



‘Going back to where it all started’ – a personal story

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This article summarizes my personal story during a 42-year career in the fisheries sector. My career began by enrolling into a two-year Fisheries Diploma Programme at Kunduchi Marine Fisheries Research and Training Institute (KMFRTI) in 1981, working as a Tutor at the same institution, a Lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), managing Tanzania Fisheries Research Institute, serving as Permanent Secretary of Fisheries in the Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries of the United Republic of Tanzania, and finally returning back to UDSM to continue teaching until retirement.

Kunduchi Marine Fisheries Research and Training Institute (KMFRTI)

In this article, I have tried to focus on the first few years of my career that I spent at Kunduchi as a Fisheries Diploma student and a faculty member (Tutor) at the then Kunduchi Marine Fisheries Research and Training Institute (KMFRTI) under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism. That is where I believe my journey truly began. Today, when I celebrate an accomplishment, I dedicate it to the younger version of me for the training and mentorship that I received at the KMFRTI.

The post-independence efforts of developing the fisheries sector and increasing the production of fish and fish products witnessed the establishment of fisheries Educational Institutions and Programs at Certificate and Diploma levels in the late sixties. KMFRTI was one of the Educational Institutions established in 1967 to train fisheries diploma graduates for an actively developing industry. Until 2003 when fully fledged fisheries degree programmes were established by UDSM following the establishment of the Faculty of Aquatic Sciences and Technology (FAST), the majority of fisheries employees at the district and regional levels were graduates from Certificate and Diploma programmes offered at KMFRTI, Mbegani Fisheries Development Centre and Nyegezi Freshwater Fisheries Institute (NFFI) under the then Ministry of Agriculture, Forests and Wildlife and

later transferred to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism.

My entry into fisheries sector began as a student in a two-year Fisheries Diploma Programme (cohort of 1981-1983) who thought that it would be nice to work in fisheries and enjoy the great outdoor activities related to the sector. Little did I know where my career would take me, the great experiences that would be enjoyed, and that so much of the work would involve, sitting behind a desk in offices and standing in front of students in lecture halls! In retrospect, my career was an evolving adventure and continuous learning experience.

Former alumni and staff of KMFRTI, fisheries managers and employers alike would agree with me that Fisheries Diploma training at Kunduchi was one of the most popular and successful programmes in imparting professional competences that were consistent with the requirements of the fisheries sector in Tanzania and the region. The programme was quite successful in imparting general fisheries knowledge to students in fields of Fisheries Biology, Fish Processing, Marine Engineering, Nautical Science and Fisheries Management. Such knowledge enabled graduates to appraise, establish and manage fisheries enterprises as well as fisheries development projects especially in rural areas. The programme also provided basic knowledge to prospective students who aspired for a degree in biological sciences or other tertiary training programmes in fisheries and related sectors.

Practical fishing and field programmes

The success of this programme owes largely to the way in which its curriculum was crafted. In addition to classroom lectures and practicals, nearly 50% of the programme was conducted outside classrooms in practical fishing and field extension programmes. I remember one of the induction practical arrangement we attended in the first three months of joining the programme was boat driftnetting (popularly known as *Kurambaza*) conducted in student rotations on every

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Friday and Saturday nights. These were conducted close to the institute in the seashore areas between Mbudya Island and Fungu Yasin mainly targeting kingfish (*Scomberomorus commersoni*). In those good old days typical catch would be between 15 and 70 fish a night. This programme was also popular in the sense that it made new students who felt they could not cope with seasickness associated with fishing to quit the Fisheries Diploma programme and find a career elsewhere in very early days of their enrolment. In my cohort, three students quit the programme because they could not endure with the rigors of night fishing.

The other field practical course was a 3-month intensive fishing in which students were attached to commercial fishing companies where they spent time onboard commercial trawlers and purse seiners operating in the coastal area of Tanzania. Personally, I spent time at sea with three different trawlers belonging to Tanzania Fishing Corporation (TAFICO). The largest of these trawlers was Mama TAFICO which, in a single fishing trip, it stayed at sea for a period of 20 days. Other medium sized trawlers I spent time in were MV Mchungu, MV Shangani and MV Nangalu, which were sea-bound for seven days in a fishing trip. For purse seining, I spent 10 days of fishing with MV ‘Giriki’, which was owned by a private fishing company in Dar es Salaam. Similarly, there was a 3-month field extension practical session in which, students were attached to work with local fishing communities in different water bodies in Tanzania. Between 1st October and 24th December 1982, I was privileged to spend my field extension attachment at Lang’ata Bora Fishing Community in Nyumba ya Mungu Dam. It is here where I learned, among other things, to go out in a night fishing using local dugout canoes.

