

AQUA CONNECT

ADVANCING INCLUSIVE
FISHERIES TRADE

Women and
Youth Economic
Empowerment in
Fisheries Programme
Quarterly Newsletter

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MESSAGE FROM PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP

Safety is the foundation, not the finishing touch



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For many women and young people in the fisheries sector, work starts before dawn at a landing site and the risks come with the job are high. We treat safeguarding not as a box to tick, but as the foundation upon which everything else stands on.

Programme assessments found persistent gaps between safeguarding policies and their implementation. Women traders often travel between landing sites, processing areas and markets at night, when lighting, sanitation, storage and other essential

protections may be inadequate. Limited protection for informal workers, weak reporting systems and child-protection concerns increase their vulnerability.

Sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, including exploitative “sex-for-fish” relationships, also remain a serious concern. These practices are often sustained by women’s limited access to fish, finance and productive assets.

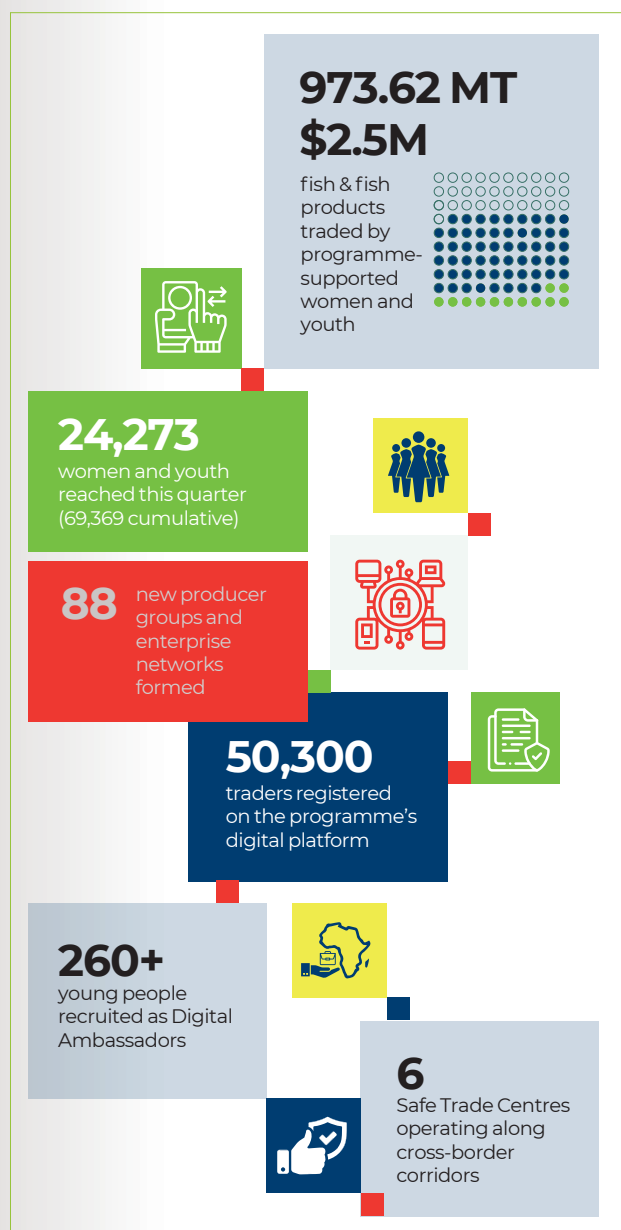
The programme is responding by integrating safeguarding into its economic empowerment initiatives. Six Safe Trade Centres are now operating in Busia, Malaba, Goli, Taveta, Isebania and Mutukula. These centres provide traders with information, market support and connections to reporting and referral services. The centres have already enabled women secure sales, obtain essential trade documentation and access more reliable markets.

Safeguarding training has also been delivered to frontline personnel and representatives from fisheries communities. In addition, a behaviour-change campaign involving roadshows and community engagement is expected to raise awareness about exploitation and safer participation in fisheries markets. Progress must be measured not only by the number of women and young people entering fisheries markets and participating more meaningfully, but also by whether they can participate safely, with dignity, independence and a genuine opportunity to prosper.



QUARTER 2 IMPACT AT A GLANCE

Programme-supported women and youth traded 973.62 MT of fish and fish products across regional markets in the quarter under review, worth approx. \$2.5 million. Uganda accounted for most of the volume and value. Two business-to-business forums catalyst this trade momentum: a regional market-access forum in Mwanza connected 57 traders from Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya and the DRC, while a Kisumu forum brought together 56 traders from Busia and Turkana and facilitated the resolution of cross-border trade disputes. In Kwale, a stakeholders meeting turned to seaweed farming, value addition and climate resilience along the coast - drawing wide media interest across the region.



