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Fisheries co-management at Lake Victoria: starting up a participatory monitoring process

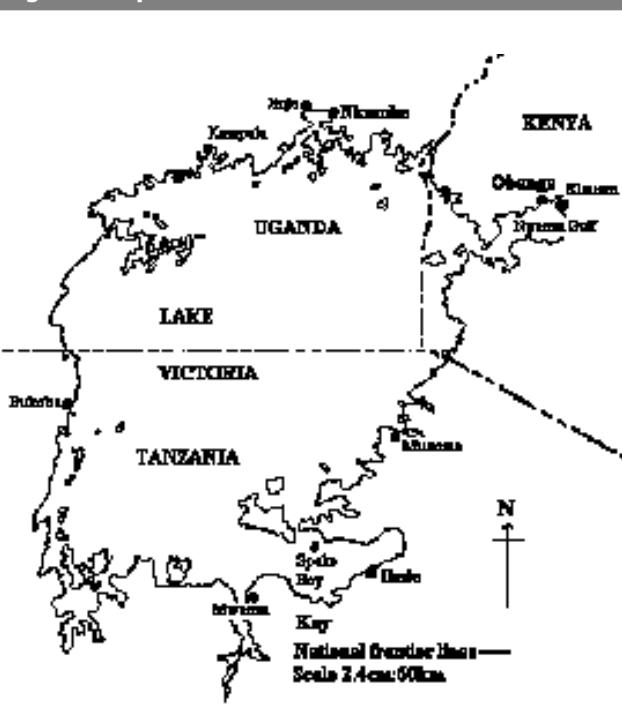
by the SEDAWOG TEAM¹

Introduction

Agreeing on a plan for the co-management of Lake Victoria's fisheries is one goal of the Lake Victoria Fisheries Research Project (LVFRP). The Project took the view that (a) local fishing communities might already have institutions that could be useful for managing the fishery and (b) that these institutions could potentially influence any imposed regulations in unanticipated directions. For this reason, a double-layered long-term programme was developed, first to monitor communities in order to identify institutions useful to management and how these institutions altered external regulation, and, second, to assess the extent to which communities were able to monitor themselves and the resources on which they relied.

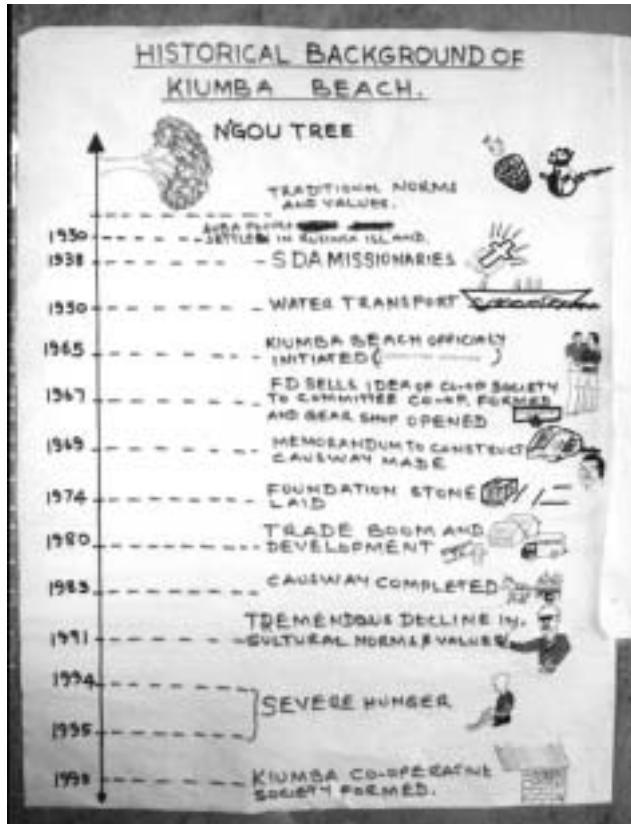
Four communities were selected: Nkombe in Uganda, Obenge in Kenya, and Mwasonge and Ihale in Tanzania. Participatory baseline studies identified the various community-based organisations operating at each beach and initiated relationships with the four communities. The next step in this process was the initiation of participatory monitoring systems with each community. This paper reports how this was done at Nkombe beach in Uganda, and how the

Figure 1: Map of Lake Victoria



¹ SEDAWOG is the Socio-Economic Data Working Group, working under the Lake Victoria Fisheries Research Project.

