Grasshopper harvesters count losses

Migrated. According to a number of stakeholders the grasshoppers, which used to be in plenty in Greater Masaka have since migrated to Mubende, Kisoro, Kyegegwa, Bundibugyo, Kasese and Fort Portal districts.

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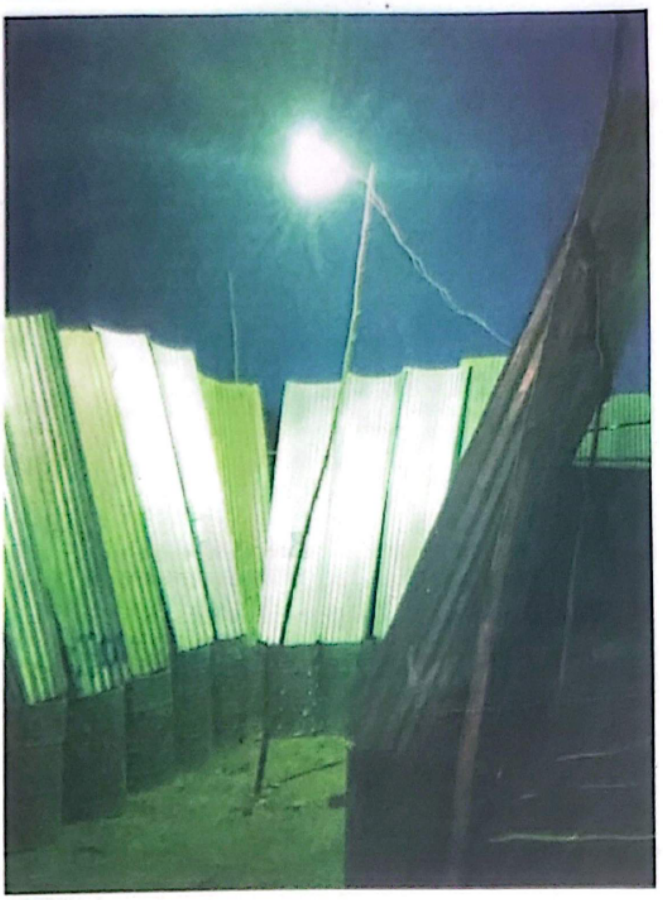

Losses. Grasshopper harvesters in Masaka are counting losses. PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER KISEKKA

MASAKA. At Nyendo Trading Centre, a Masaka Town suburb, rusty oil drums line the roadside. It is a sign that the season for grasshoppers (*ensenene*) has arrived.

The drums, fitted with shiny aluminum iron sheets and extremely bright fluorescent bulbs, form one of the ways through which grasshoppers are harvested.

Nyendo is a key hub for grasshopper harvesting, a delicacy in much of Buganda.

Grasshoppers have a key market, which explains the serious investment traders put in every time the season arrives.

However, this time round, things are not looking good. Traders might be counting losses because the grasshoppers could have migrated to other areas.

According to Mr Moses Mugerwa, a grasshopper harvester, the breeding and migration patterns seem to have changed.

"I cannot tell what is going on. We set our traps but we get very little," he says, adding grasshoppers are harvested in March, April May, November and December.

Valuable source of income

The informal trade has become a valuable source of income for many people and it is common for people from across Uganda to camp in grasshopper harvesting areas, especially in Greater Masaka and parts of Wakiso and Kampala.

According to Mr Kuraish Katongole, the chairperson of Old Masaka Basenene Association Uganda in Greater Masaka, a decline in grasshopper trend was first noticed about three years ago.

"Although people in other areas catch them [*nsenene*], we are counting losses here. We suffered similar losses during the April season and we had hoped to compensate it with the November season, but things are no any better. They no longer come as it was the case in the past," he says.

Mr Sakka Lubega, a grasshopper dealer in Masaka, invested Shs40m, but doubts whether he will recover his money.

"We had high hopes but it seems grasshoppers have shunned this area, we hardly get them. Those (grasshoppers) sold here are ferried in from other areas," he says.

According to Mr Lubega, grasshoppers seems to have migrated to Mubende, Kisoro, Kyegegwa, Bundibugyo, Kasese and Fort Portal districts, among others.

The migration has eroded the income, which as Mr Lubega says, had made it possible to cars, build houses and other investments using proceeds from grasshoppers.

"It was like our gold. People could become rich in just two months," he says.

However, Mr Katongole blames the changing pattern on the massive destruction of forests along the Lake Victoria shores, which he claims were key breeding areas.

"Grasshoppers used to breed from such areas which have been destroyed and as a result, we can no longer get good harvest like we used to get in the 1980s upto early 2000," he says.

Dr John Joseph Kisaakye, a lecture at Makerere University in the Department of Zoology, Entomology and Fisheries Sciences partly agrees with Katongole, emphasising that the shift could be a result of the general environment degradation in the Masaka Sub-region, especially in wetlands which are the breeding areas of such insects.

OTHER CHALLENGES

Apart from the migration, grasshopper harvesters, particularly in Masaka have been faced with other challenges including high prices of equipment such iron sheets and drums, among others.

The cost of electricity has also been a challenge whereby a harvester could have to pay between Shs200,000 and Shs250,000 for a season that lasts about a month.

"We end up working for electricity," Mr Lubega says, adding that this has forced some people out of the business.

However, Mr Stephen Ilungole, Umeme spokesperson, says the money charged is not exclusive to grasshopper harvesters.

"What we charge from grasshopper harvesters is Masaka is the same money we charge other harvesters in other districts," he says, adding the fee is set after engaging stakeholders.

There are at least 500 registered grasshopper harvesters in Masaka, according to Mr Katongole including thousands of other people who benefit from the business.

However, as the catch has been noticed seasoned harvesters have moved to where the grasshoppers migrated.

According to Mr Joseph Ntale, who has harvested grasshoppers for decades, people have moved to nearby places such as Mateete in Sembabule District.

However, the results there have also not been good, which, as he says, has pushed them to places such Mubende District.

"When we move to a new area and they are not either, you have to continue the search. Some have gone as far as Kasese," he says.

However, this, according to Mr Victor Mukasa, also a grasshopper harvester, is expensive and the only redemption is when you are able to have a big catch.

Efforts to farm grasshoppers

As the origin, breeding and migration patterns of grasshoppers remain a mystery, grasshopper harvesters have been trying to find means of breeding the insects in particular areas.

For instance, in 2013, Deo Kiwanuka Kigundu, a retired mechanical technician and a resident of Jjanngano village, Buwunga Sub-county in Masaka District, recently said grasshoppers can be farmed just like other insects such as bees.

Kiwanuka, who had already started breeding, crickets, noted when during a visit in Malawi, he had seen swarms of grasshoppers resting in sand, especially in swampy areas and he was informed that they lay eggs in such places.

Accordingly, he says, the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology in Nairobi, Kenya, has already embarked on a research focusing on how such insects can be farmed.

Voices



Evironmental conservation is the only answer to bringing back grasshoppers in Masaka. If wetlands and forests are not conserved, grasshoppers will never return," MR FRANCIS JJUUKO, A GRASSHOPPER HARVESTER KYEGEGWA DISTRICT



"It is difficult to give a clear reason why grasshopers have migrated. If it is all about forests why are harvesters in Kampala getting them? May be scientists need to conduct a comprehensive research to know why."
MS RITAH NAMUKASA, A RESIDENT OF NYENDO