'West Nile won't grow through lodges alone'

Dr Jimmy Opigo, who has been at the heart of Uganda's public health for nearly three decades, is commonly known as the head of Uganda National Malaria Control Programme. Away from the drive to beat malaria, Dr Opigo owns the picturesque Arra Fishing Lodge where a nightly price will set you back nearly Shs500,000. He tells **Trevor Lutalo** that the West Nile Sub-region will not grow through lodges alone; it must be built as a destination.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

When you think about the Nile, calm is rarely the image that comes to mind. The river is often imagined in motion, wild, churning, dramatic, its identity tied to falls, rapids, and force. But in Adjumani, along a quiet stretch of the Albert Nile, the river is something else entirely. It is calm. Wide. Patient.

A few fishermen cut across its surface in narrow wooden canoes, their movements slow and deliberate. The breeze is gentle, the kind that carries both heat and relief. We sit under the shade of a tree, its branches shielding us from the full weight of the midday sun. Scattered rocks stretch toward the sandy edge where land meets water at Dr Jimmy Opigo's Arra Fishing Lodge. This is where I meet him.

He is dressed simply, in shorts, a white T-shirt, and thick, dark-rimmed glasses that give him a studious air. But there is nothing hurried about him. He speaks like a man who has spent years thinking deeply about systems, how they fail, how they can be fixed, and what it takes to build something that lasts.

We put our phones away. Breakfast is uncomplicated: Ugandan rolex and coffee. Then the conversation begins.

"I am a medical doctor," he says, settling into the conversation with ease. "With a specialisation in public health and health quality improvement."

Doctor becomes hotelier

For years, Dr Opigo's work has been rooted in Uganda's rural health systems, particularly in disease control.

"I've spent a lot of time in malaria control and programme management," he explains. "That has been my professional side."

But that is only half the story.

"The other side is passion, tourism, hospitality, environment, aesthetics," he explains.

He pauses, then adds with emphasis: "I like creating spaces, designing buildings, landscaping. Most of the facilities we have done, from Moyo to Namugongo to here, I have directed myself. No architects, no interior designers. I visualise it, then we build."

What ties it all together is a deeper motivation.

"I want to contribute to transforming society," he says. "Adding a brick to building the world we all desire, a world where people are healthy, productive, and have livelihoods."

Tourism was never part of the plan. "I don't know whether I tumbled into it," he says, smiling slightly. "Or whether fate pushed me."

The turning point came in the early 2000s when he was posted to Moyo.

"There was nowhere for visitors to stay," he recalls. "Completely nowhere."

The few available options were basic, far below what visiting professionals or partners would expect.

"Rooms behind shops, shared facilities, no proper bathrooms," he says. "People had to carry their own water. It was difficult."

The effect was immediate. "People avoided coming," he says. "Even projects would not be placed here."

So he improvised. "We converted a doctor's house into a guest house," he says. "Then I looked at my village home and thought, 'my family doesn't live here, why not turn it into something useful?'"

That decision gradually opened the door to hospitality. "It kept growing," he says.

A return to the Nile

Years later, his work with international health organisations brought him back to the Albert Nile, this time as a host rather than just a visitor.

"I had a World Health Organisation project on sleeping sickness," he says. "We would host international experts here."

Through those interactions, he began to understand tourism differently, not just as travel, but as an ecosystem.

"I started seeing the vision," he says.



A section of Arra Fishing Lodge. PHOTOS/TREVOR LUTALO

West Nile tourism. In the next 10 years, [the] West Nile will be visible. Tour operators will include it in their circuits. Lodges, transporters, tour operators, and an ecosystem will grow. But the immediate focus is on the groundwork. The next five years are for preparation. Building systems, capacity, awareness.
– Dr Jimmy Opigo, head of Uganda National Malaria Control Programme and owner of Arra Fishing Lodge



Dr Jimmy Opigo. ILLUSTRATION/ CHRIS OGON

But it wasn't until Covid-19 that the shift became decisive.

