

Where our sand is taken

Dilemma. In 2014, Uganda earned Shs18m from 14 tonnes of sand exported. In 2015, 22 tonnes of sand earned the country Shs253m. But it is not clear whether a number of firms exporting sand are paying taxes amid environment conservation concerns, Walter M. Mwesigye explores.

Uganda in the eyes of fortune hunters largely from the West and China, is a treasure trove. The British were our masters during the imperialism era. Today, the Chinese have taken their coveted position with a subtler approach than the West, anchored on a windfall of loans and development projects to pacify indigenous communities and plant African regimes.

Lake Victoria, is the second largest fresh water body in the world. This catchment area covering 71,000 square miles is a home to a diverse range of flora and fauna species. But it is under threat by illegal activities, especially sand mining. A Chinese firm Mango Tree Ltd with links to the President's brother Gen Salim Saleh is among those carrying out sand mining.

It is not yet clear whether this firm is exporting sand. However, according to figures obtained from Uganda Revenue Authority, China in the throes of industrialisation, is among the leading countries importing sand from Uganda.

Importing countries

In 2014, Uganda earned a paltry Shs18m from 14 tonnes of sand exported. In 2015, 22 tonnes of sand earned the country Shs253m, in 2016 19 tonnes of sand earned the country Shs4m and three tonnes of export last year brought into the coffers Shs16m.

Mr Dicksons Collins Kateshumbwa, the Uganda Revenue Authority commissioner for customs, did not, by press time, respond to our calls to answer queries, including the disparities in the amount of money earned each year from sand sales.

WHAT THEY SAY...

Christine Akello: "We have to be mindful where we put our capital, where we put our focus for wealth creation, not into resources that are already fragile in nature".

Gen Salim Saleh: "We have told you the demand for sand by the Standard Gauge Railway. We have told you the capability of this company as regards dredging the lake and putting ports."

Mary Kitutu: "We are monitoring and we have reports so whoever queries can come to us for explanation. Scientifically, that is correct. Parliament told us to stop because they wanted us to put the laws in place to regulate because everybody now thinks they can mine and sell sand."

It is also not clear whether a number of firms exporting the sand are paying taxes in a lucrative business that remains opaque.

Other countries, which are purchasing Uganda's sand are South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, United Kingdom and Morocco. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) survey reveals that sand and gravel account for up to 85 per cent of everything mined globally each year. Demand for sand is spread unevenly across the globe. Building booms in China and India have increased the need for sand in those markets.

Globally, China accounts for a fifth of the world's sand imports, according to the trade statistics branch of the United Nations.

This is because of the frenzied development of new dams, roads, buildings and factories. The country has used more sand in the last four years than the US in the last century.

The voracious demand has now sparked a murky trade in Uganda, where petty traders run cartels on behalf of their puppet masters.

Unlicensed firms

Through a number of correspondents, we were able to establish that there are a number of unlicensed firms that are exporting the finer part of sand, which is gravel. Among the firms, is one run by this man we can only identify as Patrick. It is based in Kapeeka, Luwero District.

In this recorded interview on a mobile phone, we explore how possible it is to but sand for exporting to China.

The man on the phone is Patrick and this is the conversation. "Where are you going to supply the sand?" asks Patrick. "I am exporting to China, I have some Chinese that want it." I was supplying them with fish and they told me they want sand too," my colleague responds.

"Where did you get my number?" asks Patrick. "I got your number from a truck driver who transports sand in Luwero." "Communicate with that person who gave you my number, so we can do business. I am ready to work with you because I can get what you want but I want to first understand you properly," he replies with a tinge of suspicion.

Patrick adds, "I have not yet

trusted you properly. Nowadays the business is risky. But if I get to know you, we will work and you too will be pleased."

We later plan to film him secretly as he delivered the sample of the sand we were seeking to export. But fearing this could be a trap, he switches off his phone.

For those like Mr Sam Mukholi who has been in the business for 13 years, sand mining is lucrative. "The sand is business. For example, can you stop me from mining sand here? I just have to get sand from here and use it for construction or sell it for money," he says.

