

HARNESSING THE FISHERY POTENTIAL OF MAN-MADE LAKES FOR THE PARTIAL COMMERCIALISATION OF NIGER RIVER BASIN DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY, MINNA - NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Niger River Basin Development Authority Minna (NRBDA) is one of the eleven River Basins in the country now undergoing transition towards partial commercialisation. In the light of this the need to be self-sustaining through exploration and exploitation of every possible areas along their operation to yield revenue cannot be over-emphasised. Therefore it is most pertinent to consider fisheries activities along their water bodies as one of the major sources of revenue by organising the local fishermen operating along the water into cooperative bodies and made to pay for fishing rights. Strategies to accomplish this objective is highlighted. The need to embark on aquaculture projects by construction of fish ponds at suitable sites along the reservoirs and developing the recreational potentials of their water bodies as sources of revenue is also stressed.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The issue of partial commercialisation of the eleven River Basin Development Authorities (RBDA) is no doubt a reality with the signing of performance agreement between the RBDA and the Federal government with the Technical Committee on Privatization and commercialization (TCPC) as independent monitor for the purpose of monitoring the performance of the government and enterprises in the discharge of their duty. Although the process is gradual due to the gradual withdrawal of Federal Government subvention, perhaps this is an attempt to prepare them for the better future that calls for a more purposeful organisation equipped with highly skilled and dedicated staff who are ready to face the challenges ahead through active innovation and improve productivity with a great deal of efficiency.

What constitute a forest perhaps started with a tiny seed blown by wind onto the fertile soil for subsequent germination and gradual metamorphosis from a tree to a thick forest. A thousand mile journey as they say begins with the first step. Let me rephrase this by saying a thousand paddle along our lake begins with the first paddle. If the first paddle is without vigour and determination all in the canoe shall sink in the lake (few that can swim may survive). They are now at the early but most crucial in the stage of the partial commercialisation. Very crucial in the sense that they are presently like a nurtured fry of Tilapia being protected by the parents (i.e. Federal government) only for a short time and later to be discarded to fend for itself. Therefore it will now be wise to prepare for the future challenges ahead, when the task of being independent must be accomplished. For the sustainance of an independent organisation, there is need to explore and exploit all areas along their operation to generate revenue simultaneously

with the provision of a better and efficient service to the benefit of their customers and the nation. In the light of this, harnessing the fishery potential of the man-made lakes cannot be marginalised.

2.0. Fishery activities of the Authority in the past

In the past, the fisheries development activities of the Authority include primarily the provision of fishing inputs at highly subsidised rate to the artisanal fishery sub-sector through the "loan-in-kind" termed scheme. However returns from the beneficiaries of this scheme was not encouraging. Perhaps one of the major factor responsible for this was the general belief that government assistance in whatever form constitute their own share of the national cake. Areas covered in Niger State by this scheme include Baro, Katcha, Egbagi, Muregi, Wuya, Tatabu, Gbagibo, Jebba, Kontagora, Shiroro and New Busa while those of Kogi State include Lokoja, Jamata and Kontokarfe. In Kwara State fishermen from Shongai and Ilorin benefitted while few fishermen benefitted in Kaduna of Kaduna State. Some fishing inputs given to fishermen of those areas include outboard engines, nets, sinkers, floats and well built canoes manufactured by the Authority. Less emphasis was placed on aquaculture project because Edozhigi and Agaie fish-farms were the two completed and functioning fish farms while construction works on those of Erin-Ile, Ira and Ilorin started late and could not be completed due to the downward trend of economy and subsequent reorganisation of the Authority. The construction works of these two functioning farms were then contracted out at exorbitant rate compared with the job carried out despite the fact that the authority was well equipped with the necessary machinery (Buldozer, Excavator etc.) and skilled manpower (Fisheries Biologist, Engineers and Surveyors) whose knowledge and technical ability were not fully utilized on the field except under air-conditioned offices where they only minute and sign files. The money which could have been enough to complete the construction work of ten fish farms was only utilised for the completion of one farm. This does not apply to fishery projects, alone but also other project units that could have been more productive. Hence contractors seized this opportunity to loiter the office premises everyday for any possible contract job. Monitoring of projects were not effective while the issue of accountability was a mere child play. Today we can see the result of the past mistakes. We had the good opportunity but failed to utilize it because we were being spoon fed. Now the Federal government is withdrawing her silver feeding spoon and telling us to evolve the act of "do it alone", an operation that is self-reliant and result oriented.

3.0 Fishery Development under the present partial Commercialisation:

In view of the fact that we must struggle to survive in the current drive towards partial commercialisation, the need to explore all possible avenues to generate revenue is a matter of concern. It is pertinent for all unit heads to be up and doing in satisfying the need of the customers and hence justify the purpose of their existence.