Some of the knowledge and learning shared during PRA training at Kiumba Beach, Kenya



process was then replicated at the other three landing sites. The problems faced, the solutions tried, the monitoring indicators agreed, the replication of the process, and lessons learned are all outlined.

Background

Lake Victoria is a massive inland water, larger in size than Burundi. It is shared by Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda and supports Africa's largest inland fishery. In 1995, over 400,000 tonnes of fish were landed. Most of this bulk comprised the introduced predator, *Lates niloticus* (Nile perch), the small endemic sardine, *Rastrineobola argentea* ('dagaa') and the introduced *Oreochromis niloticus* (Nile tilapia). Although Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda each have their own fisheries department, they are under-funded and under-staffed. The lake is not, for practical purposes, regulated.

Addressing this is the objective of the EDF (European Development Fund)-funded Lake Victoria Fisheries Research Project (LVFRP), the second phase of which began in 1997 and ended in December 2002. The project worked hand in hand with the fisheries research institutes of Kenya (KMFRI),

Tanzania (TAFIRI), and Uganda (FIRRI). It concentrated on two areas of research: stock assessment and socio-economics. The latter was carried out by socio-economists working under the umbrella of the Socio-economic Data Working Group (SEDAWOG), here referred to as 'the team'.

In the past, much of the socio-economic work on Lake Victoria has been restricted to quantitative data collection. While valuable, this yields data in which little of the very dynamic nature of fishing on the lake, and fisheries management in general, is captured. To overcome this, the project invested in developing the participatory research skills of the participating institutes. An initial workshop was held in Mbita, Kenya, in March 2000, followed by participatory baseline studies with the four beaches, and a second training workshop designed to start up the participatory monitoring process.

Beginning the participatory monitoring process: misunderstandings and errors

The first steps of this process were successful and the team was pleased with the relationships developed with the beach communities and with the results of the participatory base-

line studies. However, a number of difficulties were experienced in the course of a two-day visit to the Ugandan beach, Nkombe, during which the team had intended to start up a participatory monitoring system.

At Nkombe, the most immediate difficulties faced stemmed from the size of the team, which comprised 20 international members of SEDAWOG. Previous meetings with the community had involved only three of the Ugandan SEDAWOG members, all of whom spoke Lusoga (the local language). It came as a surprise to the villagers to be confronted by the entire team. The alienation was probably compounded by the fact that the team could be clearly identified as outsiders to the village, local area, and to Uganda.

The international composition of the team was unsettling for a community that had had little contact with the outside world. In fact, the team was the first group of researchers ever to visit Nkombe. During a later, and more relaxed exchange of views, the villagers commented that hearing strange languages being spoken and seeing three Europeans helped fuel suspicion about the team's 'real' intentions. Members of the community were convinced that the team had come to make a reconnaissance before acquiring the village land and evicting inhabitants. This rumour arose because several village members had been evicted from land bordering a nearby forest reserve, and the Forestry Department team that had evicted them included a European. Moreover, the village map drawn during the baseline study was viewed by some in the community as evidence of the team's hidden (land grabbing) agenda. The team later discovered that tensions caused by internal power struggles and disputes over, amongst other things, the use of illegal fishing methods/gears had contributed to the community's suspicions of these outsiders. The misunderstanding over the map (and its 'land-grabbing' connotation) caused some villagers to retreat to their homes and not take part in the meeting groups.

Early on the second day of the visit, the team realised there needed to be a significant change in their approach to the community. The team convened an 'emergency meeting' with the beach leader, designed to discuss how the team could improve their approach to the community. One key problem that emerged was the one-way flow of information from the community to the team. Several options were discussed and it was agreed that the team should host a one-day workshop for a delegation from Nkombe at the Ugandan Fisheries Resources Research Institute, FIRRI. This would provide the community with an opportunity to learn about FIRRI and the LVFRP project. This would then be followed by a full meeting with the wider Nkombe commu-

'In Kenya, KMFRI researchers developed a remarkable rapport with the Obenge community... the villagers felt that they were finally being listened to and that someone in the "outside world" genuinely cared about their problems and successes'

nity during which the Nkombe delegation could give their assessment of the work which the SEDAWOG team wanted to achieve. The Nkombe workshop was arranged for the following Monday and the wider community meeting for the following Wednesday.