According to Mr Mukholi, the construction boom in some parts of the world has driven the demand of the golden grain to new heights.

He says sand is extracted from Lake Victoria, packed and exported. "There is the type they take to be mixed in chicken feeds and the other is taken to sieve water. The rest I am not sure but sand is exported," he says.

He says the buyers who are largely Chinese and Nigerians look for a specific type of sand, which is sieved according to grades, packed and taken.

Unlike sand for construction, which is displayed to attract buyers, gravel has a specific market.

"There are contacts we work with who call the buyers once the gravel is available," says the source.

Sand and gravel are used in the construction industry to make concrete and asphalt but have more uses, including making glass, electronics and also used in extraction of oil.

Disagreement

Wakiso District leaders are sharply divided over the issue with those seeking to invest dangle carrots.

In March 2017, the Wakiso District chairperson, Mr Matia Lwanga Bwanika, clashed with Chinese who were illegally mining sand at Lugumba Landing Site.

Trouble began when Mr Bwanika accompanied by his deputy, Mr Betty Naluyima, and the district environment officer, Mr Esau Mpoza, among others, carried out an impromptu visit of the sand-mining site and asked why the Chinese were excavating sand in contravention of a directive by the district to suspend the activity.

Mr Bwanika ordered their arrest, which culminated into a fist fight. Whereas some sites have been closed, others remain open.

In November 2017, a Nigerian national drowned at this site in Bwaise Katabi Town Council, Entebbe, following a sting operation by the National Environment Authority.

Jessie Kiddi was a manager of Porch mining company, that had been mining sand for more than two



Profitable. Some of the sand that is collected at Mango Tree Group site. The sand was dredged from Lake Victoria recently. PHOTO BY JOSEPH KIGUNGU

years. Since then, the dredger machines were withdrawn.

When we visit the area, there is almost no work going on but the fresh tread marks and small heaps of sand are proof that some activity is still happening probably by the locals.

Excavators, dredgers and fresh sand are found at another site in Bukaa, Katabi Town Council.

Sources say Nigerian nationals are responsible for the illegal activities here.

Some of the locals we speak to express uncertainty over these projects.

"This is the only way we can earn a living despite destroying the environment," says a man who only identifies himself as Ezeza.

We move further to Nalugala in Entebbe on a boat due to the hostile nature of the people working at the site. From a distance, we took pictures of this active dredger.

We later move to the site. After negotiations, we are provided rules on how to film.

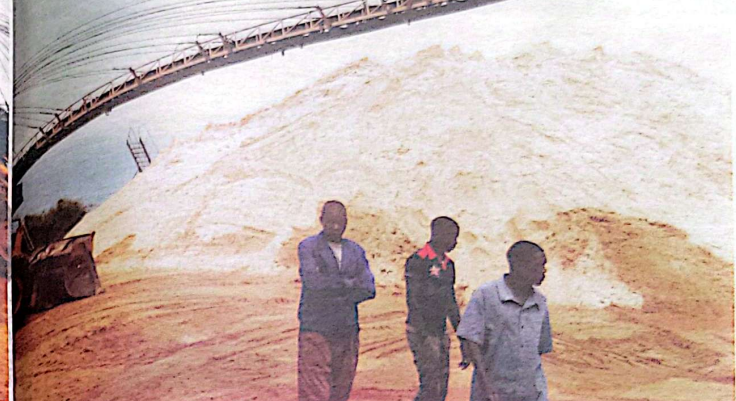
Mr Sam Mukholi claims Nema authorised their activities.

"We get permits and they expire then we renew them again and work," he says.

I ask Mukholi if he was aware that sand mining in lake Victoria is illegal and this is his response.

"You can't stop us, are you saying there is no smuggling in the country, aren't there people who have been arrested? If you want lake sand, it has to come from the lake. I was arrested by Nema onetime, I tasked them to give us areas to legally extract sand and pay taxes. If they don't do that we shall continue to steal the sand and the government will lose."