AfCFTA AGRI-TRADE ACTION PLAN ADOPTED AS FOCUS SHIFTS TO IMPLEMENTATION BY AfCFTA PSU

The AfCFTA Council of Ministers Responsible for Trade adopted the AfCFTA Agri-Trade Action Plan at its 18th Meeting in Abuja on 30 June 2026, marking a major step towards strengthening intra-African agricultural trade and regional value chains.

The AfCFTA Secretariat developed the Action Plan in response to a Council directive, championed by the Government of Rwanda and supported by AGRA and other strategic partners. It was shaped by review and guidance from the Committee of Senior Trade Officials in April 2025 and a continental consultation in Addis Ababa on 8-9 December 2025, which brought together representatives of AfCFTA State Parties' agriculture and trade sectors alongside Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the private sector and development partners.

The Plan addresses a stark reality. Less than 20% of Africa's agricultural and food trade takes place within the continent, even as African countries spend more than \$80 billion a year on food imports. Persistent non-tariff barriers, fragmented standards, inefficient border procedures, limited access to finance and weak logistics continue to hold back regional trade.

The Plan lays out a practical continental framework for coordinated action across nine priority value chains, namely, maize, rice, soya, fruits and vegetables, palm oil, meat, fish, cashew and cotton. Picked through evidence and agreed prioritisation criteria, these value chains anchor on value addition, regional market integration and the cross-cutting constraints, which limit their growth and trade.

With adoption secured, attention now turns to delivery. The AfCFTA Secretariat is working with State Parties, RECs and partners to develop an Implementation Roadmap to translate the Plan into sequenced actions, clarify roles and responsibilities, and identify financing and investment needs. This will be complemented by domestication at the national level, allowing State Parties to identify priority value chains and trade opportunities suited to their own circumstances and determine the actions needed to strengthen their participation in regional markets. As a living document, the Plan will continue to evolve through this process.



FROM ABUJA TO KASUMBALESA, POLICY MOMENTUM BUILDS UP FOR WOMEN AND YOUTH IN THE FISH TRADE

For thousands of women and young people who make a living moving fish across African borders, the difference between a viable business and a loss-making journey can come down to a permit, an unexpected charge, a delayed inspection or a regulation they did not know existed.

During the second quarter of 2026, the programme sharpened its focus on these barriers, moving its policy and advocacy work increasingly from identifying constraints to developing roadmaps for tackling them. This builds on work undertaken during the first quarter, when the programme supported engagement on the Simplified Trade Regime (STR), non-tariff barriers (NTBs), sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) requirements and fisheries standards. In Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, earlier engagements had identified the need for a common list of products eligible under the COMESA STR, digitalised clearance procedures, stronger trade information desks and improved coordination between border agencies.

At Kasumbalesa, one of the busiest gateways between Zambia and the DRC, a bilateral workshop on 24-25 June brought together over 60 stakeholders, including women and young people. Border agencies, ministries, financial institutions, cooperatives and value-chain actors deliberated on the obstacles traders encounter, from documentation delays and unofficial charges to language barriers, discrimination and limited access to finance.

The outcome was a Joint Action Plan covering stronger bilateral coordination between the two countries, simplifying cross border trade procedures, strengthening trader associations, identifying modalities for access affordable finance for the traders, pursuing value addition opportunities and greater use of the AfCFTA mechanism for reporting and resolving NTBs. Namanga border was identified as the next priority corridor for similar engagement.

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The policy agenda is also becoming increasingly country specific. In Kenya, the programme is monitoring the implications of the KSh50,000 (approx. \$ 390) commercial aquaculture licence requirement and a 5% landed-fish levy. While regulation is important for sustainable fisheries management, the programme is examining whether these costs could unintentionally discourage smaller women- and youth-led businesses from formalising or expanding. Evidence on their impact will inform advocacy for more proportional and harmonised licensing approaches.

Along Uganda-DRC trade corridors, meanwhile, fish transit interceptions and public-health controls have exposed traders to delays, spoilage, working-capital losses and route disruption. Proposed responses include clearer transit information, trader-rights guidance, improved cargo protocols and stronger use of NTB escalation mechanisms.

In Tanzania, attention is turning to the multiple licences, permits and certification requirements facing smaller enterprises. The programme intends to develop simplified compliance guidance that can be delivered through trader associations and digital platforms such as iSOKO.

Standards and SPS reform are another important part of the policy agenda. The period under review saw the programme move beyond standards development towards enabling enterprises to comply with those standards. About 20 women-led SMEs and other organised fisheries enterprises entered certification-readiness processes, while work with regulators and industry continued on harmonised fish-feed and food-safety standards.

