AQUA CONNECT

TURNING LOCAL FISHERIES INTO ENGINES OF JOBS AND GROWTH

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MESSAGE FROM PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP

Women and youth charting a new pathway in Africa's fisheries economy

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Africa's fisheries sector is increasingly emerging not only as an important source of livelihoods, but also as a strategic driver of trade, jobs, enterprise and inclusive economic transformation. Across the continent, women and youth are already reshaping fisheries value chains through innovation, entrepreneurship and cross-border trade. Yet their potential has often been constrained by limited market access, weak financing systems, fragmented standards and inadequate support structures.

This edition of Aqua Connect highlights how those barriers are gradually being addressed through coordinated partnerships, practical interventions and regional cooperation. From Cabo Verde's drive to modernise fisheries trade, to expanding fish trade corridors across East Africa, to women and youth-led enterprises transforming seaweed and aquaculture into profitable businesses, the stories in this edition demonstrate that progress is no longer theoretical. It is visible in growing enterprises, stronger market linkages, improved financial capability and rising participation in regional trade.

The programme's work on sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) systems, digital trade, safeguarding and financial inclusion also reinforces a broader lesson: sustainable growth in fisheries depends not only on more efficient markets, but on creating trading environments that are inclusive, safe and founded on dignity. This edition spotlights the planned six-month behaviour change campaign that seeks to address sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) in Kenya's fisheries value chain, demonstrating that lasting transformation requires more than awareness alone. By combining community engagement, trusted local media, digital storytelling and economic empowerment, the initiative tackles both the social norms and economic vulnerabilities that enable exploitation to persist.

As we continue implementing the programme, we remain committed to working with governments, the private sector, development partners and communities to unlock the full potential of Africa's fisheries economy. By strengthening regional value chains, promoting innovation and ensuring that no one is left behind, we are laying the foundation for a fisheries sector that drives sustainable economic growth, expands intra-African trade and delivers lasting prosperity to communities.

AfCFTA ADVANCES SPS AGENDA TO PROTECT CONSUMERS AND EXPAND MARKET ACCESS

By The AfCFTA Private Sector Unit (PSU)

Africa's fast-growing population, rapid urbanisation and rising incomes are driving unprecedented demand for food and agricultural products, placing renewed focus on the systems needed to safeguard food safety and facilitate trade across the continent.

The World Bank projects that intra-African food demand will rise by 178% by 2050, intensifying pressure on governments and regional institutions to strengthen agricultural production and improve food security. Against this backdrop, harmonised Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures are emerging as an important pillar for enabling safe, sustainable and competitive agri-food trade under the African Continental Free Trade Area framework.

SPS measures are designed to protect human, animal and plant health while ensuring that food and agricultural products traded across borders meet stipulated safety standards. However, limited SPS capacity and weak compliance among small and medium enterprises continue to constrain intra-African trade and expose markets to food safety risks.

The challenge is particularly significant in the fisheries sector, where trade has become an important source of jobs, income and livelihoods for millions of Africans, especially women and youth. Stakeholders say weak SPS systems can hinder market access and increase vulnerability to pest outbreaks, unsafe food products and trade disruptions.

To address these challenges, Annex 7 of the Protocol on Trade in Goods under the AfCFTA provides a framework for harmonising SPS measures among State Parties. The annex seeks to facilitate trade while safeguarding public, animal and plant health, improve transparency and cooperation, strengthen technical capacity, and encourage the use of internationally recognised standards to reduce unnecessary trade barriers.

The AfCFTA Secretariat's Non-Tariff Measures Division and SPS Unit are working closely with the Secretariat's Private Sector Unit to strengthen SPS implementation under the Women and Youth Economic Empowerment in Fisheries Programme, in partnership with Mastercard Foundation and TradeMark Africa.

Part of the effort includes developing unified fish standards to boost intra-African fisheries trade and improve compliance among SMEs. The SPS Unit has also been actively engaged in the African Organisation for Standardisation Technical Committee on fish, fisheries and aquaculture standards to align continental SPS requirements with the evolving fisheries value chain.

Momentum around SPS reform continued during the 5th Meeting of the AfCFTA Subcommittee on SPS held in March 2026, where discussions highlighted continuing efforts to strengthen agriculture and agro-processing trade across the continent.