These field practicals allowed students like myself to learn about what it means to be at sea for days on end as well as what it is like to be a fisherman. It was a privilege to be able to work and discuss the concepts we have learned in class with some local fishermen to gain insight that cannot be attained or taught in an academic setting. Meeting fishermen in a variety of local settings allowed roots to be established early on between most of us who were just about to enter a fisheries career and those who have acquired a wealth of knowledge over the years, further bridging the gap that can occur between academia and industry.

Class and laboratory practicals equipped us with skills to handling a live fish and learned how to identify, measure, tag, and release fish. Other practical skills included net mending and repair, troubleshooting an outboard engine, fish canning and managing fish in an aquaculture setting. Canned fish from our fish processing laboratory had a shelf life of up to 12 months.

From Tutor at Kunduchi to Lecturer at UDSM

Following successful completion of the Fisheries Diploma Programme in July 1983, I was employed at KMFRTI where I started teaching the first year Diploma course “Fish Handling and Processing” offered in the Department of Food Technology. Two years into the teaching career I got an advice from one of my Teachers and Mentor - Mr. W.A. Sichone, that a degree would be desirable for subsequent career advancement and employment. Five years later from 1985 (3 years taking undergraduate biology and fisheries-related courses followed by 2 years in graduate school), I emerged with the MSc in Aquaculture and Fisheries Management and returned to KMFRTI to continue teaching biology and fisheries-related courses. Apart from teaching, it is during this period that I was assigned administrative duties following my appointment as the Institute Training Officer.

In the process of career advancement in 1992, I left KMFRTI and joined the UDSM where I was employed as an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Zoology and Marine Biology. In the next several years I taught, obtained a PhD and rose to the rank of Senior Lecturer in 2006. However, one important event during this period was the integration of KMFRTI into UDSM, which led to the establishment of the Faculty of Aquatic Sciences and Technology (FAST) of UDSM in August 2002. Following the establishment of FAST, I was appointed to serve as the first Head of Department of Fisheries Science and Aquaculture, which was entrusted by the UDSM to continue running Fisheries Diploma programme inherited from KMFRTI. Against this background, I had to establish a counterpart office at Kunduchi Campus that allowed me to closely attend to matters related to running of the Fisheries Diploma Programme. Once again, I looked at this event as a blessing in disguise as it gave me the opportunity to reunite with the Kunduchi Campus.

Working at management and policy arena

On account of the wide industrial insight and experience in fisheries sector, I suspect that there came a time when I entered a pool of senior fisheries scientists that can invariably contribute to the knowledge needed to sustainably manage the country’s fisheries resources. In that reflection, in December 2016, I was appointed to the position of Director General of the Tanzania Fisheries Research Institute (TAFIRI). The tenure at TAFIRI lasted for 18 months before my next appointment as the Permanent Secretary of Fisheries in the Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries in June 2018, the position that I served until March 2023 when I returned to UDSM to continue with a teaching career. Having benefited from experiences in fisheries science and administration and lessons learned therein, my advise to young scientists contemplating potential paths to pursue in their careers is that “if you love what you do, you will dive in and accomplish what is needed, and you will do it well”.

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Back to my roots

During the period 2016 – 2020 UDSM continued with the process of restructuring its administrative and academic units with a view to attaining academic excellence. One output of these transformations in September, 2020 was the elevation of the Department of Aquatic Sciences and Fisheries Technology (DASFT) of the College of Agricultural Sciences and Fisheries Technology (CoAF) to become the new School of Aquatic Sciences and Fisheries Technology (SoAF).

This move also came with the directive that relocated SoAF from Mwalimu Nyerere Mlimani Campus and start operating from Kunduchi Campus. For this reason, my return to UDSM has led into another re-union with the Kunduchi Campus, the very place where the long journey to follow my teenage-hood dreams truly began. It looks like wherever I have been in the noble duty of serving the sector, I always find myself **going back to where it all started: Kunduchi Campus** ■



Laboratory building at Kunduchi Campus after rehabilitation. ©Rashidi Bilali