MEMBER PROFILE

Mark Olokotum

Research Scientist, National Fisheries Resources Research Institute; Ph.D. Student, Makerere University



I undertake activities to generate information on the trends of fish stocks, biomass, and biodiversity. My colleagues and I carry out routine aquatic biodiversity assessments for all human developments to ensure "ecological good status/ potential" and compliance with legislation. My Ph.D. research assesses the patterns of phytoplankton diversity, dynamics of cyanotoxins, and associated health risk. In addition, I advise on the interaction of algal blooms and fisheries production.

My Pandemic Story

The COVID-19 pandemic led to several presidential directives in Uganda, including a national lockdown that took place while I was traveling from the field to the workplace. The following week, researchers were designated at essential service providers and allowed to operate at 30% workforce. During this period, our workload was high, but we had limited working time due to a 7 p.m. curfew (when factoring commuting time).

I started working from home, where my little girl was always my biggest challenge as she needed to play, in addition to the house chores. It was also the first time I experienced a feeling of "retirement" at an early age. All learning institutions were closed, and closure of Makerere University affected my mandatory cross-cutting courses that required physical classes and meetings with other Ph.D. students.

With the cancellation of commercial flights, my plans for final data analysis and subsequent write up at the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, France, were put on hold. In addition, airport closures and subsequent flight cancellations would have kept me from attending the IAGLR conference in June if it had proceeded in person. Either way, I could not share in person with an international audience the ongoing assessment of the patterns of phytoplankton diversity and the dynamics of cyanobacteria. As a Ph.D. student, presenting my work to an international audience is a university requirement. This wasn't possible during the peak of the pandemic.

To keep up with my work and Ph.D. progress, I've held regular meetings with my work colleagues to manage workplans and budgets for recently approved projects. I adopted weekly Skype and Zoom meetings with supervisors; however, this was hindered by the high cost and poor internet connectivity.

Although I have embraced e-working environments, airport closures still limit my ability to travel for my data analysis and to attend other international conferences to complete my Ph.D. studies. At work, we have embraced the World Health Organization standard operating procedures and recommendations of the Ugandan Ministry of Health as we exercise our mandate. However, we are still challenged, as our problems and those of fisher communities are far beyond just the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges include increasing water levels and floods, poor fisheries management, post-harvest losses, lack of alternative livelihoods, health risk associated with cyanotoxins, and inadequate financing. Unfortunately, the pandemic has diverted funds and support away from these other challenges.

A look to the future

We must embrace working smarter within the different situations with the numerous webinars that have been used to reach researchers and stakeholders. I have participated in several online conversations and presentations that received good viewership. In addition, learning institutions in developing countries should embrace virtual meetings and presentations for subsequent assessments.