

Fish Rearing

Fish project keeps the youth from fishy deals

A group of young people in Kyeni East have turned to fish farming after failing to find jobs, and they don't regret it

By **STANDARD CORRESPONDENT**

It's drizzling and the visitors are getting a little wet. But none of them wants to leave the banks of the fish pond as they enjoy watching the fish swimming by and occasionally making a sudden swirl before disappearing deep into the water. The mountain air here is crisp and the dense tropical forest all around awesome. It's chilling cold although our host insists that today is a little warmer than most of the days.

Wanjohi Wambugu, 31, is our host and says it is not just the beauty of the trout swimming in the cold, crystal clear mountain water that fills him with joy. It is the fulfilment of a dream to start a trout rearing project that has taken him and the 20-odd members of his Jitunze Environmental Self-help Group on the slopes of Mt. Kenya in Kyeni East, Nyeri, many sleepless nights to succeed.

"The beginning was difficult," Wambugu says, as he throws a handful of fish feed into the water.

"But as they say, every cloud has a silver lining. We may not have attained what we want to just yet but at least we are a step closer and we are confident and determined to do so. Every long journey begins with one step."

The trout project by Jitunze Environmental self-help Group is today an example of what young people in the rural areas can do to create employment.

"But exploiting these resources requires hard work and for those willing to soil their hands, there is no regret," says Samuel Muriuki, a member of the group.

FISH EXPORTS

Because of the area's potential for trout fish farming, the group is establishing links with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which supports the One-Village-One-Product (OVOP) concept in Kenya, through the Ministry of Industrialization. The group

believes that their village can become one of the leading inland fish production centres in Kenya for local and export markets.

The concept of OVOP originated from Oita Prefecture in Japan in 1979 and has since been introduced to many other parts of the world. It is designed to help local communities to identify local products which they are best at and to raise the value of those products so that they can be exported to the global market.

Jitunze sees it fits in well in the concept because the area has the potential for trout farming, even at industrial level, for example, canning for export.

Jitunze self-help group was formed in 2004 when a group of youth found themselves idling in the villages having left school and with no sign of employment. After discussions, the group settled on fish farming because, they argued, no one in the area was doing it. The market was assured and the climate just right.

First though, they had to raise the money to start the project and they had to do this from all sources. Some of the members asked their parents for money while others sold cabbages, potatoes and chicken or did manual work on the farms. After a while, the group eventually raised what Wambugu called a “reasonable amount by village standards” to start off.

RED TAPE

The worst was to follow as Wambugu explains: “What we thought was a simple application for land from the Government for the project was a nightmare. We explained to the authorities that our kind of engagement would ensure young people stay away from crime but no one listened. It took us three years before the group could get the necessary concessions, especially to access Government forest land to build the ponds.”

In the meantime, the members kept themselves busy learning trout farming. They attended courses at the Government Fisheries Farm at Sagana.

“You can therefore imagine how excited we were when we eventually constructed our first pond in 2008, bought fingerlings from the Government farm and stocked the ponds,” says Wambugu, who recently visited the US for leadership training in Connecticut.

Wambugu says that while in the US, he learnt more about rearing of trout, knowledge that made him an instant hero in his Kimahuri village on his return. Now, he spends evenings surrounded by curious villagers - old and young, - to narrate his experiences in the US, particularly about his visits to trout farms.

“Of course those people are years ahead in technology”, he says

“Would you imagine fish farmers there manufacture pure oxygen and inject it into their ponds? I just could not believe what I saw.”

Despite the surprises, Wambugu says he learnt a lot from the trip and shall share the knowledge.

He sates Mt. Kenya area has a potential to raise trout because of its clean flowing rivers and regrets that some hotels import trout yet lie to their customers it is local.

Wambugu, however, decries Government red tape, especially the numerous licences required for his kind of project. They pay more than Sh50,000 a year.

However, he is thankful to the Fisheries Department, which helped them design the first ponds and the hatcheries and also trained them.

Today the group concentrates on breeding fingerlings, which they sell to other local fish farmers and also to NGOs. It hopes to breed table size fish as soon as they can expand their breeding tanks.

As the visitors, some from JICA, huddle together under a makeshift shed to keep off the drizzle and enjoy a succulent trout fried by John Karue, Wambugu says emphatically that they soon shall be among the leading suppliers of trout.



Members of Jitunze Self-help Group at one of the breeding ponds.

Government red tape slows noble initiative

Wanjohi Wambugu, the secretary of Jitunze Self-help group, laments that Government red-tape is killing initiatives such as theirs.

He says the Government should be more sympathetic to groups such as his by reducing payments for the numerous licences required – they pay more than Sh50,000 a year.

“These are young people who are struggling to pull themselves out of poverty so where does the Government expect them to raise that kind of money,” says Wambugu.

However, he is thankful to the Fisheries Department which helped them design the first ponds and hatcheries and also trained them in the initial stages of the project.

Today, the group concentrates on breeding fingerlings which they sell to other fish farmers in the region and also to NGOs for restocking rivers in the Aberdares region.

They hope to breed table size fish as soon as they are able to expand their breeding tanks.

“I know we shall make a lot of money in the near future.

“That is why when relatives keep reminding me that I’m a university graduate and should have gone out of the village like other young people to look for formal government jobs, all I can do is shake my head and marvel at their ignorance. I wish I could make them understand that in our very own village, there are millions of shillings waiting to be made, says Wambugu.

In Kenya, the One-Village-One –Product (Ovop) programme is managed through an institutional framework, starting from the Central Government, cascading down to the district and community levels.

An Ovop Secretariat within the Ministry of Industrialisation and working closely with Kyoko Harada, Jica’s Expert for Ovop, has been instrumental in identifying, promoting and facilitating implementation of approved projects.

The first phase of Ovop in Kenya was launched in 2008 and mainly involved sensitisation workshops in the pilot areas (Yatta, Nyeri North and Laikipia West).

Other activities are technical support, training, formal groups and product development.

In Phase 2, the programme was spread to eight other districts – Garissa, Isiolo, Nyeri North, West Pokot, Nandi South, Bomet, Kisii Central and Voi.



Wanjohi Wambugu, tests the water temperature in one of the breeding troughs.