At continental level, an important milestone was reached when the 18th Council of Ministers Responsible for Trade adopted the AfCFTA Agri-Trade Action Plan for implementation by State Parties. The AfCFTA Secretariat has since begun preparing an implementation roadmap and technical consultations, creating a framework through which fisheries priorities, including standards, finance, regional value chains and the participation of women and youth, can be translated into



Regina Mungandi, a small scale fish trader at the Kasumbalesa Border between Zambia and DRC seen here in February 2026.

TAKING THE AfCFTA TO THE BORDER - WOMEN AND YOUTH FISH TRADERS PUSH FOR FASTER, SAFER TRADE AT KASUMBALESA BORDER

By the AfCFTA Private Sector Unit

Women and young fish traders operating along the Kasumbalesa corridor have secured commitments from Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to address border delays, unclear procedures, unofficial charges and safety concerns that constrain cross-border trade. The commitments followed a two-day trade facilitation workshop held on 24-25 June 2026 in Chingola, Zambia.

Convened by the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Private Sector Unit and TMA, the workshop sought to translate continental trade commitments into on-the-ground improvements for women and young people trading fish along one of Southern Africa's busiest corridors. The event was as part of the Women and Youth Economic Empowerment in Fisheries programme, a partnership between AfCFTA, TMA and Mastercard Foundation.

Participants explored how the AfCFTA and its Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade could support their businesses, with sessions covering fish production and quality standards, access to new markets, savings and affordable finance, business formalisation, border procedures and the operation of the one-stop border post. Traders were also introduced to the AfCFTA mechanism for identifying and reporting non-tariff barriers, obstacles that increase the cost, time and difficulty of moving goods across borders.

Traders also recounted their experiences. Working in mixed Zambian and Congolese groups, they highlighted the obstacles they encounter before, during and after crossing the border, with their experiences showcasing the full cost of trading fish right from purchasing, drying and packaging to transport, documentation and clearance. They also noted that multiple check-points, lengthy delays, unofficial charges and language barriers weaken their ability to understand procedures and negotiate effectively. Women traders raised additional concerns about discrimination, personal safety and the unequal treatment they sometimes experience while conducting business across the border.



PARTICIPANTS AT THE CROSS-BORDER TRADE FACILITATION WORKSHOP HELD IN CHINGOLA.

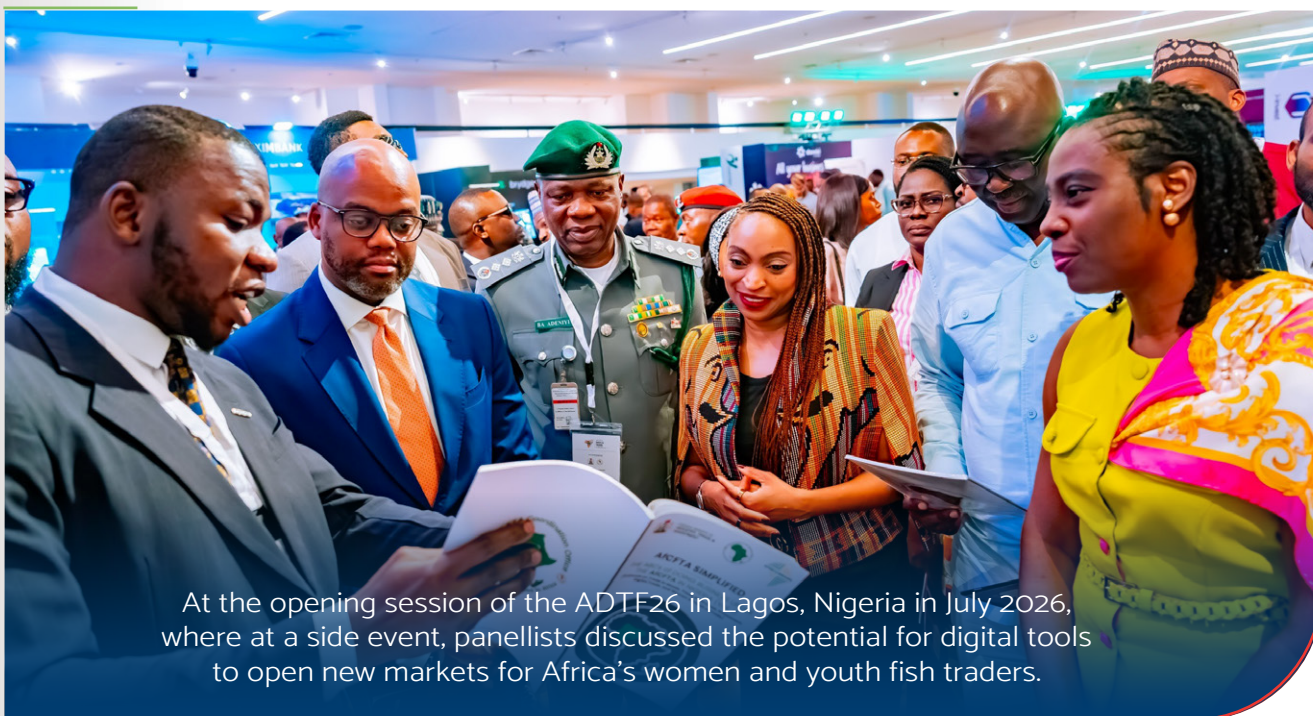
The traders presented their concerns directly to government representatives from Zambia and the DRC. Officials acknowledged the challenges and committed to strengthening cooperation among the agencies responsible for fisheries and cross-border trade.