Looking ahead, the AfCFTA Secretariat and its partners are expected to prioritise harmonisation of SPS service costs, strengthen the capacity of competent authorities, improve surveillance and risk assessment systems, support national food control systems, and accelerate adoption of digital tools and traceability systems to improve market access and trade efficiency.

With food demand rising and climate-related risks becoming more pronounced, stakeholders increasingly view stronger SPS systems not only as a regulatory necessity, but also as a strategic foundation for Africa's trade integration, food security and economic transformation.

178%

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IN-COUNTRY AND REGIONAL PROGRAMME HIGHLIGHTS

Stakeholders rally behind Cabo Verde's bid to modernise fisheries trade

Cabo Verde is positioning itself to become a major fisheries and blue economy hub in West Africa after government leaders, fishers, researchers and private sector actors endorsed reforms designed to unlock trade opportunities under the AfCFTA.

At a high-level Fisheries and Blue Economy Stakeholders Forum held in Mindelo on São Vicente Island on 24-25 March 2026, stakeholders validated a national situational analysis on cross-border fish trade and spelled out priorities for modernising one of the country's most strategic economic drivers. The discussions revealed a sector rich in opportunity but constrained by regulatory bottlenecks, fragmented systems and infrastructure gaps that undermine competitiveness in regional markets. Yet, with strong existing trade ties to Mauritania, Senegal and wider ECOWAS markets, the forum said Cabo Verde is well placed to leverage AfCFTA to expand exports and strengthen its position in the Atlantic fisheries economy.

Cabo Verde's Minister of Sea, Jorge Santos, described fisheries and aquaculture as critical national economic pillars, supporting jobs, export earnings and livelihoods, particularly for women and youth. He urged stakeholders to embrace innovation and technology while creating an environment that attracts investment into the ocean economy.

A strong emphasis emerged around digitisation and trade facilitation. Stakeholders called for the deployment of digital systems for catch-data harmonisation, vessel monitoring, certification and traceability, as well as the implementation of the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) to reduce transaction costs and improve regional trade efficiency.

Financial institutions urged to rethink lending for fisheries businesses

Stakeholders from government, financial institutions, development agencies and the private sector convened in Nairobi on 18 March 2026 for the Kenya National Fisheries Access to Finance Workshop, seeking solutions to one of the sector's most persistent challenges - limited access to finance for women and youth.

Organised by MSC Foundation, the workshop brought together actors across the fisheries value chain to examine why financing continues to fall short for small businesses despite growing potential within Kenya's blue economy. Speaking at the forum, Kenya's Principal Secretary for the State Department for Blue Economy and Fisheries, Betsy Njagi, said the sector has the potential to contribute between KSh300 billion and KSh350 billion annually, but current output remains low.

Participants agreed that while the fisheries sector remains active and entrepreneurial, formal financing systems have yet to adapt to the realities of how many businesses operate. Women traders and youth-led enterprises shared experiences of relying on informal

lenders, struggling with cash flow pressures, and facing difficulties accessing growth capital despite increasing use of savings groups and digital tools. Financial institutions acknowledged challenges of limited sector data, seasonality, and difficulties applying traditional lending models to fisheries businesses.

The workshop also highlighted signs of progress. More enterprises are improving record-keeping and separating business from personal finances, while some lenders are beginning to pilot products tailored to the sector's needs. Stakeholders said the focus must now shift from dialogue to action through stronger partnerships, better use of data, and financial products to support women and youth-led businesses driving Kenya's fisheries economy.

Cross-border fisheries trade opens new opportunities for women and youth

At the busy Mpondwe border between Uganda and the DRC, refrigerated trucks loaded with fresh fish from Jinja are becoming a visible symbol of a growing transformation in East Africa's fisheries economy. What was once largely informal trade is increasingly evolving into structured regional trade connecting women and youth-led enterprises to larger cross-border markets.

Between January and March 2026, Kilimo Trust facilitated the formal trade of over 640 metric tonnes of fish and fish products valued at more than $367,000 across major border points in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. The trade moved through strategic corridors including Elegu, Mpondwe, Busia, Horo Horo, Tunduma, Rusumo and Mutukula, linking producers and processors to markets in the DRC, Kenya and beyond. The commodities ranged from smoked, dried and salted fish to chilled seafood products, reflecting growing diversification within the region's fisheries value chains. Tanzania accounted for the largest share of the trade volumes in the period under focus, underlining the increasing economic significance of fisheries in East Africa. Behind the figures lies a broader effort to strengthen systems around trade.