The Nkombe meetings Workshop for delegates

Early on Monday, a car was sent to Nkombe to collect their chosen representatives. In addition to explaining the goals of the wider project, the team's objectives for the workshop were to ensure that the Nkombe delegation could return to their community and explain the team's intentions, and to allay fears that we had a hidden agenda.

The car returned to FIRRI, and several members of the research team gathered outside to greet the Nkombe delegation. The group was then shown into the conference room, and introductions were made. The community had sent seven representatives, which included the beach leader, representatives from the local council, and most importantly (as it later turned out), two community elders.

The day started with a guided tour of the FIRRI aquarium and the offices of the Lake Victoria Fisheries Organisation (LVFO). Next, a presentation describing the fish stock assessment component of the LVFRP was made. Presentations on the participatory baseline studies conducted at the Kenyan and Tanzanian beaches were also made.

That afternoon, the discussion turned to the problems the Nkombe fishing community faced and to meaningful indicators of the well-being of the fishery. The very fact that the discussion took place suggested that the representatives were sufficiently confident that the team was not about to steal their land. A sign of this was the openness of the discussion, with community members readily admitting the widespread use of illegal fishing gear and techniques, clearly reassured that SEDAWOG had no power nor desire to punish this.

There was much debate about the well-being of the

Box 1: Monitoring the fishery at Nkombe beach

Indicators proposed by the Nkombe delegation were:

- Monthly catch weight totals
- A monthly report on any new events in the community
- Good working relationships between different organisations
- Numbers of immigrant fishers

The indicators proposed by the SEDAWOG team were:

- Gear types used
- Number of boats licensed
- Socio-economic status of the fishing community
- Number of gear thefts and their outcomes
- Registration and identification of immigrant fishers
- Amendments to LMC bye-laws
- List of organisations operating at the beach

Box 2: Agreed indicators for monitoring the fishery at Nkombe beach

- Monthly catch weight totals to be provided from the LMC records.
- A monthly report on any new events in the community and, in particular, on whether there had been any changes to the bye-laws of the LMC.
- Good working relationships between the different organisations working in the fishery.
- Numbers of immigrant fishers registered by the LMC each month.

fisheries. One of the elders said, 'In the past we would fill a boat with three nets,' and a younger fishermen said that now, 'It takes up to 100 nets, to fill a boat'. One issue which arose was how the community should report their fish catches. The Landing Management Committee (LMC) was unwilling to give out details of fish sizes but said they would be willing to provide information on the total weight of their monthly catch.

At the end of the afternoon, the workshop had agreed on a list of indicators, those suggested by the Nkombe delegation and those suggested by the team, to be discussed with the wider community (see Box 1). It was also agreed that monitoring would be based initially on bi-monthly visits to Nkombe by the FIRRI team, and bi-monthly visits to FIRRI by Nkombe residents.

After the Monday workshop, the mood was high on all sides. The Nkombe delegation chatted excitedly about what they had learned at FIRRI all the way home. Senior FIRRI staff were thrilled to have hosted a 'real' fishing community and the SEDAWOG team believed the participatory monitoring process had significantly moved forward.

Community meeting

The Nkombe delegation provided feedback to the wider community at a meeting outside the village church two days later. This was held under a large tree, and was attended by around 100 villagers. At the centre of the circle were two chairs, one of which was taken by the secretary of the local council and the other by an elderly blind man.

After a prayer, the beach leader started the meeting. He distributed photographs taken during their visit to FIRRI and asked the Nkombe delegation to explain what they had learned at FIRRI. Each one stood in turn and made a short presentation while the photographs circulated through the crowd. The representatives were emphatic that the team's

intentions were not to take their land, and that all they had seen at FIRRI related to fish and water. The suggestion then came that the representatives had been bribed, and this was discussed at some length. It was finally resolved when the beach leader reminded the gathering that two of its elders had accompanied the group to FIRRI and had they been bribed, they would surely not lie. The discussions under the tree were, at times, surprisingly frank, with the beach leader and the local Fish Guard (a Fisheries Department representative) both being accused of using illegal gear, and the elderly blind man in the chair being pointed out by a local administrator as the person who was creating fear in the community (being blind and speaking no English rendered his accuser safe).