The workshop concluded with a Joint Action Plan setting out priorities for improving fish trade along the Kasumbalesa corridor. These include strengthening cooperation between Zambia and the DRC on fisheries trade; simplifying border procedures and communicating them more clearly; improving access to affordable finance and financial literacy; supporting fish processing, packaging and other forms of value addition; strengthening trader associations so they can better represent their members; expanding the reporting and resolution of non-tariff barriers and improving the safety and treatment of women and young traders. The next engagement with traders will take place at the Namanga border between Kenya and Tanzania.



PARTICIPANTS FOLLOW THE WORKSHOP'S OPENING SESSIONS.

DIGITAL TOOLS EMERGE AS LIFELINE FOR AFRICA'S SMALL-SCALE FISH TRADERS BY AfCFTA PSU



At the opening session of the ADTF26 in Lagos, Nigeria in July 2026, where at a side event, panellists discussed the potential for digital tools to open new markets for Africa's women and youth fish traders.

From digital wallets that cut post-harvest losses to blockchain systems that build buyer confidence, technology is opening new doors for the women and youth who power Africa's fisheries. That was the central message of a high-level panel convened by the AfCFTA Secretariat's PSU, in partnership with TMA, on the margins of the AfCFTA Digital Trade Forum 2026 in Lagos.

Held under the theme "Digital Technologies Supporting Inclusive Trade of Fish Products," the side event spotlighted the vital role fisheries and aquaculture play in Africa's food security and livelihoods, and the barriers that keep women and youth from accessing finance, markets, and trade information across the value chain. The sector supports millions of livelihoods and contributes to food security, but many small-scale traders, particularly women and young people, continue to face high transaction costs, limited financing and complex cross-border procedures.

Panellists discussed the technologies that could help close these gaps. These include digital wallets, micro-insurance and guarantee schemes that connect traders to formal financial services; mobile applications and the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS), which can make cross-border payments faster and more affordable; and blockchain, QR codes and Internet of Things sensors that strengthen

traceability, sanitary and phytosanitary compliance, and consumer confidence.

Participants shared experiences from women and young traders and examined how platforms such as PAPSS, iSOKO and the 50 Million African Women Speak Platform can respond to challenges within the fisheries value chain.

The discussion also highlighted climate-adaptation tools and early-warning systems that can help fish farmers and traders respond to climate and market shocks. Predictive technologies can support better production planning and reduce post-harvest losses, while electronic certificates of origin, online non-tariff barrier reporting systems, single windows and platforms such as iSOKO can simplify the movement of perishable products across borders.

The session linked these solutions to the AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade, the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade, and the AfCFTA Private Sector Strategy. These continental frameworks are being translated into action through the Women and Youth Economic Empowerment in Fisheries, which seeks to among others, leverage on digital innovation to connect traders to wider markets, lower trade barriers and build more resilient fisheries enterprises.

STAYING THE COURSE AND ADAPTING UNDER PRESSURE

THE PROGRAMME'S RESPONSE TO EBOLA, ENFORCEMENT SHOCKS AND RISING COSTS

A resurgent Ebola outbreak in the DRC, tighter fisheries enforcement in Uganda and rising input costs characterised programme implementation in the review period.

A highly perishable product, a delayed truck and a disrupted border can turn a promising trading opportunity into a financial loss. That reality came into focus during the second quarter of 2026 as the Programme navigated a changing operating environment characterised by public-health concerns, regulatory pressures, fisheries enforcement and rising production costs.

Among the most significant emerging risks were Ebola-related public-health measures and disruptions affecting trade corridors connected to the Democratic Republic of Congo. The outbreak in the DRC, caused by the Bundibugyo strain of the virus and declared in May 2026, concentrated in the north-east of the country amid conflict and displacement. Uganda, which recorded a small cluster of linked cases, declared its own outbreak over in July 2026. The situation remains fast-moving, and the human toll is high.

For a programme whose growth strategy leans on the south-eastern DRC on the Kasumbalesa corridor, the exposure is real, and the response has been cautious. Public-health protocols and remote delivery options applied where physical access remained constrained, with alternative trade routes and corridors, including Kasumbalesa, being considered to maintain market connections.