In Summary - Kenya

In Kenya, Kilimo Trust advanced cooperation with county governments and private partners, including fish and seaweed associations and MSMEs. A key milestone during the period was the March 2026 engagement with Kwale County Government, which resulted in an agreement to establish a joint stakeholder coordination forum for the fisheries programme.

In Summary - Tanzania

In Tanzania, engagements focused on reinforcing fish value chains in the Mtwara and Kigoma regions. Discussions with Mtwara District Council and FETA-Mikindani highlighted progress in adopting modern fish-processing technologies and new partnership opportunities. In Kigoma, institutional assessments confirmed FETA's readiness - supported by modern equipment and an FAO-supported expert trainer - while market reviews showed strong demand for sardine products.

IMPACT SPOTLIGHTS AND VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Youth turning fisheries skills into business opportunities

What began as informal, low-paying work along East Africa's fisheries value chains is increasingly transforming into structured enterprise for dozens of young people in Uganda and Tanzania. Between January and March 2026, 82 youth aged between 18 and 35 transitioned into employment or self-employment through programme-supported fisheries initiatives, marking an important shift from subsistence activities to value-added business opportunities. Of these, 67 were in Tanzania and 15 in Uganda.

Before joining the programme, many of the young participants relied on unstable income from fish loading and the sale of unprocessed fish products. Today, they are moving into higher-value activities such as producing packaged fish products and processed seaweed goods for commercial markets.

In Tanzania, the transformation has been particularly striking. Youth who previously sold raw seaweed for as little as TSh800 per kilogramme are now processing seaweed into value-added products retailing at up to TSh40,000 per kilogramme, signalling how training and market-oriented skills are reshaping earning potential within coastal communities.

By the close of the reporting period, participating youth had collectively generated over $9,400 from the sale of nearly 10 metric tonnes of fish and seaweed products. Programme partners say the figures offer early evidence that value addition, business training and group-based enterprise development can significantly improve livelihoods for young people entering the fisheries economy.

To strengthen sustainability, newly formed business groups were also equipped with sales record books to improve financial management, monitor production volumes and support long-term enterprise growth.

BUILDING FINANCIAL CONFIDENCE: STORIES AND LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

In Busia and surrounding fisheries communities, financial literacy training is becoming a foundation for investment and enterprise growth. At Bukani Mama Toto Women Group, members pooled over KSh100,000 to invest in fish farming. With better record-keeping in place, they are now tracking their costs closely and preparing for their next harvest with a clearer sense of what to expect.

In another case, a women-led group moved into cage fishing and generated over KSh2 million from a single harvest, while also creating direct and indirect jobs.

"The financial literacy training was useful to us as it came at the same time we had received funding. We used the record keeping training to track how we feed the fish and our costs, so we know what to expect when we sell. After the last harvest, we now understand how profitable the cages can be. We have also employed one person to feed the fish."

**Wilda Akinyi, 45, coordinator,
Bukani Mama Toto Women Group**

What stands out is how the pieces are coming together. The group already had some experience and access to funding, but it is the financial discipline - budgeting, record keeping, and planning - that is helping them make better use of those resources and create jobs in the process.

The progress is encouraging, but it also points to what needs to happen next. There is a clear need to strengthen links with financial institutions so participants can access products that fit their businesses. Many are also ready for simple digital tools to make record keeping and budgeting easier. Continued mentorship and refresher training are critical to sustain these new habits, while stronger market linkages will help reduce losses and improve returns.

THE FISH CAGES CREATING LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES IN JINJA

On the waters of the Wairaka Landing Site, Lake Victoria, Susan Auma casts feed into a floating fish cage. What looks like a routine chore is in fact the frontline of a gradual economic shift in the lake region's aquaculture. Once a trainee under the fisheries programme, Susan, now a community facilitator, has successfully bridged the gap between classroom capacity building and real-world market participation. Utilising facilitation support from Lattice, she invested in her own fish cage enterprise, transforming theoretical skills into a tangible, income-generating asset.

Susan's impact did not stop at a personal level. In a sector traditionally dominated by men, she became a powerful catalyst for community-led development. ***"Starting my own fish cage showed me that women can lead in aquaculture and create opportunities for others." - Susan Auma.***

She leveraged her success to mobilise peers like Rita Nafula and Phoebe Lewinsky, guiding them to establish their own bamboo fish cages. This chain reaction highlights three critical dimensions of the programme's pathway for success:

Asset-Driven Growth: Shifting focus from basic skills acquisition to the active management of productive, income-yielding assets.