The Authority now embark on dam Construction primarily for irrigation and flood control among other purposes for which such structures is usually created. However, it is sad to observe that the evaluation of the fishery potential of dams before their creation in Nigeria has usually been neglected in relation to immediate demands for domestic water supply, irrigation of farm lands and provision of hydro-electric power. Even when substantial fisheries benefit were expected from reservoir projects, the involvement of fishery experts are often sought too

late in the planning and implementation processes. Thus fisheries problems are not usually considered in the engineering design or provided or in the basin development plans (Ita *et al.* 1992). An example is the Tungan-Kawo lake of Niger River Basin Development Authority at Wushishi, Niger State, where it can be seen by any fishery expert that the fishery potential of the lake was marginalised or ignored completely during the construction work of the dam. The lake bottom was not cleared of trees and shrubs before impoundment and this of course impairs fishing activities. The construction of a dam provides an ecosystem for various aquatic organisms of which fish fauna occupies the terminal position in the ecological chain (Fagade 1981). A lake without fish is unproductive and may be regarded as a dead lake. However, most of our man-made lakes are not dead. Although we did not stock them, it is interesting to observe the presence of some fishermen landing several fish species of commercial importance. The questions that call to ones mind includes.

- (a) Were these fishermen invited by the Authority that constructed the dam?
- (b) Is it possible to prevent fishing activities around the lake?

The answer to these questions is No, because fish are sources of cheap protein of high quality for human population and their life-stock. Apart from this, fishing activities such as fishing, preservation and marketing provide job and recreational opportunity for the people to improve their lot and hence raise standard of living. It beats ones imagination when fish and fishery activities are being classified as non-water assets during the re-organisation of the River Basins Development Authorities for the partial commercialisation. The Authorities of River Basin Development particularly Niger River Basin, should consider fisheries activities along their water bodies as an inevitable exercise, and explore this opportunity to generate revenue in the process of transition to partial commercialisation. Completed dams of NRBDA include Tungan-Kawo, Swashi, Kubli dams all in Niger State, while Omi dam in Kogi State and Auna dam are still under construction.

4.0 The Approach:

Harnessing the fishery potential of the lakes for revenue generation can be approached in two ways.

- (1) Attempt to attract revenue from the fishing activities carried out by the un-invited guest around the lake.
- (2) Embark on aquaculture projects by construction and stocking of ponds at suitable sites around the lakes.

The first approach perhaps appear difficult because of what is now experience on the irrigation scheme where it is also difficult to collect dues from farmers. however, there is no other way to it because they must be made to pay for fishing around our water bodies. In doing this, the Authority must be cautious because it may be difficult to prevent poaching or illegal fishing for 24 hours round the clock, therefore the need to adopt the following recommended strategies could be useful.

- (a) There is need to make them realise that the lakes belong to the Authority and a lot of money have been sunk to make it exist in order to improve their lot. Gone are the days when government gives free services. The public relations unit of the Authority can take charge of this.
- (b) There is need to assess the fish species composition of the water bodies to ascertain the necessity of stocking the lake with fish species of commercial importance. The involvement of fishery expert in this respect is of paramount importance.
- (c) Those who like to fish around the lake should constitute themselves into a cooperative body through the assistance of their local government chairmen and perhaps the Emir, Oba or village head. Members constituting this cooperative body should know one another and also identify themselves with the Authority through registration of members and issuance of licence for fishing by the Authority to each member. Commercial rates for fishing rights is to be charged by the Authority. Such rate would conform with the recommendation of the National water policy to be evolved soon by the Federal government and subject to changes as may be recommended by the National fisheries development committee based on current economic situation.
- (d) Annual fishing festival around the water body should be organised to award prizes to some best fishermen to boost their moral and enhance efficiency. This will further promote the association with the Authority and attract more members into the cooperative body to increase revenue for the Authority.
- (e) It is very important to monitor fishing activity constantly to prevent indiscriminate and over fishing; also to exclude non-members from activities around the lake. In the light of this, a motorized boat or canoe should be placed on the lake and two fishermen from the local government employed to carry out monitor fishing activities simultaneously with the monitoring activities. They should be provided with some fishing gears.

On the second approach involving construction of fish ponds at suitable sites around the lakes; the advantage of this over the activities on the lake is that the fish are under captivity for rearing and can be monitored under effective management until the period of harvest. One knows what is in stock and the expected yield. The need to run around fishermen to collect dues will not exist. Since the Authority has the necessary equipments (such as bulldozer, excavator etc.) and manpower to supervise the construction work, less input is only required to accomplish this. At least two fish ponds of one hectare each is recommended for a start around each of the completed reservoirs. The ponds are permanent structures. if well constructed and each is capable of producing two tonnes of fish annually to yield minimum revenue of about N40,000 per annum if stocked with good species such as *Clarias*, *Tilapia* carps, and *Heterotis*.

There are over fifteen night storage reservoirs in Swashi existing naturally; consequent of the creation of the Swashi and Kubli dam. These night storage reservoirs are also capable of fish production annually if stocked. However, it is necessary to drain these reservoirs, clear the bottom of the trees and shrubs, and install structures such as gates with screens to prevent fish from escaping.

Finally it is pertinent to draw the attention of the Authority to the recreational potential of these water bodies. Recreational facilities such as children playing ground, beautiful garden, provision for spot fishing and snack bar to attract visitors especially during public holidays and festival periods to yield substantial revenue for the Authority must be considered for development.

All the staff of the Authority should work as a team to achieve this noble objective. Nobody can be redundant in our bid towards partial commercialisation. Management should desist from lavish spending and concentrate on the development of revenue yielding projects before 1995 when the Federal Government will stop funding the Authority. Accountability should be our watch word in relation with fearless and meticulous services expected of the audit unit.

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