The DRC remains strategically important despite these challenges. An April market assessment cited exceptionally strong demand for fish, with estimated annual supply deficits exceeding one million metric tonnes in major markets including Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. While insecurity and public-health concerns continue to affect eastern DRC, southern trade corridors remain commercially attractive. The programme is therefore prioritising southern DRC and the Kasumbalesa corridor while developing relationships with processors, aggregators, distributors, financial institutions and aquaculture enterprises capable of supplying this demand.

In Uganda, intensified fisheries enforcement reduced fisher participation and fish supply at several landing sites, hitting the mukene (silver fish) trade on which many women processors depend. The programme's answer is a supply-diversification roadmap, namely, strengthening aquaculture and value-addition pathways as alternative sources of raw material, equipping traders with documentation and border-compliance tools, and pressing trader-rights and NTB-resolution channels.

In Kenya, rising fuel and transport costs are squeezing enterprise margins alongside licensing and levy requirements. In Tanzania, multiple permits and certifications remain costly and time-consuming for small traders. In Zambia, election-year administrative sensitivities affected stakeholder engagement and data collection, even as opportunities around soybean production, aquaculture feed and trade through Kasumbalesa have expanded.

High feed and working-capital costs remain another major concern. The programme's risk assessment denotes that these pressures can make aquaculture cycles unviable and potentially lead producers to abandon ponds or cages. Responses include developing local feed systems, buyer-backed financing, insurance and lending products whose repayment periods better reflect aquaculture production cycles.



Traders plying the Kasumbalesa Border (Zambia-DRC). The outbreak of the ebola disease has necessitated a cautionary approach on programme activities on borders such as Kasumbalesa in February 2026. Photo-TMA.



\$100M

In targeted fisheries trade puts women and young people at the centre of a 242,000-jobs plan



The programme commissioned RSK Africa to assess and strengthen safeguards for women and young people working in fishing communities across Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda in February 2026.

By RSK Group

TradeMark Africa is expanding cross-border trade in Africa's fisheries sector, with the goal of creating more than 242,000 jobs for women and young people and increasing the region's trade in fish and fish products by at least US\$100 million by 2028. The work is being delivered through the Women and Youth Economic Empowerment in Fisheries Programme, a five-year joint initiative between TradeMark Africa, the Mastercard Foundation and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Secretariat.

To ensure this forecasted growth is accompanied by strong social and environmental safeguards, TradeMark Africa commissioned RSK Africa to deliver a comprehensive safeguarding assessment across Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. RSK Group Senior Social Consultant Naphca Kuboja said: "Measured against international environmental and social standards, the assessment examined the laws and policies protecting people who work in fisheries, the cultural drivers of exclusion and exploitation, the systems available for reporting and redress, and the environmental and social risks of an expanding industry – pinpointing where women and young people are most at risk and what needs to change to protect them as the sector grows.

"Formal and informal fisheries play a significant role in the regional economy, employing thousands of people across Africa. Women and young people make a significant contribution to the market's financial success, but face significant risks in carrying out their work. Our research provides TradeMark Africa and its implementing partners, Lattice Aquaculture, Kilimo Trust, MicroSave Consulting and EASSI, with a knowledge base on the safeguarding issues

women and young people face today, and on the direct and indirect environmental risks of delivering the programme in a sensitive ecosystem, so that protections can grow in step with the planned expansion."

The assessment found that although women make up nearly a quarter of the world's fishers and fish farmers, and more than 60% of those working in processing (FAO, 2024), they remain the most exposed to risk, Naphca explained. "More than 90% of fishing vessels on Lake Victoria are owned by men, and just 0.1% by women (FAO, 2019), so many women traders depend on male boat owners for access to the catch. This dependency exposes them to exploitation, including gender-based violence and sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. And while national helplines, one-stop centres and police gender desks do exist across all three countries, they are concentrated in towns and cities, leaving remote fishing communities with little practical access to reporting and support.

"The assessment also documents how deep-rooted cultural norms confine many women to shore-based processing and petty trade, excluding them from fishing itself and from decision-making, while economic constraints, little collateral, thin savings and credit products not designed with them in mind, make it hard to build the capital needed to trade on equal terms (Bradford & Katikiro, 2019). These are precisely the gaps the programme's financial literacy training, inclusive finance partnerships and market linkages are designed to close."

The team conducted an environmental assessment in addition to its social surveys. Naphca said: “The Lake Victoria Fisheries Organisation estimates that fish stocks have declined by more than 50% over the last 30 years (LVFO, 2022), and roughly 76% of endemic freshwater species are now threatened, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Red List assessment of the Lake Victoria Basin. Ensuring safeguards are in place to maintain populations and control which species are fished will contribute to preserving aquatic life.

