

# POLICY BRIEF

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## COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN DEVELOPING ECONOMIES: LOCKDOWN VERSUS NO LOCKDOWN SCENARIOS FOR THE FISHERIES.

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## KEY MESSAGES

1

The negative impacts of COVID-19 prevention measures in the fisheries sector in poor developing countries such as those along Lake Victoria were felt more where lockdowns were implemented.

2

Pandemics' prevention Interventions in poor countries should take a form that allow the sustainability of key sectors for livelihood including, the fisheries sector.

3

There is a need to develop a strong ICT aided procurement and distribution system for fish and fisheries products

4

In the short and medium term, governments can extend infrastructures to allow availability and use of appropriate fish preservation and processing technologies and encourage the use of ICTs in fish marketing through reducing taxes on mobile money transfer, ICT gadget and social media use.

## INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic has affected the social and economic situation worldwide. Such situation is worse for countries and communities whose social and economic wellbeing were already in a poor state prior to the outbreak of the disease. COVID-19 has pushed for interventions such as the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and lockdown restrictions among others in order to fight against the spread of the disease. Whereas implementation of the above has contributed to the prevention of COVID-19 spread, some of the measures appear to have devastating impacts on some social and economic fabric.

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### **THE PANDEMIC AND THE FISHERIES IN THE POOR ECONOMIES: THE CASE FOR UGANDA AND TANZANIA**

Lake Victoria is a source of livelihood for the communities living along the shores in East Africa, including fisheries business. In both Tanzania and Uganda, the business is dominated by small scale enterprises, and the sector contribution in terms of GDP is approximately 2.4% and 1.2% respectively (URT, 2016; ASSP, 2016). The sector comprises of various segments along the value chain that substantially generate both formal and informal jobs. For Tanzania, the sector provides direct employment to about 183,800 fishers and more than 4,000,000 indirect employment, while for Uganda the sector employs around 1.3 million people (ASSP, 2016).

With the spread of COVID-19, the fishery is one of the affected sectors. This is due to the fact that, its location is already in places that are particularly high risk of extreme events such as flood, droughts, cyclone and tsunami and hence put the fisheries sector and fishery-dependent communities vulnerable to disasters (Badjeck et al., 2013). This is especially the case for African and South eastern Asian countries. In addition to the potential of the pandemic affecting contribution to GDP growth, it also undermines efforts towards achieving sustainable development goals (SDG). For instance, goal 1 on ‘no poverty’ by affecting sustainability of earnings of families along the lake shores; SDG 2 on ‘zero hunger’ through lack of protein from fish and food insecurity; and SDG 8 on ‘decent work and economic growth’ by disrupting fish businesses that generate both formal and informal employment.

As in other countries, measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 were put in place in Tanzania but were intense in Uganda where a lockdown was imposed. The intervention measures in turn produced stress on livelihoods for the communities depending on fish, albeit to different degrees in the two countries, which is the result of differences in SOPs approaches, specifically that of engaging in lockdown practiced in Uganda and with no lockdown situation in Tanzania. Such impact differences were observed from the fisheries sector value chain nodes that is the production, processing, trade/marketing and the consumption nodes and hence calls for rethinking.

## PRODUCTION NODE

While in Tanzania, the fisheries production node activities appeared to largely continue as normal for domestic consumption, the pandemic prevention measures such as curfews in Uganda led to a change in the way the business was carried out. For example, the decongestion measures enforced on the landing sites resulted into increased fish post-harvest losses (fish spoilage) as very few people were allowed to offload fish from the boats. This prolonged the time fish stayed in the boats and was reported to have affected the quality of fish and the revenue generated by the fishers. The table fish harvesters revealed that they could collect all their catch and assign an individual a role of delivering it to the landing sites in compliance to the social distance measures. However, this sometimes, brought misallocations in the quantity of fish catches per individual fishers, which then resulted in conflict and reduced income among others. Additionally, some fishers who changed the target species like those that changed from Nile perch to dried fish like the Dagaa and Mukene -who had longer shelf life-had to incur additional costs in terms of labor and fishing gears. Thus, fishers were forced to divert their savings from their initial plans.

With export challenges in both countries, fishing shifted more towards the species that were locally consumed such as the Tilapia and the Silver fish like Dagaa or Mukene and away from the Nile Perch which is mostly for the export market. This led to an increase in the number of entrants in Silver fish (Dagaa /Mukene) fisheries as the fisheries resources are open access in nature. Some fishers have since remained in fishing these species since it's where they can generate income. This in turn increased the pressure on silver Fish which resulted in reduced catch volume per boat, and also resulted in reduced earnings for fishers.

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## PROCESSING AND TRADE NODES

The processing and the trade activities of the fisheries sector can be sub categorized in two; 1) the artisanal and 2) industrial. While the artisanal processing and marketing usually takes place at the landing sites and are for the local consumption, the industrial one is mainly for the export market. The activities in these nodes were more affected in Uganda than in Tanzania mainly due to curfews social distancing and lock down which reduced working time and labor capacity among others. With the cancellation of most flights, which is the medium of transportation for the export market, industrial processing and trade faced a setback. Some processing factories closed due to increase in operational costs while others operated at excess capacity. This led to reduction in the revenues and profit margins of the fish factories which threatened the sustainability of operations. Indeed, the impacts of COVID-19 did not segregate between the two countries when it came to fish for export. Example of this is seen in Tanzania where although there was no lockdown, the trading of fish and fisheries product faced similar setbacks just as the one faced in Uganda where lockdown was in effect.

Issues of market for export do not only depend on a single country situation but that of the global trade as a whole. In Tanzania, the local market under the no lockdown measure continued with minimum negative effect but the export market was distorted mainly because buyers, mainly in the Western countries were under lockdown during the period compounded by a stop in flight operations. With the export market closely related to industrial processing, the industrial processing value chain node was also equally affected.

## CONSUMPTION NODE

COVID-19 also led to a reduction in fish consumption in Tanzania but more in Uganda. While the reduced consumption in Tanzania was mainly due to reduced earnings, in Uganda it was further compounded by absence of fresh fish or certain species of which are locally preferred especially at the areas far from the lake. The lack of appropriate preservation technologies especially for table fish hindered access by communities that stay far away from the lake. Since measures associated with COVID-19 prevention entailed longer time for fish to get to the consumer, fresh fish got spoiled. As a result, non-perishable fish products became more demanded and consumed in both Uganda and Tanzania due to its longer shelf life and affordability. As such, dried fish seemed to have been purchased even by those who usually despised it as a poor man's sauce. Even though consumption of dried fish tried to cover the gap for the consumption of the fresh ones, total consumption was low compared to the pre COVID-19 time. Time limitations on motorcycle transportation that was imposed in Uganda as part of preventive measures as well as high fish transportation costs that resulted from such measures explained the further reduction in the volume of fish consumption in Uganda. This has further inhibited the achievement of consumption of the target per capita for East Africa and Africa in general which is already below the global one.

## ROLE OF ICT

The use of ICTs cannot be divorced from the fisheries businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from being a tool for spreading information about the disease, ICTs played an important role in local fish trading given the fact that fish markets and the landing sites were less visited due to social distance measures. Even though no new or advanced technologies have been introduced, the traditional ICT tools like radio, television and mobile phones which were already in use way before the pandemic were increasingly used for the purpose of advertising and delivering of the fish products to consumers locally. However, taxes and charges such as those on mobile money and airtime as well as the cost of ICT gadgets such as smart phones are high. In Uganda for example, the OTT tax that is charged for social media use is a hindrance to many who would like to send and access information on COVID-19 and business through smart mobile phones. ICT presented an opportunity to ensure sustainable fisheries continuity amidst the COVID-19 pandemic right from the harvesting of fish, processing, marketing and consumption of fish. All such charges not only hamper accessibility and use of ICT but also limit business transactions and other business opportunities in the fisheries sector.

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## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience with the lockdown and no lock down in poor countries such as Uganda and Tanzania where informal fisheries sector contributes immensely to the livelihood in the fisheries communities provide an opportunity for learning. Lockdown in poor economies indeed requires rethinking. Striking a balance between COVID-19 spread prevention intervention and general livelihood intervention is paramount. An intermediate solution is therefore needed that involves promotion of interventions that respond to the COVID-19 preventive measures while at the same time allow sustainability of fisheries businesses. The situation in both Tanzania and Uganda on the effects of COVID-19 on fisheries sector specifically points out the following recommendations towards reducing the impact of COVID-19 to the fish dependent communities and the sector as a whole.

- i. Government policies and interventions in reducing the impact of COVID-19 should not only focus on prevention measures for the spread of the pandemic but also to focus on striking a balance between these interventions and sustaining livelihood by allowing relatively smooth flow of fisheries activities.
- ii. Governments should spearhead the development of a strong procurement and distribution facility for fish and fisheries products through formulation of an Agency and use of ICT in order to sustain fish trade and consumption even at the time where lockdown restrictions and other SOPs such as social distancing are in effect.
- iii. Governments can consider reducing charges associated with ICT, especially during this challenging time of COVID-19 in order to not only to sustain the customer-seller linkage but also accessibility of information.
- iv. Given that most landing sites are remote, governments should avail the commensurate infrastructure such as electricity. Upgrading electricity infrastructure in remote areas of fisheries production, value addition, marketing and export will not only solve the challenge of failure to power gadgets that aid ICT but also aid fish preservation.
- v. There is a need to build capacity of fisheries value chain actors in usage of social media and usage of ICT especially in marketing strategies so as to solve the problem of customer-seller linkage. These capacity building initiatives can be mobilized at municipal/parish/sub county/district levels or even landing sites management units.
- vi. There is a need for a value chain approach that includes multiple countries rather than individual countries in addressing the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on fisheries sector.

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## SOUTHERN VOICE

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