

The power of partnership

Initiatives in the WISER HIGHWAY project demonstrate just how effective – and essential – cooperation and partnership can be for providing weather advice for people living near Lake Victoria.

The Weather and Climate Information Services for Africa (WISER) HIGHWAY (High Impact Weather Lake System) project is a regional programme delivering regular weather forecasts and severe weather warnings for Lake Victoria and the communities that rely on the lake for their livelihoods.

The lake is a hotspot for severe convective storms, leading to high waves and strong winds that can be deadly for fishermen. The Lake Victoria Basin Committee estimates that up to 5,000 people die on the lake each year, as storms capsize fishing vessels¹. To deliver early warnings of potential storms to fishermen and communities, HIGHWAY brought together a number of stakeholders to work in partnership.

“Partnership is essential for this type of objective,” explains John Faragher, Senior International Development Manager at the Met Office. “When working alongside the people who are making decisions – whether they are members of the public, people in Governmental departments or large business sectors like agriculture – you can understand the decisions they need to make and the impact those decisions will have.”

Consequently, HIGHWAY ran regional workshops in Kigali and Nairobi to bring together professionals from the National Meteorological and Hydrological Services (NMHSs) of the countries surrounding the lake, including Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. The workshops were also attended by representatives from the fishing communities, disaster risk managers, the media, fishery and marine experts and development professionals from Non-Governmental Organisations such as the Red Cross.

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Sharing best practice

The workshops focused on sharing best practice on producing and delivering early warnings, developing the early warning service and providing hands-on training on the processes involved. “The whole project was focused on transitioning from providing weather information to providing information about impacts,” explains John. A weather forecast in itself is of limited use to someone who is weighing up whether to go out on the lake for their next catch. Faragher gives the example of an amber warning for 20-knot winds.

“This may be irrelevant to a fisherman. What the amber warning should include is that 20-knot winds are dangerous and may cause waves to inundate your boat and cause it to sink.”

The workshops in Kigali and Nairobi helped the NMHSs understand how the information and warnings they provided were having an impact on the communities around the lake as well as other forecast users. In return, the communities on the lake gained a broader understanding of the kind of information that could be available to them.

The sharing of information is making a practical difference to people’s daily lives. For example, because powering a boat into a strong headwind expends more energy, widespread knowledge of when high winds are forecast should mean fewer vessels run out of fuel on the lake.

The workshops also included a discussion of the design of the early warning service. For example, representatives discussed the procedure at the landing site when a red warning is issued, and the measures that disaster management representatives need to take to prevent people from going out on their boats at dangerous times.

Stronger communications partnerships

Representatives from local media were also invited to the workshops in Kigali and Nairobi to comment on the role they could play. David Agangu, the manager of a community radio station called Nam Lolwe FM, explained the need for communicating warnings in local languages. His radio station broadcasts in Dholuo, a Kenyan language that’s very common in his region of the lakeside, with some members of these communities only able to speak their local language. “David translating the advice statements into Dholuo highlighted the impact of this and provided us with a road map as to how that could be used in other areas,” says John.

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Having an impact on the ground

The workshops have made a tangible difference to communities reliant on the lake, helping them avoid life-threatening storms. Mr Edward Oremo, the County Beach Management Network Chair for Homa Bay, updated John Faragher on the success: “Edward said that in 2018 they had 54 reported incidents and 22 deaths. However, after the forecasts were introduced in April 2019, up until the end of November there had been only 18 incidents and 8 deaths reported to the network.”

A death on the lake can have long-lasting effects in a community. Losing a family’s livelihood isn’t just a tragedy for a family, it can also mean that they have no way of paying education fees. That has a devastating effect on children’s futures. Yet with timely warnings, breadwinners and their families are protected.

There are impacts in other ways too. For example, women on the shores of Lake Victoria dry and sell Silver Fish. If the weather forecasts predict when it will rain, then fishermen know not to land these fish, as no one will buy them if they are wet.

By encouraging cooperation and dialogue, the workshops in Kigali and Nairobi have made a life-changing difference for the people who depend on Lake Victoria. WISER shows that by sharing information and cooperating, meteorological scientists and local communities can work together to safeguard livelihoods and lives across the region.

¹https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/binaries/content/assets/metofficegovuk/pdf/business/international/wiser/highway-brochure_final.pdf

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