The SEDAWOG team then outlined their vision of participatory monitoring to the community as a whole and explained the various indicators that had been discussed with the Nkombe delegation the previous Monday.

The indicators discussed at the workshop on Monday were proposed to the wider community. After some debate, the meeting agreed to monitor four of these indicators (Box 2).

Applying lessons from Nkombe

After leaving Uganda, the Kenyan and Tanzanian socio-economic teams returned home and established similar monitoring programmes. In Kenya, KMFRI researchers developed a remarkable rapport with the Obenge community. It was claimed that the frequent contact and the exchange visits between the landing and the researchers yielded tangible management results. The villagers felt that they were finally being listened to and that someone in the 'outside world' genuinely cared about their problems and successes. As a direct result of this contact, the Obenge beach community implemented a series of regulations, including the banning of nets below five-inch mesh size (the government-stipulated minimum).

In Tanzania, the outcomes at Ihale and Mwasonge beaches were not as spectacular as they had been at Obenge, but nonetheless were very successful. The same

The SEDAWOG team discussing the Lake Victoria fisheries with a Kenyan fishing community



format of exchange visits by the beaches to TAFIRI's regional centre in Mwanza, and return visits by the TAFIRI socio-economic team, forged high levels of trust between the communities and the researchers. With trust as the basis of the research relationship, the quality of the data obtained noticeably improved with each visit. At the same time, the communities used these visits to exploit what they saw as the more 'worldly' and educated knowledge of the researchers, seeking advice about all manner of issues and problems. This excellent relationship was, perhaps, the result of strong community-government relationships developed during the *ujamaa* years.

In Uganda, a country whose history has been beset by civil strife, the relationship between the FIRRI researchers and Nkombe ebbed and flowed. At each visit, the researchers had to remind participants of the study objectives, and reassure them that FIRRI's intentions were not to grab land. Slowly, successes began to be seen. During a visit to FIRRI's headquarters in Jinja, village representatives explained that they had taken action to ban two types of

fishing techniques, which they perceived to be destructive to the fishery. When probed for reasons why they had done this, they replied that their frequent contact with FIRRI researchers had emboldened them, and that their discussions with the team had taught them they could have some control over their own futures, and that the lake was theirs to look after.

In December 2002, the LVFRP ended. Talk of a follow-up and implementation phase may well bear fruit, but the interruptions in visits may prove very damaging to the relationships developed between the research institutes and the landing sites concerned.

Conclusions

The team learnt a number of lessons from their experiences with the communities:

- Participation requires a two-way flow of information. Knowing about the SEDAWOG team and being assured that they would continue to learn more about the team mattered a great deal to the communities.

- Participatory monitoring is a slow process. Trust has to be worked at: it was not sufficient that the team merely explained the study objectives or where they came from. The visual impact of actually seeing the research institutes, and experiencing very visual presentations of LVFRP activities, was an important step in this process.
- Nothing goes to plan: if there was a single reason for the success of the exercise, it was that the research team was very flexible and very patient.
- Context is crucial. The historical problem of eviction from the neighbouring forest reserve at Nkombe generated fear that we were there to steal people's land, which had an important influence on the process. In Tanzania, conversely, communities were far less suspicious because they were used to being visited by government representatives.

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NOTES

This paper is a synthesis of the lessons learned during the second participatory training workshop convened for the SEDAWOG team and funded by the LVFRP. The members of the SEDAWOG team were: R.O. Abila; A. Atai; E. Bwana; K. Crean; K. Geheb; J. Gonga; M. Kabati; D. Komba; M. Kyangwa; C. Lwenya; M. Meddard; E. Mlahagwa; D. Msunga; D. Ngusa; A. Nyapendi; K. O. Odongkara; J. Onyango; P. Onyango; J. Ouko; and M-T. Sarch.