

A young person with short, dark hair is shown in profile, looking out over a beach and ocean. They are wearing a black and white striped tank top. The background is a bright, sunny day with a clear blue sky and a sandy beach. The ocean is visible in the distance, with some white surf visible. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

International Alert.

OIL AND WATER?

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livelihoods in Uganda

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OIL AND WATER?

The impact of oil on livelihoods in Uganda

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About this photo essay

The discovery of commercially viable oil in Uganda's Albertine Graben region in 2006 set in motion the race for oil wealth across the country.

As Uganda moves from exploration and appraisal to production, civil society organisations in both Uganda and the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have been raising concerns over the potential impact of oil activities on people's livelihoods, wildlife conservation and tourism. Of particular concern is fishing – a major way of life in the region and one on which a number of livelihoods depend.

In 2014, International Alert carried out an exploratory survey around the region to identify some of the perceived and real conflict risks associated with the oil industry's impact on fishing across Lake Albert.

This photo essay highlights the feelings, thoughts and views of local communities across the lake, and suggests ways in which the oil and fishing sectors could peacefully coexist.

Alert is convinced that careful understanding of the issues at play in the Albertine Graben will create trust, ensure stability and promote coexistence.

A man inspects *mukene* (silver) fish
drying in the sun.
WALUKUBA, BULIISA DISTRICT



Uganda's oil reserves are expected to yield US\$2 billion a year for 30 years, according to the country's Petroleum Exploration and Production Department. The Bank of Uganda estimates that the country could save up to US\$630 million every year on oil imports once production starts.

However, while the discovery of oil has the potential to increase national revenue and enhance development, some fear that it also has the potential to create new conflicts and to exacerbate existing ones – locally, nationally and regionally.

Three brothers clean their fishing boat
by Lake Albert.
KANARA, NTOROKO DISTRICT



Successful oil exploitation, enhanced through fiscal responsibility, could elevate Uganda to a middle-income country, pulling millions of people out of poverty, including fishermen. However, while this is true, experience in other mineral-rich countries, particularly in Africa, points to the importance of 'getting it right'. As the country's oil prospects gather pace, there is a worry that oil is being viewed as a quick economic solution to what are complex development problems.

While both the government and oil companies have continued to sell the good news story about oil, with stories of bumper revenues and good times ahead, little is being done to address the underlying issues facing the country, such as inequality, corruption and land disputes, all of which are likely to be exacerbated by oil exploitation.

The sudden influx of oil cash could distort the economy and undermine other sectors such as agriculture, which currently employ and feed far greater numbers than oil ever will.

A local restaurateur expresses concern that a pause in oil operations could hinder potential jobs in her village.
NSONGA, HOIMA DISTRICT



The discovery of oil and people's expectations of gaining from it have already resulted in an influx of thousands of people into the oil regions. This migration is not only leading to population growth, but is also increasing pressures over land and fuelling tension between indigenous communities and newcomers. There are also concerns that an increase in population will put a strain on already limited social services, such as education, water and healthcare. Communities fear that the next phase of oil exploration will lead to further migration.

Across the Albertine Graben, where fishing remains a major economic activity and the main source of livelihood for many people, the likely impacts of oil exploitation on fishing are yet to be understood. For centuries, local people have seen Lake Albert as their life source. They depend on it for food, water and transport. To many, losing it is inconceivable.

Although oil production is not expected to begin until at least 2018, many communities already believe that the current stages of oil development are leading to dwindling fish stocks – despite evidence indicating that it is instead related to broader resource management issues. Communities have also expressed significant anxiety about their future and their livelihoods with the coming oil development. The interface between the two economic activities is therefore already creating conditions that could lead to conflict.

Yet, fish is a finite resource. With so many people dependent on one lake, fishing as a way of life is gradually getting harder. Fish stocks have dwindled due to widespread overfishing, overreliance on one economic activity and a general failure by authorities to effectively manage the country's economic resources.

Fishermen cast their net off Butiaba
Landing Site.

