Trifina Josephat: First among Equals

Trifina Josephat manages the Malehe landing site in Kyamalange, Tanzania

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A mother of five, 42-year old Trifina Josephat is both an entrepreneur and a community leader. Although in her village, Kyamalange, in Tanzania's Kagera region, the role of women in fisheries is restricted to selling cooked food to fishers and fish traders along the beach, Trifina today owns a fishing vessel and manages a crew of four fishermen. Trifina is the Treasurer of the Beach Management Unit (BMU) in charge of managing the Malehe Landing Site in Kyamalange. A BMU is a community-based organization that is responsible for the management of local fish landing sites. This includes the collection of fish statistics and revenue, promoting environmental awareness, and mediating conflicts between local fishers and other stakeholders. The Malehe Landing Site is one of the numerous local landing sites along Lake Victoria, famous internationally for its Nile perch fisheries.

The Nile perch trade boomed in the years 2005-2007 as a result of economic liberalization and a consequent export-led demand. This period also intensified the competition among fish traders from neighbouring countries, particularly Uganda. Local fish traders began supplying fish to processing factories in Uganda, which paid about TShs500 to 600 (approx. US$0.5), more than what local traders were willing to pay. During these years, Trifina, sensing a lucrative opportunity, invested capital gained from selling coffee into building a canoe (*mtumbwi*) and buying fishing nets. She then employed four male *vibarua* (fishing labourers) on a sharing basis—50 per cent share of the catch to the crew, after adjusting for operational and maintenance costs. And so, Trifina launched her own fishing venture, one that has flourished over the years.

Trifina keeps close track of her vessel and crew. Though she does not enter the waters herself, she is known as a fisher because she controls her own production crew. One of the reasons for Trifina's success and the success of other entrepreneurs like her, was the prevalence of informal, trust-based exchange arrangements with neighboring traders—arrangements such as '*mali-kwa-mali*' (goods-by-goods) according to which fish is exchanged for an equivalent amount of material goods. A growing capital base soon allowed Trifina to buy another canoe and machine.

The intensification of the Nile perch fisheries has, however, led to illegal 'fencing'. Powerful vessel owners, who have more vessels and larger crew, fence off fishing grounds using force and violence, thus preventing entry by smaller vessels, like Trifina's. Big fishers, among them owners of 30 to 40 canoes, thus end up gaining monopoly over the fish trade. Recent times have also seen significant increase in piracy. In July 2010, Trifina's crew was attacked and one of her vessels seized by pirates. Luckily, the crew was rescued by other fishers from neighbouring fishing grounds. Trifina's efforts to follow up the case with local authorities and the police have remained unsuccessful. Trifina is, however, pleased with her growing success in the fish trade. She relates strategically to the fish market, selling the larger fish to traders or fish processing factories and disposing the smaller ones in the local market.

In the village, Trifina is regarded by some as a 'he-woman'—a woman with masculine traits. This is unfortunately the price that any strong woman who dares to swim against the tide ends up paying. But Trifina's strength also commands respect since very few women have had the courage to enter the fish trade. Today Trifina owns a modern house and ten heads of cattle, and her children study in good schools. Her strong will has also won her a leadership position in the BMU, as a result of which she stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the male fishers in the landing site—surely the first among equals.