister of Works and Transports