BUTIABA, BULIISA DISTRICT



An estimated 30% of the western arm of the Rift Valley (an active continental rift) is covered by water. According to the Environment Sensitivity Atlas, compiled by Uganda's National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), lakes and rivers in the Albertine Graben are among the most fragile ecosystems in the region. Parts of Lake Albert, for example, are the favourite breeding grounds for both fish and migratory birds.

Oil companies have put measures in place regarding waste management. However, there are legacy issues to contend with and anxieties from communities about the efficacy of the measures. For example, in Ntoroko district, Heritage Oil Company constructed a waste site and fenced it up with barbed wire to keep out animals and people. But when the company left, residents vandalised the wire fence, making access to the site possible. In another instance, residents reported that, after months of flooding due to heavy rain, some of the waste ended up in the lake and residents found many dead fish in the lake.

"There has been no assurance on spillages," says Steven Mbidi, the Local Council II Chairman in Butiaba, Masindi district. "We have been asking but there is no assurance. I think it would be good if oil companies could be honest about their plans when it comes to waste management. We need to understand how the two sectors will coexist."

A local resident in Ntoroko district remarked: "We have seen and heard of oil waste being buried on people's private land in Ntoroko. While the poison is yet to claim [human] lives, it does not mean it is safe. Our problem is that no one wants to talk about it."

Musa Bithum in Dei, Nebbi district, on the border with DRC, expressed concerns over the risks of oil to the fish: "I think oil will suffocate the fish. Some people are excited, but I know this oil will affect fish and ultimately make us all jobless. Imagine a life without any income. Imagine that."

Children playing in the water.
BUTIABA, BULIISA DISTRICT



Some people have expressed doubt over whether the presence of oil will bring development to communities. "Oil has brought us some developments as well as problems," explains William Kato, Local Council I Chairman in Nsonga in Hoima district. "Heritage [Oil Company] built a school for us. It brought us water from up the hills, accessible to everyone in this village. However, when CNOOC [the China National Offshore Oil Corporation] took over, everything came to a standstill. Today, the water is untreated and the whole village is drinking it. We have had cases of typhoid and bilharzia due to people consuming contaminated water. Unfortunately, there isn't much we can do. CNOOC hasn't done anything yet, too. Maybe they are busy with other things. In the past, there was a system where available jobs would be advertised locally so members of the local community could apply. This has since been scrapped. They say work has been sub-contracted. The sub-contractors prefer using their own people, so the locals no longer get hired."

William Kato talks about the positives and negatives of oil exploration in the area.

NSONGA, HOIMA DISTRICT



Concerns about oil waste or spillages are not the only potential driver of conflict. Ugandans at the national, local government and community levels appear to have great expectations. A narrative has been sold that oil exploitation will improve people's quality of life, end the country's dependence on foreign donors and increase national prosperity, with the proceeds being used to construct roads, hospitals and schools. There is even talk of Hoima in the west of the country becoming the economic capital of Uganda. This has encouraged many to migrate to the oil districts in the hope of benefiting from the oil industry.

If the country is to manage the oil and gas proceeds, it must first find ways of managing expectations. The government must identify those who will be impacted by oil activity and engage with them. These include local communities, economic migrants and the Ugandan public more broadly, local governments, oil companies and members of the business community. Suspicion and anxiety have already arisen about the coming oil production, so people must be consulted and given ample time to understand the situation and to fully engage in the consultation process.

Ugandans already perceive their leaders and law enforcers as corrupt. An old man at Kanara Town Council in Ntoroko district referred to the situation as "Uganda Kurya", literally translated as "Uganda is about eating", whereby eating in the local jargon implies fraud and embezzlement. This mismanagement of oil funds, whether perceived or real, could fuel conflict.

People welcome a fishing boat coming ashore
from Lake Albert.

KANARA, NTOROKO DISTRICT



In an environment where jobs are scarce and there are few if any alternative sources of income, Lake Albert has become a prized asset. Entire villages are so dependent on the lake that a slight change in their livelihood would have a drastic impact.

“We people who live here, our life depends on the fish,” highlights Mzee Matteo Mulongo from Panyimur, Nebbi district. “This lake is our life. Our lives, the lives of our children, and their children depend on it. Generations and generations of us have fished on this lake. It is the only source of livelihood we have got. We don’t want to let it go.”

With fish stocks dwindling and catches becoming small, the effects are beginning to show. “It is dangerous,” says Mulongo. “We are unable to take our children to school. The general lack of what to do is creating an environment for thieves. Some wives have also run away from their marriages because husbands are no longer able to provide [for them]. I have also heard of cases where some children are threatening to chop their fathers’ heads off because they cannot afford to take them to school! That is how far it has gone.”

Mzee with his children and grandchildren
– three generations of fishermen.
PANYIMUR, NEBBI DISTRICT



Fishing used to be straightforward on Lake Albert, say the local communities. Everyone would go fishing and come back happy. Women used to stay by the shore and catch a few fish using just buckets. Today, however, fish stocks have fallen significantly. Some fishermen spend night after night out on the lake with no luck. It is frustrating many and there is much speculation on what or who is to blame.

Many of the fishermen attribute the change in fortunes to 'light fishing', a particular type of fishing that uses lights and is aimed at catching *mukene* (silver cyprinid). Some blame the oil exploration, arguing that some types of exploration used loud noises that must have scared away the fish. Others say it is due to overfishing or "the bad neighbours from Congo".

Whatever the reason, there is no denying that poor resource management is to blame. Rofino, an elder from Panyamur, Nebbi district, explains: "I will tell you what the problem is. The problem we have is one of too many authorities, yet nothing is being done to save the lake. We have the Beach Management Units, law enforcement officers, the fish guards, everyone ... But even with all these people on the lake, illegal fishing is still going on." He adds: "The introduction of *mukene* fishing has led to a total decline in fish stocks on this lake. The *mukene* net collects everything, including fish eggs. How then do you expect fish to multiply if their eggs are being pulled out of the water?"

A fisherman fixes lights to floats attached to *mukene* fishing nets.

BUTIABA, BULIISA DISTRICT



In Nsonga in Hoima district, locals are convinced that the seismic studies carried out on Lake Albert during the oil exploration phase significantly altered the fish habitat on the lake. Fishermen say they were prevented from fishing in oil exploration waters and never compensated for the loss of livelihoods during this period. Some fishermen talked of having lost their fishing nets when they were ripped apart by passing vessels from oil exploration companies.

The same was reported in Wanseko in Buliisa district, where MSL Logistics, contracted by Tullow Oil Company, conducted a survey on Lake Albert. The fishermen claim the big diesel-powered boats used in the survey scared away the fish, thus resulting in low catches. In fact, fish stocks had already started to dwindle due to overfishing even before oil exploration started, but local fishermen are adamant that the exploration significantly affected fish stocks.

The community also believes that gas flaring during oil exploration stops rain. Because fish stocks tend to increase with rain, the perception is that gas burning is responsible for the reduced volume of fish – a coincidence that only came to light after oil companies moved into the area.

“If the fisherman is yawning in the future while the oil man is enjoying, this is bound to brew conflict,” says William Kato, Local Council I Chairman in Nsonga.

Mukene being left to dry on the sand.
BUTIABA, BULIISA DISTRICT



In general, there also seems to be a lack of reliable information about the possible impacts of oil exploitation on fishing as an economic activity. It is impossible to determine whether this is a case of people simply not understanding the potential impacts, or of the government and oil companies not sufficiently sharing information and engaging in dialogue with communities.

It is clear that, in the absence of information, people are beginning to make their own conclusions. Some of these conclusions may be based on rumour, but if not properly countered may fuel trouble in the communities.

“I would think that, if the oil people are on one side of the lake, we would still be able to fish on the other side,” says Emmanuel, a *mukene* fisherman from Rwanda based in Butiaba. “If that is not possible, then we will go deeper into the lake. I am not aware of us not fishing just because the oil company is drilling or stopping our activities because of oil. I have invested so much money in buying fishing boats. I can’t imagine a situation where I will be unable to fish.”

A woman coils a fishing net.
KANARA, NTOROKO DISTRICT



“People are worried around here,” says William Kato, Local Council I Chairman in Nsonga. “We have heard rumours that CNOOC are planning to shut operations until 2017 due to the fall in the oil price. As you can imagine, everyone here is worried. We have people here whose restaurants, lodges and bars have been dependent on oil company staff. If they close, it will be chaos.”

There are also concerns over land and compensation. The government is exploring the viability of temporarily suspending the issuance of land titles, to stop land speculation around the Albertine Graben. However, in the absence of clear information, sections of the public have their own views on the matter. “The government has decreed that it won’t issue any land titles any longer for land within the Albertine Graben,” says Steven Mbidi, Local Council II Chairman in Butiaba. “We think all this is due to oil. The government is aware that the presence of oil will increase the land value. So, to dictate how much people are compensated, they have decided it is best to not issue land titles. Otherwise, why else would they decree such?”

Steven Mbidi talks about his concerns
over the impact of the oil industry on land.
BUTIABA, BULIISA DISTRICT



Back in 2011, the then State Minister for Fisheries, Ruth Nankabirwa, recommended the deployment of law enforcement officers on Lake Albert, in a move she argued would streamline fishing. The officers were given powers to confiscate illegal gear, impound boats for contraband and mete out punishment to transgressors. However, none of the officers was paid a salary. They also worked independently of the Fisheries Department and Beach Management Units (BMUs), reporting only to the minister.

Their activities were later marred by controversy, as fishermen accused them of corruption and bribery. Today, very few remain, after being disbanded by the current central government minister, but their legacy lingers. Their conduct has been blamed for promoting illegal fishing on Lake Albert. BMUs have also been accused of allowing illegal fishing to go on on their watch. The BMUs insist that the problem is not entirely theirs, as most of the illegal gear is cleared by government authorities who allow its importation into the country.

“To be honest, I think it is all an elaborate scam,” says Peter Timukunda from Panyamur Landing Site. “Ask yourself, if all these nets are illegal, how are they being allowed into the country? Why can’t the government ban the importation and sale of all illegal fishing nets? It doesn’t make sense.”

While the law says that confiscated illegal gear should be burnt, there are numerous cases where illegal gear confiscated from one landing site has been sold to fishermen from other landing sites around Lake Albert. This has put these fishermen at risk of retaliation from previous owners. Cases of retaliation have been recorded in particular across the border between Ugandan and Congolese fishermen.

Corruption has also led to uncontrolled fishing, further depleting the already meagre fish stocks. Local fishermen complained about an influx of foreign nationals into the area – a development they attributed to corruption and lack of proper border controls.

Fishermen claim nets like these are fueling overfishing.
KANARA, NTOROKO DISTRICT



Across the Albertine Graben, the general feeling is that the law enforcement officers were nothing but 'a gang of thieves', whose interest lay not in protecting Lake Albert but in fleecing fishermen of their earnings. The officers have been accused of presiding over a period of indiscriminate illegal fishing courtesy of unchecked *mukene* fishing. While everyone we interviewed agreed that *mukene* fishing on Lake Albert was responsible for the reduced fish stocks, and that the nets used in this type of fishing were illegal, the practice remains rife.

There is growing resentment towards *mukene* fishermen, many of them foreign nationals. Many tend to invest hugely, sometimes coming in with hundreds of boats. They are thus able to maximise catches and to make more in sales than the local people who fish with one or two boats.

"I say ban *mukene* fishing," insists Mzee Mulongo, from Panyamur in Nebbi district. "Everything was fine until *mukene* fishing was introduced on this lake. In fact, even now, most of it is done by foreigners. They are all here. They steal our nets. They steal our fish. They are taking everything. Surprisingly, the same government that is encouraging us to fish using legal gear is the same government that is allowing *mukene* fishing to go on. It doesn't make sense."

According to Venance Okethi, a fisherman at Dei Landing Site: "There is a lot of *mukene* fishing on the lake and it has destroyed everything. If *mukene* fishing can be banned on this lake, the stocks will improve. Get the light off this lake and everything will get back to normal."

Two young boys help to repair broken fishing nets.

BUTIABA, BULIISA DISTRICT



To guard against overfishing, the DRC has put in place fishing holidays. The Congolese fishing holiday takes place from August to October. There are reports that some Congolese fishermen have been exploiting Uganda's porous borders and lenient immigration laws to enter Uganda and fish during these fishing holidays – something that the locals are unhappy about. There have been calls for Uganda to adopt a similar approach and establish a fishing holiday period. While the fishermen agree that such a move would be helpful to increase fish stocks, the government appears to have no alternatives to fishermen's livelihoods.

“The ministry has also come up with inland fish conservation measures, which look at having closed seasons at some fishing sites to allow the infant fish to mature,” explains Professor Zerubabel Nyiira, State Minister for Fisheries. “However, the major challenge in enforcing this measure has been finding alternative sources of income for fishermen during the fish holiday.”

Many of the fishermen we interviewed were supportive of the move to introduce fishing holidays. However, with so many dependent on one lake and everyone seeing it as the only quick way to make money, such a move would need a coordinated effort. For instance, there would be no point in introducing a fishing holiday if fishermen from other landing sites across Lake Albert were not going to honour it.

A group of fishermen speak about their frustrations.

KANARA, NTOROKO DISTRICT



Janet Awachango and Agnes Pachudaga spend the day ferrying buckets of *mukene*, which they spread on the lake shore to dry. They get paid UGX 700 (US\$0.20) for each bucket of *mukene*, which is barely enough to live on. Since it is considered a taboo for women to go fishing on the lake, fish drying is one of the few activities that women can actively engage in. However, it is labour-intensive and requires a lot of effort.

“The work is tiresome. I can do three buckets a day if lucky, but that is not enough to buy lunch and save. We leave home very early in the morning and return very late. As you can see, the working conditions are tough. We spend many hours bending down, which is bad for our backs. Besides, *mukene* smells a lot. The stench stays on you throughout and we fear it may have side effects,” says Janet Awachango, Butiaba Landing Site, Buliisa district.

“The nature of our work is also putting a strain on our family relationships. Our husbands leave home at sunset to go fishing on the lake. They don’t return until dawn and that is about the same time when we are heading out to work,” she adds.

Janet and Agnes spread *mukene* on the sand to dry them in the sun.
BUTIABA, BULIISA DISTRICT



Fifty-seven-year-old Lazaro Bule, a boat maker at the Butiaba Landing Site, has been making boats for 35 years. “I am not a fisherman but this lake is my life, too. Without it, I will struggle to feed my family. People will buy boats if the catch is good.” With his youngest son, he sits by the shore every day waiting for work – occasionally taking on roofing jobs in the village.

“Sometimes, there is no work at all,” he says. “Boats are not easy to make. It takes me about four days to complete a big boat like this one, although sometimes I struggle to find the right materials. I cannot remember the number of times I have had run-ins with officials from the National Forestry Authority. I have been accused, not once not twice, of using illegal timber even though I buy this from established carpenters. One has to survive, so, despite the troubles, I keep going on.”

An average boat like the one Lazaro was building costs up to UGX 120,000 (US\$35). In a good month, he says he can make up to 10 boats – raising enough money to support his family of eight. His youngest son (12) is the latest member of the family to take up an apprenticeship with his father.

Lazaro building a boat.
BUTIABA, BULIISA DISTRICT



Of course, part of the problem across the Albertine Graben is the overdependence on Lake Albert and the fact that people refuse to see beyond the lake. In fact, in the event of any halt to fishing caused by oil exploitation activities, some people suggested that they would be ready to take the fight to both the government and oil companies.

“We have been asking people to think beyond the lake, but it is hard,” says Aisha Nyakake Nalongo, Local Council III Chairperson, Kanara Town Council, Ntoroko district. “People see the lake as their saviour, a source of each and everything. They are terrified to go away. And it is not about money. Some fishermen can make up to UGX 1 million [US\$285] a week. Once they get the money, they go to the cities and stay in lodges, living a life of luxury until the money runs out. No one thinks about life after the lake because they see it as a permanent resource.”

