

POLICY BRIEF

Migration and Conservation in the Lake Albert Ecosystem

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Buliisa District lies on the shores of Lake Albert in western Uganda, in one of the key biodiversity areas of the Upper Nile Basin. Over the past five decades, an increasing number of migrants from neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo have settled in the district, drawn to the region by the economic opportunities available on Lake Albert, Uganda's third most productive fishery. This migration has had a variety of impacts on Buliisa District's demographics, infrastructure, economy and politics. It has also had a significant impact on Lake Albert's aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems: a dramatic change in the composition of Lake Albert's fish species has taken place over the past two decades, the result of overfishing linked to migration.

Migration in Buliisa District is primarily driven by economics and livelihood opportunities: most Congolese migrants are drawn to the district by the incomes available in the local fishery. The scale of this migration is significant, as Buliisa District fisheries are now almost fully dependent on migrant workers for cheap labour.

Fishing plays a vital role in the Buliisa District economy; in communities along the Lake Albert shoreline, the majority of inhabitants work either as fishers or fishmongers. Migrants and long-term residents do not always play the same role in the fishery. Long-term residents tend to have greater access to the resources needed to diversify their household livelihood strategies. They often own fishing boats, and today rarely work as fishers. For recent Congolese migrants, livelihood options are more limited to working as crew on fishing boats.

Migrants are widely perceived to be an important driving force in the unsustainable exploitation of the fishery. Observed trends show a marked decline in large predatory fish in the fishery. With the overfishing of larger species, fishers have increasingly focused on smaller fish: small fish now account for over 90 per cent of the catch on Lake Albert. Historic data indicate that

before the 1990s, larger, more commercially valuable species were dominant. In addition, the amount of fish brought ashore per boat has declined by nearly 30 per cent over the past five years.

While the availability of data to corroborate reported declines is limited, and factors other than migration may be contributing to the observed trends, catch per unit effort is rapidly declining in the local fisheries. The key factors driving this decline are: the growing fisher population; the increased use of illegal fishing equipment; weak enforcement of regulations; growing demand for fish; improved access to domestic and Congolese markets; and de facto open access to fish resources. To continue along this path will lead to the inevitable collapse of the fishery and the livelihoods it sustains; however, in the meantime, high domestic and Congolese demand for fish guarantees that profits can be sustained in the short term.

District Fisheries Offices are responsible for local implementation of the strategies and regulations of the Department of Fisheries Resources. They do so in partnerships with local fishery co-management institutions, called Beach Management Units (BMUs), which, with local governments, are legally empowered to manage the fishery. All fishers currently operating on Ugandan lakes are required to be registered with a BMU.

In practice, the Buliisa District Fisheries Office does not have the capacity to fulfill its role, while politics and a lack of transparency mean that the BMUs are also mostly ineffective in fulfilling their co-management mandate. Interactions between the two are complicated by competing stakeholder interests: the elected BMUs and the District Council are often reluctant to enforce those fishery regulations of the District Fisheries Office that may harm the short-term economic interests of their migrant and non-migrant constituents, whose livelihoods depend on the profitability of local fisheries. The economic

interests of elected officials and their constituents serve as a powerful disincentive to enforcing or strengthening existing fishery protection legislation. As a result, no measures are being taken to protect and manage critical habitats and species in Buliisa, despite the fact that these institutions all claim to understand the importance of protecting and managing fish breeding grounds and other key habitats.

The increased availability of cheap migrant labour in Buliisa District plays a key role in enabling and sustaining overfishing. A feedback loop exists whereby the decline in fish stocks resulting from the fishery's overexploitation leads to reduced economic returns per unit effort which—in the absence of viable alternative livelihoods—pushes fishers to fish more in a bid to maintain their income. Decreasing financial returns also force local boat owners to rely on cheap migrant workers to keep the costs of fishing low. The abundance of migrant workers willing to work for wages far below the Ugandan average enables the on-going expansion of fishing in Buliisa District.

Field research identified a number of key barriers to addressing the impacts of migration on the Lake Albert fishery: poverty, a porous border, a lack of documentation among the local population; village expansion; weak law enforcement; limited livelihood diversification options; and local governance structures that work against sustainable management of the fishery. Efforts to minimize the impacts of migration on the Lake Albert fishery must first address these challenges.

These challenges are significant, and a lack of action on addressing the impacts of migration on the Lake Albert fishery will contribute to its continued decline. However, action can be taken to reverse this trend. First, Ugandan authorities must work to curb illegal immigration into the district. This would require stepping up border patrols and establishing a system whereby Ugandan immigration officers register all incoming migrants. To be effective, the issuance of counterfeit documents would need to be addressed at the national level, and the systems used for registering Ugandan nationals in rural areas would need to be radically overhauled. In addition, the issue of migrants being allowed to settle on public land on the shores of Lake Albert with the tacit acceptance of the Ugandan authorities

would need to be addressed. To succeed, this will require major political will and policy reform at both the national and district levels.

Secondly, authorities should take advantage of the opportunity to bring about the sustainable management of Buliisa District's artisanal fisheries through a combination of BMU-level fisheries management plans and specific ordinances regulating local fisheries at the district level, supported by specific bylaws at the sub-county level where necessary. This will require that the significant capacity gaps within the District government be addressed before local legislation on fisheries management is developed. In addition, technical collaboration between the District Fisheries Office and local BMUs would have to be strengthened.

Livelihood diversification is already commonplace among the local population; promoting livelihood diversification among the migrant fishers would require establishing mechanisms through which they could access natural resources other than Lake Albert. Fish farming could be one option: breeding commercial fish (in particular larger and more economically valuable species such as Nile perch) in fish farms could provide a stable source of income to fishers without further depleting the existing fish stocks.

Finally, there is a need to strengthen the protection of the ecosystem itself—in particular the fish breeding grounds that are crucial to the long-term viability of the fishery. These breeding grounds are not actively protected, even though stakeholders are aware of their importance. There is a need to increase the capacity and incentives of the BMUs to record fish catches and analyze trends, in order to have a better idea of how the fishery is faring over time. Capacities should be strengthened to develop responsive management plans for each of the BMUs. Improved technical expertise in sustainable fisheries management is required for BMU staff, as is the equipment they need to fulfil their enforcement mandate, including boats and petrol. Overfishing could also be partially addressed by more clearly marking and monitoring breeding and spawning sites, and enforcing existing regulations prohibiting fishing activities in these sensitive habitats.

IISD's Migration and Conservation in the Great Lakes Region project examines the emerging impacts of human migration on the critical ecosystems of the Great Lakes region of Africa. The overall goal of the project is to improve the protection of biodiversity and critical ecosystems in areas experiencing significant pressures resulting from human migration. The project aims to achieve this by developing practical tools and interventions for conservation, development, and humanitarian actors working in the region to understand and respond to specific migration threats. The project is made possible by the generous support of the MacArthur Foundation.