Women as Multipliers: Empowering local leaders who naturally inspire confidence and replicate success among other women.

Organic Sustainability: Fostering peer-to-peer mobilisation and shared learning, which reduces dependency on external agency support and promotes sustainability.

For Rita, Phoebe, and the other women now managing cages at Wairaka, aquaculture represents a self-determined future for their families.

HOW WOMEN AND YOUTH IN TANZANIA ARE REIMAGINING THE SEAWEED ECONOMY

Along the coastline of Zanzibar, seaweed farming supports thousands of households, particularly women. Yet despite the sector's economic importance, many young people have remained largely absent from the industry, discouraged by labour-intensive work, low returns and limited opportunities for growth.

That reality is beginning to change in Pongwe, where a youth-led push is reshaping how the next generation engages with the seaweed value chain. To tackle declining youth participation, Lattice convened a Youth Forum in Pongwe, bringing together young women and men to openly discuss barriers within the sector and identify practical ways to make seaweed farming more profitable, inclusive and attractive to young entrepreneurs.

What emerged from the discussions was a clear shift in ambition. Rather than focusing solely on traditional seaweed farming, many young women expressed strong interest in higher-value activities such as processing, drying, soap-making, oil production, packaging and small-scale enterprise development. The engagement marked a move away from treating youth as labour providers and toward positioning them as entrepreneurs within the blue economy.

In response to the feedback, programme partners introduced targeted support including training in processing techniques, product quality management and value addition, alongside access to drying racks, tools and essential materials. Young women were also integrated into more profitable segments of the value chain beyond raw production. The initiative is increasingly being viewed as a model for how youth-centred design, mentorship and enterprise support can transform seaweed farming from a subsistence activity into a more modern and commercially viable livelihood pathway.

In the fishing communities of Mtwara in southeastern Tanzania, the programme rolled out hands-on value addition training in February 2026, bringing together 89 women and youth from Naumbu and Pemba Pwani villages. Participants were trained to transform raw seaweed into market-ready products including soap, shampoo and food items, while also building skills in quality assurance, packaging, shelf-life management and market readiness. For 29-year-old seaweed farmer Nurdin Hemed Mwena, the training opened a door he had long hoped to walk through.

Following the training, over 40 participants from Naumbu village formed a joint enterprise producing and selling seaweed-based products using the training materials as start-up capital. Their first round of sales generated over TSh570,000, earnings the group immediately reinvested into a second production cycle. Nurdin also launched his own seaweed-based body jelly business after relocating to Msijute Village. Starting with an investment of TSh54,000, he produced 38 bottles and sold 28 within weeks, generating TSh84,000 and reinforcing his confidence in the business.

"The market here is promising. I plan to expand into soap and other products as I grow my capital," he said.

The Naumbu group is now seeking seaweed flour and soap-making machines to increase production and lower costs, with ambitions extending beyond local markets. Nurdin noted that they are now "selling within our village and nearby communities. But our goal is to formalise and expand beyond regional and national borders."

DIGITAL TRADE, POLICY, SAFEGUARDING AND INCLUSION IN A NUTSHELL

Behind the Nets: Safeguarding risks persist across East Africa's fisheries economy

Across East Africa's fishing communities, a growing push to expand economic opportunities for women and youth is also exposing deep social vulnerabilities that development actors say cannot go ignored. A new safeguarding update under the Women and Youth Economic Empowerment in Fisheries Programme has revealed worrying patterns of exploitation, child labour, substance abuse and weak reporting systems across fisheries communities in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

The assessment, conducted between January and March 2026, paints a picture of a sector where economic potential is often undermined by unsafe working environments, informal labour structures and limited access to protection mechanisms for vulnerable groups. Among the most concerning findings is the normalisation of male child labour in fishing communities. In parts of Tanzania, boys as young as 12 are reportedly introduced to fishing under the justification of "inheriting the business." While often framed as skills transfer and livelihood preparation, researchers warn that the practice exposes children to hazardous work, pulls them away from education and entrenches cycles of poverty.

