Socio-economic implications of the water hyacinth in Lake Victoria on fishing and trading communities: a comparative rural and urban case study

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The water hyacinth, an exotic plant of Africa was first introduced about 120 years ago by explorers and naturalists. It is believed to have been imported from South America where it is an indigenous plant. It was first seen in Kenya in the early 1980's and in Lake Victoria in the early 1990's. Its proliferation left unchecked has caused a myriad of problems to the regular lake users, the fishermen, fish traders and the fish processor not to mention the interference with domestic and irrigation uses of the lake. The difficulties include navigation, blocking of the water intake points and the interference with irrigation channels among many others.

Hence this study set out to assess the socio-economic havoc the water hyacinth has had on the shore line communities in Kisumu District. The objectives of the study were: finding out the socio-economic effects the water hyacinth has had on the fishing and trading communities, the control and coping mechanisms by the fishermen and the fish traders and lastly to seek possible mitigation measures for the disaster now in the lake 'allegedly' brought by the weed.

The study which was carried out in Kisumu Dunga and in Nyakach showed high negative social and economic effects than the 'business as usual' and that the fish traders and the fishermen in the areas of study employed limited control mechanisms, other than the survival tactics. The study results show that the water hyacinth has indeed negatively affected the social and economic livelihoods of the fishermen and the fish traders. These include navigation difficulties, closed blocked beaches, blocked irrigation canals, snakes and crocodiles bites, migration, reduced economic fish caught consequently reducing income levels among several others. The study however revealed that the current focus on weed removal is only but looking and addressing the problems from angle and ignoring the other arm.

Blaikie et al's (1994) 'pressure and release' model adopted by the study provides a more concise and comprehensive approach when dealing with the disaster. The model advocates the tracing of root causes for disaster occurrences and finding solutions for the same. The root causes are usually well established remote factors in a society that aid in producing a disaster. The field survey revealed them for the area of study as policies on industrialization, national food, population growth rate and political marginalization. These policies nevertheless seem fine on paper.

The problem comes in their implementation or translation. For example, agricultural intensification 'a product of national food policy propagates for increased food yields. This
obviously means agricultural intensification is interpreted as the use of more inorganic fertilizers and the creation of more land for cultivation. Forests may thus have to be cleared. These activities if not controlled could easily lead to eutrophication and/or soil erosion respectively which are very disastrous to the environment.

Project funding, another product of industrialization could easily produce increased waste effluents into water bodies. Inequity in national resource distribution, a product of political marginalization further compounds the crises. It easily produces reduced developmental activities (among them poor communication facilities and a lack of sufficient schools). Higher population growth rates put pressure on the land and the existing social and economic activities.

This produces unsafe conditions such as the emergence of urban squatters, poor sewerage facilities and people living in flood prone areas. Unfortunately, as revealed by the field survey, these factors occur in the area of study. The study therefore concludes and recommends alongside the water hyacinth removal, equity in natural resource distribution, political demarginalization, reduced population growth rates and the proper implementation of industrial policies.

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