“These waters also attract wildlife such as crocodiles and hippos, which can attack people if they feel threatened, and human-wildlife conflict has increased in recent years, so finding ways to work safely in these environments is vital for personal safety and for broader conservation goals.”

The report makes a series of recommendations to embed safeguards within the programme’s core activities. Naphca said: “The recommendations pair financial literacy training with awareness of intimate partner violence; “Safe Trade” and “Men Against Violence” campaigns that engage men and boys as allies in preventing gender-based violence; confidential, multi-channel reporting supported by trained focal persons at landing sites; anti-harassment procedures for border corridors so women can trade across borders safely; and environmental screening and training on food safety, responsible fishing and waste management.

“Alongside these measures, the report identifies low-cost “quick wins” at landing sites and markets – better lighting, sanitation, safeguarding signage and secure spaces – that measurably reduce the risk of harassment and gender-based violence, particularly after dark, and highlights well-designed sites in Tanzania and Kenya as models to replicate. Over the longer term, it notes that



Interview with a fishertrader at Daraja landing site in Lake Turkana, March 2026

widening women’s pathways to owning boats, gear and businesses would help dismantle the dependency that drives exploitation.”

Anataria Uwamariya, Director, Business Competitiveness at TradeMark Africa said: “Our ambition through the Fisheries Programme is to ensure women and young people can participate in, and benefit from, Africa’s fisheries trade on equal terms, with the skills, finance and market linkages they need to build competitive, sustainable businesses. But inclusive trade must also be safe trade. This assessment gives us and our implementing partners the evidence and opportunity to embed strong social and environmental safeguards across the programme, from training rooms to landing sites to border crossings, so that as trade grows, the women and young people driving that growth are protected, and the ecosystems their livelihoods depend on are sustained.”

Naphca said: “As the sector grows, there is the potential to replicate the methodology behind this study in other regions and contexts. Assessing both the environmental and social factors of the fisheries sector’s expansion will contribute directly to women’s inclusion and prevent them from being alienated from owning their own part of the industry. Delivering safeguards will have far-reaching benefits, protecting people and livelihoods as well as whole communities that depend on fishing for a living.”



Focus group discussion with women fish traders at Busia transshipment Fish Market, Kenya, in March 2026

FEATURE STORY

FROM REBUILDING LIVELIHOODS TO PREPARING FOR GROWTH AS TWO WOMEN TAKE THE NEXT STEP IN CAGE FISH FARMING

When Diana Atieno Ojiambo moved from Busia to Port Victoria a year ago, she had to start over. She entered fish trading with an initial investment of KSh 5,000 (approx. \$39) from her savings group and now sells fulu and dagaa two days a week, earning about KSh 7,500 (approx. \$58) in revenue on each trading day. To keep money flowing, she also runs a grocery business, bakes cakes, and prepares mabuyu for sale. Even with several income sources, limited capital and inconsistent fish supplies have continued to hold her business back.

For Dorothy Akinyi Ojiambo, diversification has also been essential. She fries and sells fish three days a week, generating about KSh 8,000 (\$62) in daily sales and KSh 2,000 (approx. 15) in profit. Alongside this, she runs a clothing and shoe shop and supplies handmade soap to local restaurants and hotels, earning an additional KSh 200 (approx. \$1.5) each day. Like Diana, she has relied on several small businesses to support her household while looking for opportunities to grow.

Today, both women are members of a 12-person cage farming group at Mulukoba Beach that is preparing for its first harvest in January 2027. The group's journey reflects both resilience and determination. An earlier investment failed, but the members reorganized, strengthened their governance, and committed to rebuilding the enterprise. Every member now contributes KSh 1,500 (approx. \$11) each month toward fish feed and KSh 250 (approx. \$1.9) as a security contribution. The group also hired a caretaker to feed the fish, with members providing regular oversight. To formalize the business, they invested KSh 3,750 (approx. \$29) in BMU membership and KSh 500 (approx. \$3.8) per person for fisheries registration. Their license now allows them to expand with additional cages and new members over time.

As part of the Women and Youth Economic Empowerment in Fisheries programme, Diana and Dorothy joined 62 cage fish farmers from Busia who received financial capability support designed to strengthen both their businesses and their ability to engage with formal financial institutions.



Dorothy Akinyi Ojiambo, a fisher trader who has found a lifeline in diversification during an interaction session in May 2026. Photo Credit - Microsave.

They completed MSC's six-module financial and digital literacy curriculum, which covered financial planning, savings, budgeting, financial management, and digital financial services. They also received training in group governance to strengthen collective decision making and improve the management of shared enterprises.