The report also identified widespread alcohol and substance abuse among male fisherfolk, particularly around landing sites where youth congregate. In some communities, alcoholism has become so entrenched that it is treated as a personal failing rather than a broader social and public health challenge requiring coordinated intervention. Equally alarming are attitudes surrounding sexual exploitation and abuse. In some fishing communities, commercial sex work is reportedly viewed as a "preventative" mechanism intended to reduce incidents of sexual violence. Safeguarding experts caution that such perceptions risk normalising exploitative behaviour while diverting attention from the structural drivers of abuse.

The assessment further found that women and youth involved in fisheries frequently lack awareness of regulatory standards and labour protections. Limited understanding of fish size regulations and compliance requirements exposes traders and fisherfolk to harassment, extortion and selective enforcement by authorities. At the same time, the largely informal nature of the fisheries economy leaves many workers without contracts, grievance mechanisms or occupational safety protections.

To address these challenges, programme partners have intensified safeguarding efforts across the region. During the quarter, more than 1,700 participants - many of them women and youth - were mobilised through outreach and sensitisation activities in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

The programme also assessed 33 safeguarding referral and reporting mechanisms across the three countries. National helplines such as Kenya's HAK (Healthcare Assistance Kenya) 1195, Uganda's SAUTI 116 and Tanzania's C-Sema #116 were identified as among the strongest formal response systems for gender-based violence and sexual exploitation cases. However, the assessment found that many of these services remain concentrated in urban areas and have limited reach within remote fishing communities.

At the community level, Beach Management Units were identified as the most accessible local structures. However, many currently lack formal safeguarding mandates or referral training. In response, TMA and programme partners have established a dedicated safeguarding reporting channel and are strengthening referral systems, training safeguarding focal persons and increasing community awareness campaigns.

The findings underscore a growing recognition that economic empowerment alone is insufficient without parallel investment in safety, dignity and accountability systems. As fisheries continue to support millions of livelihoods across East Africa, safeguarding is increasingly emerging as central to building an inclusive and sustainable blue economy.

RESTORING DIGNITY IN FISHERIES THROUGH A BEHAVIOUR CHANGE CAMPAIGN

Sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) in fisheries cannot be eliminated through one-off awareness activities alone. Addressing the problem requires a sustained behaviour change approach that combines community engagement, trusted local media, digital storytelling and economic empowerment to tackle the social and economic conditions that enable exploitation to persist.

Recognising that changing deeply rooted social norms takes time, TMA and its partners have rolled out a six-month behaviour change campaign to address SEAH across Kenya's fisheries value chain, beginning with a pilot in the Lake Victoria Basin.

Rather than focusing solely on perpetrators or survivors, the campaign deliberately engages the "movable middle" - community members who do not condone SEAH but have often remained silent - and empowers them to become active agents of change. Through community market activations, radio programming, digital storytelling and online conversations, the initiative encourages communities to reject harmful practices, speak out against abuse, and champion dignity, safety and accountability.

The campaign also addresses the economic drivers that increase vulnerability to exploitation by linking participants to financial literacy, business development and other economic empowerment opportunities. By combining prevention, dialogue and economic resilience, it seeks to foster lasting social change, enabling everyone in the fisheries value chain to trade, work and thrive in an environment founded on dignity, safety and mutual respect.

SEAH behaviour change campaign seeks to restore dignity in the fisheries sector.

LOOKING AHEAD

MSC

The next quarter will focus on turning training into visible results. The expectation is that:

- Around 9,000 participants will be reached through financial literacy training, with a strong focus on women and youth.
- A further 3,000 will receive more targeted support to strengthen financial management and investment decisions.
- At the same time, work with financial institutions will continue to deepen. Five institutions across Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, and Uganda will be supported to better serve this segment. Bringing Stanbic Zambia on board will be a key step in linking training directly to access to finance.

Kilimo Trust

- Continued registration and training of women and youth (18-35 years) in fish handling, value addition, and business skills
- Strengthening market linkages and enterprise formalisation for MSMEs
- Expanded sensitisation on cross-border trade procedures, standards, and digital market platforms
- Roll-out of partnerships with TVET institutions and financial service providers
- Onboarding of the Safeguarding Officer and roll-out of safeguarding systems across the programme