He says they work with foreigners who have faster and improved meth-



Against the practice. Matia Lwanga Bwanika, Wakiso chairperson



Says it is illegal. Christine Akello, deputy executive director of Nema



Defends mining. Gen Salim Saleh, Operation Wealth Creation coordinator

ods of mining. "The Nigerians come with their technology and employ us. They ask us where the sand is and we show them," he revealed.

Protection

Recently, Mango Tree Group, a Chinese company mining sand in Kavuku Village on the shores of Lake Victoria was halted by Nema and the Wakiso District Council.

Ms Christine Akello, the deputy executive director of Nema, says Mango Tree Group has never been given a licence to mine sand.

"The only certificate they have is an environmental impact assessment in regards to ship building services operations," says Ms Akello.

However, Gen Saleh, who is the coordinator of Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), threw his clout behind the Chinese firm.

While at press conference in January, Gen Saleh said the Chinese need the sand to construct industries in

Namunkeke Industrial Park in Nakaseke District.

"That is their job but the district local governments have become a problem to them and they don't have anywhere to report. So, for us as OWC we came out to support them and told them not to fear, we shall argue out your case at any level," Saleh opined.

General Saleh said if they are not allowed to get sand, a number of projects will stall.

"We have told you the demand for sand by the Standard Gauge Railway. We have told you the capability of this company as regards dredging the lake and putting ports," he said.

However, Ms Akello says caution should be taken if activities of sand mining are to be taken into the lake.

"Because the changes in climate are not favourable to us if the lake could dry up two times before when our population was less than 6 million people how about now when we

are going to 40 million people, how about now when have more industrial processes and more demand for water for consumption," she argues.

Minister warns

Ms Akello says the legitimate plans for wealth creation and improving livelihoods of people should not be done to benefit a few people.

"We have to be mindful where we put our capital, where we put our focus for wealth creation, not into resources that are already fragile in nature. Because at the end of the day a few people might be able to benefit, they will get rich at the expense of the entire nation and that is something history will never forgive us for. Not only history but also our neighbours," she explains.

"She also warns that this can spark a regional conflict among the other beneficiaries of the lake.

KEY ISSUE

Plundered.

Whereas some countries have put a cap on sand mining, in Uganda it is going on amid friction between those in support of the lucrative activity and those in favour of protecting the environment.

Like other minerals, sand is among the resources being plundered by a cartel with ties to foreign nationals at the expense of the environment and citizens.

Like a frontier in the wilderness, the resources in Uganda are free to grab by the influential.

"Even the countries downstream Egypt and Sudan, for instance, will not look on as our activities have the potential of undermining the entire water resources that feed into the river Nile so this is a big question it goes beyond wealth creation, it goes beyond Uganda," she says.

Futile attempts

Katabi Town Council mayor Ronald Kalema told The Daily Monitor that efforts to stop these activities have yielded no results.

"They only come when we have stopped them and even when they come, they don't fulfil what we have told them. Many of them are working illegally and we have nothing to do," he says.

He says others rely on the army. "I stopped this Porch company last year. When they came, one man introduced himself as a soldier then I asked him so what? When you are going to destroy this? After sometime, we discovered he was not a soldier. I asked for their permit and I realised they had been given 17 acres in the swamp," he explains.

Mr Kalema says the town council loses capital in form of uncollected taxes.

"Their illegal workings normally cost us Shs100 million," he says.

Impact

Dredging causes pollution harms local biodiversity. Their coastlines affect beaches' capac absorb stormy weather and bre areas for fish.

The result is that existing d are being mined more quick they can be naturally repl which is damaging the enviro-

There are substitutes i which include asphalt, can can be recycled.

On February 1, 2018, I asked the minister of State for Environment, Mr Jaco issue a directive halti- activities.

"All activities-sho until when the Prime back to us on Thurs reticative as the house yah.

However, Ms Kit there are areas lik District, where sa

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