MSC also connected the farmers with financial service providers as part of the Women and Youth Economic Empowerment in Fisheries Programme. Through Equity Bank, the group received practical training on cage aquaculture financing, fish feed loans, and aquaculture insurance products. To strengthen farmers' understanding of aquaculture insurance, MSC partnered with GA Insurance to provide practical insurance education under the programme. When farmers shared that they still found insurance concepts difficult to understand, GA Insurance delivered a dedicated follow-up session that explained how premiums are calculated, what determines the value of cover, and how claims and payouts work in practice.



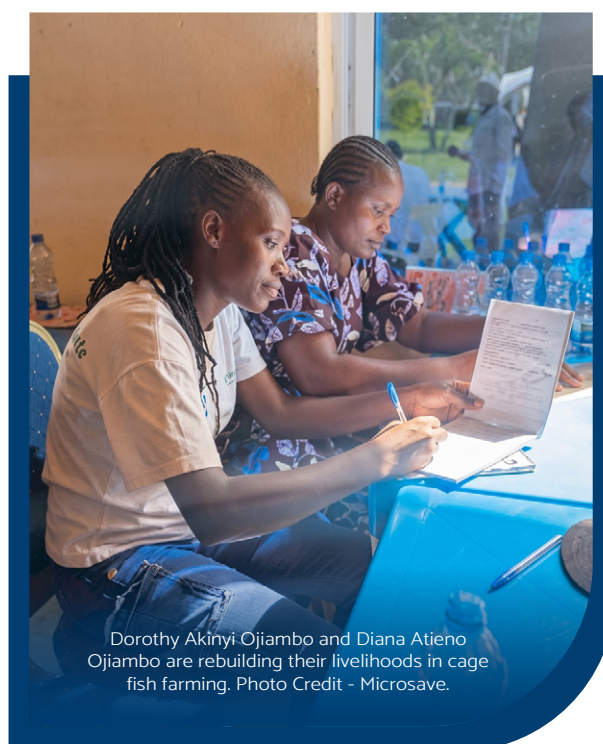
Although the group's first harvest is still several months away, early changes are already beginning to emerge. Diana and Dorothy are better equipped to budget, keep financial records, and separate the costs and income of their cage enterprise from their other businesses. The group has also demonstrated stronger financial discipline through regular meetings, consistent monthly contributions, and shared oversight of daily cage operations.

group's governance and financial discipline remain strong as money begins to flow through the enterprise, and whether Diana's and Dorothy's existing businesses become more resilient and continue to grow alongside cage farming. These insights will demonstrate how improved financial capability contributes to stronger livelihoods for women working in Kenya's fisheries sector.

The additional insurance training has enabled members move beyond simply knowing that insurance exists toward understanding how it can protect their investment, placing them in a stronger position to make informed decisions as the enterprise grows. These changes lay the foundation for stronger financial management once income from the cage begins to flow.

This story captures Diana and Dorothy at the beginning of their journey. Their first harvest, expected in January 2027, will provide the first opportunity to assess how improved financial capability translates into business growth and greater financial resilience.

As the programme continues, MSC will revisit Diana, Dorothy, and their group to understand how these early changes develop over time. The programme will track whether participants move from training into active use of formal financial services, including transaction accounts, loans, and aquaculture insurance. It will also assess whether income from the first harvest is reinvested into additional production cycles or new cages, whether the



CHOOSING DIGNITY - JANE'S DETERMINATION TO BUILD A SAFER FUTURE FOR WOMEN IN FISHERIES

For more than half her life, Jane has earned a living buying and selling fish along Uganda's Lake Albert shoreline. Like thousands of women across the region, the 34-year-old trader from Pakwach District depends on the fisheries sector to support her family. Yet every working day presents difficult choices shaped not only by the realities of the market, but also by unequal power dynamics that expose women traders to exploitation.

Speaking during the inception meeting for the Women and Youth Economic Empowerment in Fisheries Programme earlier this year, Jane shared how access to fish is often controlled by male fishing crews and suppliers, leaving many women vulnerable to Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (SEAH). Women with limited financial resources, particularly young traders and single mothers, frequently face pressure to exchange sexual favours in order to secure fish supplies or obtain goods on credit. Jane chose a different path.

"I lost my own things because I could not lose my dignity," she said, recalling how she refused advances that would have guaranteed her access to fish. Her decision, however, came at a significant financial cost. Without access to cold storage, fish often spoiled before reaching markets in Pakwach Town, nearly 40 kilometres away. Limited collateral also meant formal financial institutions could not extend credit, forcing her to rely on informal lenders with high borrowing costs. At one point, mounting losses compelled her to sell personal belongings to repay debts and rebuild her business.

Jane's experience highlights the multiple challenges confronting women in the fisheries value chain, right from inadequate market infrastructure and limited access to finance to unequal market relationships that heighten the risk of exploitation.

The Fisheries Programme is working with communities, local governments and partners to promote safer and more inclusive fisheries markets. The initiative seeks to strengthen women's economic empowerment, improve access to opportunities and contribute to market systems where women can conduct business with dignity, safety and confidence.