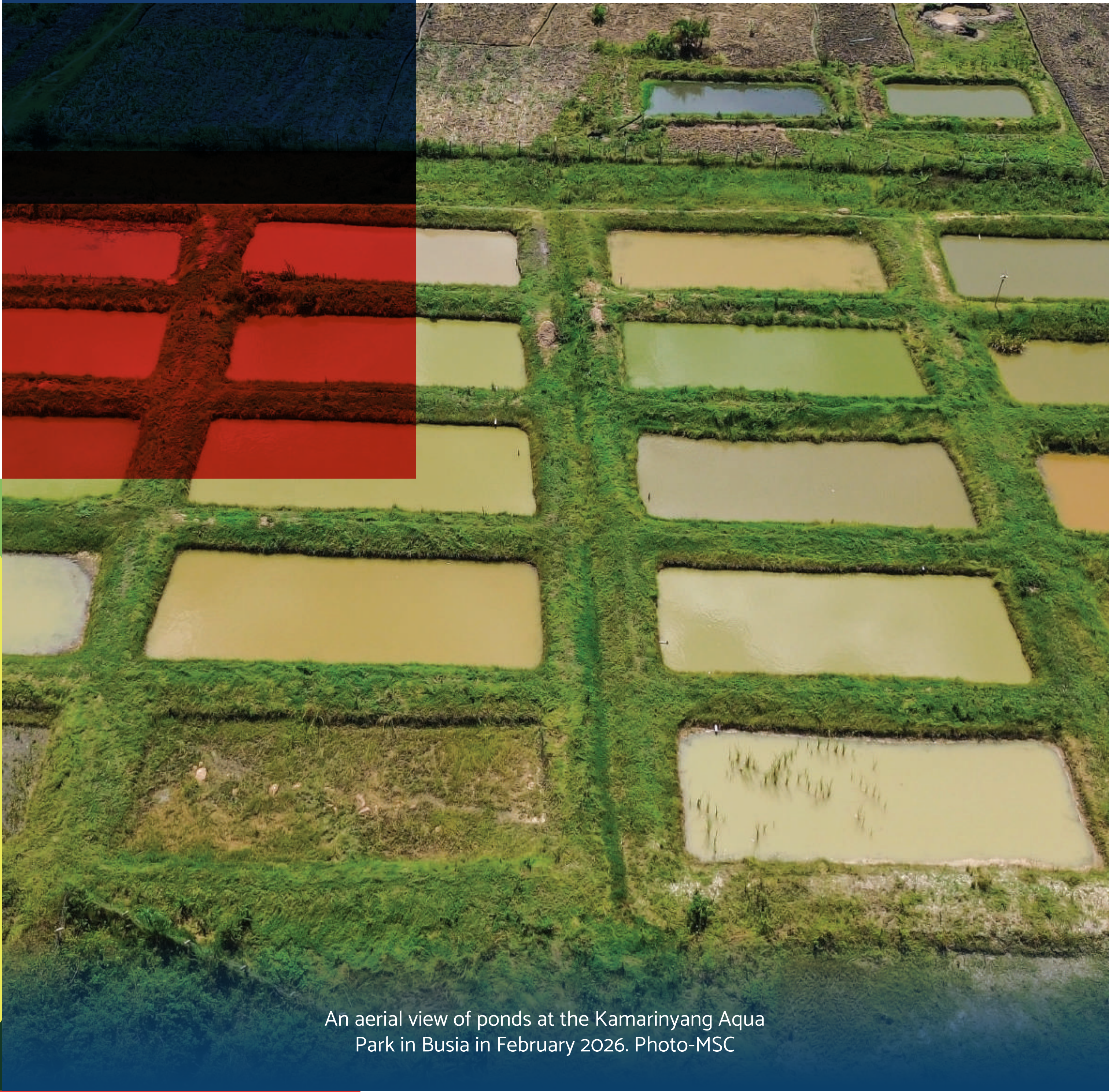
IN PHOTOS

Participants prepare fish value products including samosas during value-addition training, Mwanza, Tanzania (February 2026). Building Skills, Building Enterprises - Women and Youth Move from Training to Market.

Betsy Njagi, CBS, Principal Secretary for Blue Economy and Fisheries, speaking during the Kenya National Fisheries Access to Finance Workshop.

Programme leads from the Women and Youth Economic Empowerment in Fisheries through Inclusive Market Access initiative share a moment with youth and market actors at the Kenya National Fisheries Access to Finance Workshop.

Participants pose for a group photo after a successful Focus Group Discussion with Women from Mahagi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) dealing in Fish trade. Photo Credit - EASSI.



An aerial view of ponds at the Kamarinyang Aqua Park in Busia in February 2026. Photo-MSC

Implementing Partners: