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Governing Common Waters: Small-Scale Fisheries and the Growth of Aquaculture on Lake Victoria

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Abstract

Rapid aquaculture growth on Lake Victoria is promising improved food security in the densely populated lake basin and increased exports earnings for Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania despite declining wild fish stocks. Aquaculture is a highly efficient animal-protein production system, but the expansion of large-scale cage developments frequently creates conflicts over access to fisheries resources with local fishers. High entry barriers to the relatively capital-intensive cage aquaculture for local fishing communities keep transition rates from capture fisheries low. This article assesses the capacities of formal and informal organisational structures that exist throughout the lake basin's fisheries to advance the participation of small-scale fishers and fish-workers in the governance of fisheries resources. Based on a large face-to-face survey and interviews with actor groups in all riparian states, the authors examine the capacities of formal co-management institutions, local self-help groups, and fish-farmer associations. We further evaluate the scope of the region's national fisheries policies for establishing participatory, multi-level governance structures. While Uganda and Kenya pursue rapid aquaculture growth through foreign direct investment, Tanzania is taking a more cautious approach, citing ecological and socioeconomic concerns. All three countries established Beach Management Units (BMUs) for the co-management of fisheries resources, but evidence from our ongoing research shows that BMUs have limited effects on overfishing and potentially intensify existing inequalities by targeting illegal, unregulated and undocumented (IUU) fishing among poor small-scale fishers, while inadequately addressing significant power asymmetries within the fish value chain. New data on informal self-help groups, which are widespread in fishing communities, although often not exclusively focused on fisheries resource management, suggests that grassroots forms of self-organisation can be effective in reducing unequal access to resources in small-scale fisheries and may play an important role in establishing adaptive governance structures. The authors argue that integrating informal institutions into co-management approaches could help to avoid poverty-driven social-ecological traps in capture fisheries and improve access to aquaculture for poor fishing communities. Kenya's and Uganda's state support for fish-farmers' associations contributes to inclusive economic development, but so far fails to address the needs of fisherfolks' who are too poor to invest in aquaculture.

Keywords: Aquaculture, Eastern Africa , inclusive and sustainable development, small-scale fisheries

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