“We have been asking people what they are doing besides fishing,” states Juma Tamale, District Internal Security Officer, Nebbi district. “The problem around here is that people overdepend on the lake. We have been asking them to think about alternatives. The Congolese are ahead of us on this. The majority of them have diversified their sources of income. For example, during the fishing holiday over there, they go back to farming and agriculture.”

Aisha explains about the local fishermen's overdependence on Lake Albert.
KANARA, NTOROKO DISTRICT



The oil industry's impact is not only being felt in the fishing industry, but also has consequences for land in Uganda. According to a survey conducted in 2011 by Uganda Land Alliance, the most common land-related problems around the oil districts (as they are commonly referred to) included land-grabbing and encroachment (42%), increased land disputes due to oil discovery (27%) and land fragmentation (21%).

Locals also alleged that exploration has resulted in the expansion of gazetted land around prospecting areas, which has further restricted communal access to those areas. Without proper mechanisms for compensation, especially to those previously dependent on the affected resources, livelihoods are being strained. As a result, everyone, including people who used to farm or graze cattle, is now looking to the lake. This is compounding the problem of overfishing and further intensifying blame games.

According to Abel Asiimwe from Butiaba: "Previously, land was enough for us. Now, due to unchecked immigration, we are beginning to have conflicts over land. It was never the case. People who came here as fishermen are now buying land or encouraging their relatives to buy land because they have heard that Butiaba may have oil. The relationship between the indigenous people and migrant communities is not cordial. There is a lot of mistrust. But like most things around here, relationships are dictated by political interests. We have told authorities about a foreign influx, but some of these people are voters. No one wants to bother them or they will vote differently."

An oil development alongside local houses and fields next to Lake Albert.
NSONGA, HOIMA DISTRICT



There is also a palpable anxiety among the local community regarding the future of oil exploration and the conduct of both the government and oil companies. In Panyimur, for example, locals were uncertain about the intentions of Total. An exploration attempt for oil there returned nothing; however, because the exploration well remains heavily guarded, some locals believe there is oil and accuse both the government and the oil company of failing to tell the truth for fear of compensation claims.

Issa Byaruhanga, Vice Chairman of Buhuka Community Land Association, highlights: “The government has not come out clearly to explain its position on the many land issues that plague this area. People are not sure whether they will stay or not. It is like living on a cliff. There is a divide-and-rule policy over land in this area. The community is still waiting for the UGX 248 million [US\$70,800] that the court ruled be paid to locals as compensation for land at Buhuka. We didn’t get what we wanted and there isn’t much we can do about it. The government is powerful so they have benefited instead of us.”

Issa has been campaigning for land compensation for a few years now and is still waiting for answers.
NSONGA, HOIMA DISTRICT



About our work

This photo essay was developed as part of International Alert's project 'Harnessing the potential of oil to contribute to Uganda's peaceful development'. This aims to achieve higher levels of trust and accountability between the government, oil companies and Ugandan citizens, including communities in the oil regions.

It is Alert's belief that the issue of how oil exploitation will affect people's existing sources of livelihood should be understood from the broader perspective of effective resource management. As this photo essay has shown, oil exploitation can coexist with other forms of livelihoods in the Albertine Graben region. However, if this is to happen, stronger emphasis needs to be placed on 'getting it right'. Information sharing must be encouraged and both the government and oil companies should ensure that communities are involved in most, if not all, decision-making processes.

Yet, oil is a finite resource. Successful oil exploitation coupled with fiscal responsibility could elevate millions of Ugandans out of poverty. But attention must be paid to the fact that a sudden influx of oil cash could distort the economy and undermine other sources of livelihoods, such as fishing and agriculture, which currently employ and feed far more people than oil ever will.

You can find out more about our work on this topic at
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International Alert.

346 Clapham Road, London SW9 9AP, United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0)20 7627 6800, Fax +44 (0)20 7627 6900

info@international-alert.org

www.international-alert.org