DIGITAL INNOVATION IS TRANSFORMING FISH TRADE

For 24-year-old Grace from Taveta, Kenya, technology has not only become a business tool but also a platform for safer and more sustainable entrepreneurship. Inspired by her father's involvement in the fisheries sector, Grace established her own fish trading business three years ago. Rather than relying solely on traditional trading practices, she developed an innovative business model that sources fresh tilapia directly from cage farmers and fish producers around Lake Jippe before marketing the products through digital platforms.

Using WhatsApp, Grace advertises available stock, receives customer orders and organises deliveries directly to buyers. The approach has enabled her to reach customers efficiently while reducing dependence on physical trading spaces where women can face exploitation and other risks.

Grace also credits strong family support for helping her grow the business. Her husband now assists with logistics and operations, providing additional security while ensuring the business continues to operate smoothly.

Success in business has inspired Grace to invest in her community. Through her initiative, Binti Unaweza (Daughter, You Can), she mentors young girls and encourages them to build confidence, pursue economic opportunities and resist exploitation.



QUARTERLY UPDATES IN BRIEF

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES TO BUILD SAFER AND MORE INCLUSIVE FISHERIES MARKETS

During the April-June 2026 quarter, EASSI continued engaging women fish traders, local government leaders and community stakeholders across Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and DRC. These engagements included project inception meetings and courtesy visits to introduce the programme to local leadership while strengthening collaboration with local institutions that play a critical role in creating safer market environments. In Arua City and Pakwach District, leaders reaffirmed their commitment to supporting interventions that promote women's economic empowerment and address barriers facing women in the fisheries sector.

The programme also conducted focus group discussions with women fish traders at Mutukula One Stop Border Post in Tanzania and in Mahagi in the DRC. These engagements enabled participants to share first-hand experiences of cross-border fish trade, identify challenges affecting their businesses and contribute recommendations that will inform programme implementation.

Field visits across the project locations further provided valuable insights into the realities facing women working throughout the fisheries value chain. Discussions highlighted recurring challenges including limited access to finance, inadequate cold-chain infrastructure, market inefficiencies and vulnerability to Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment. These experiences will inform on-going interventions to strengthen women's and youth's economic participation while fostering fisheries markets that are safer, more inclusive and economically resilient.



Trucks at the Mahagi in the DRC. File Photo.

MSC-EQUITY SIGN PARTNERSHIP TO UNLOCK FINANCE FOR FISHERIES

In May, MSC and Equity Group signed a Memorandum of Understanding to advance financial inclusion, gender equity, climate resilience and digital innovation - with Kenya's fisheries sector among the first to benefit. The partnership pairs MSC's technical expertise with Equity's financial services and entrepreneurship support, enabling women, youth and businesses across the value chain access the finance they need to grow.



FROM A MWANZA MARKET FLOOR TO A MINISTERIAL TABLE

The programme's agenda gained continental reach this quarter. In Abuja, an ECOWAS regional fisheries workshop (28–29 April) convened more than 70 women and youth from 15 countries - many exhibiting and selling smoked catfish, fillets and fish chips, with most vendors selling out. In late June, a Zambia–DRC bilateral workshop at Kasumbalesa brought 67 stakeholders together around a Joint Action Plan to ease one of the region's busiest fish-trade corridors. And continentally, the AfCFTA Agri-Trade Action Plan was adopted for implementation by State Parties, anchoring fisheries, standards and finance in a lasting policy framework. Behind the drive is demand: an April assessment confirmed that the DRC's appetite for fish outstrips local supply by more than a million tonnes a year.



Fish aggregation and market outreach conducted by the Programme in April 2026.

DIGITAL TOOLS IN YOUTHFUL HANDS

The programme's digital backbone took shape this quarter. More than 260 young people were recruited into the first cohort of Digital Ambassadors, who will spend eight weeks in experiential learning before institutional placement. The iSOKO trading platform was reimagined in a second version - adding cold-chain ordering and a country-configurable design - while registrations on the programme's trader platform grew to 50,300. The next step is turning those registrations into actual transactions, buyer matches and trader income.

SAFE MARKETS, AND A SHIFT TOWARD INDEPENDENCE

Safeguarding and economic empowerment moved in tandem. Six Safe Trade Centres operated across cross-border corridors, offering market facilitation, referral services and trader support, while a Training of Trainers in Pakwach lifted participants' understanding of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) by 75%. The programme rolled out an on-ground behaviour-change campaign in Western Kenya. It is part of a wider shift the programme enabling: away from the Jaboya (sex-for-fish) practise and towards cash-based trade led by women boat-owners.



Community engagement on safe fisheries markets and prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. Photo: EASSI.



Implementing Partners