"This place had been on sale for a long time," he says, referring to Arra Fishing Lodge. "Big investors were not interested. They could not visualise what it could become."

At the same time, something else was happening.

"During Covid, people started travelling more locally," he says. "As a family, we visited lodges across the country. We saw how important this sector is, not just for leisure, but for employment and livelihoods."

The decision followed. "My family agreed, this is something worth doing." They bought the place.

Redeveloping Arra Fishing Lodge has been a journey defined by patience. "It is exciting. But it is tough."

Tourism, he explains, demands a different mindset.

"This is not a quick-return business," he says. "It is a marathon."

He leans forward slightly, emphasising the point. "You need extreme passion. You need commitment. And you must think long-term, generations."

There is a science to it. "You have to understand your client," he says. "Tourists are very intentional. They know exactly what they want: rest, adventure, knowledge."

Everything must align. "Architecture, ambience, service, activities, you must design it deliberately."

But beyond infrastructure, the real challenge lies elsewhere.

"The biggest challenge is people," he says. "Building a team. Selling the vision. Remaining consistent."

And then comes the temptation. "You must resist quick money," he adds. "Because it can easily distort your purpose."

Why West Nile?

The obvious question lingers, why here? Why build in a region still largely outside Uganda's tourism map? His answer is both practical and philosophical.

"This is a post-war region," he says. "It needs development. It needs investment. It needs livelihoods."

Tourism, in his view, is not just business; it is a tool for transformation.

"We are here to equalise. To create opportunity," he says.

But there is also a bigger ambition. "We want to position West Nile as a destination. Someone has to be the pathfinder."

He gestures toward the river again. "There is immense potential here."

What Dr Opigo is attempting goes beyond hospitality. He is intent on building a destination, not just a lodge.

"This is not just about running a lodge," he says. "It is about developing a destination."

That includes changing perceptions. "Many people still think this region is insecure. They think it is a no-go area."

It also means expanding what tourism looks like.

"Uganda has focused heavily on wildlife, the Big Five, now even Big Seven," he says. "But tourism is much bigger than that."

He offers examples. "Look at New York. Look at Paris. These are not wildlife destinations. They are built on experienc events, culture, lifestyle."

West Nile, he believes, can follow a similar path. "The Nile alone offers endless possibilities, cruises, sports fishing, canoeing, birding," he says.

And then there is the landscape. "Mountains, culture, history, this region is rich," he adds.

The slow tourism model

His vision is deliberate and different. "We are not looking at 'come and go' tourism. We want slow tourism."

That means longer stays, deeper experiences.

"People immerse themselves in the community, the culture, the environment," he explains. "They feel the soul of the place."

It is a model that prioritises impact over volume. While the government has made strides, he believes more needs to be done.

"Security has improved, roads are coming, policy direction is there," he says.

But implementation is uneven. "There is a gap between intention and execution. Especially at [the] local government level."

The issue, he argues, is mindset. "Many leaders are still focused on social services. They have not fully embraced tourism as a driver of employment and income."

Looking ahead, his outlook is clear. "In the next 10 years, [the] West Nile will be visible," he says. "Tour operators will include it in their circuits."

Businesses will follow. "Lodges, transporters, tour operators, and an ecosystem will grow. But the immediate focus is on the groundwork. The next five years are for preparation. Building systems, capacity, awareness."

Attracting investors remains a priority. "We have to be intentional," he says.

He recounts directly approaching some of Uganda's top business figures. "I told them to come and invest here," he says. "Sometimes availability creates demand."

It is a bold pitch, but one rooted in belief.

As our conversation winds down, the Nile remains steady, quiet, expansive, almost symbolic of the patience this vision requires. Tourism itself, Dr Opigo reflects, is evolving.

"People now value experiences more than material things," he says.

Travel is no longer occasional; it is part of life. "People want to rest, to detox, to create memories," he says. And increasingly, they are willing to travel for it.

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