

AQUACULTURE AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN NIGERIA

The past few years have been a whirlwind for Ahmed Ogunlaja, but his love for public health and for Nigeria have grounded all of his work and studies.

In 2015, Ogunlaja was a newly minted physician working in a busy hospital in Lagos. He quickly realized that trying to heal the patient without solving the root cause of the illnesses he was treating was an exercise in futility.

“I began to think of ways I could help people beyond the walls of the hospital,” Ogunlaja said.

He wanted to move beyond the clinic and into the community but was unsure the best approach to achieve his goal. In 2016, Ogunlaja was selected to represent Nigeria in the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders, a program sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development.

Through this fellowship, he realized he needed more training in public health, so Ogunlaja chose to attend graduate school at Washington University in St. Louis, in the United States. As a graduate student, he worked with Joe Steensma, a professor of practice at the university and co-PI on a Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Fish (Fish Innovation Lab) project studying postharvest loss in Nigeria.

“Dr. Steensma taught me so much about public health and the role of food security in helping people live healthy lives. I became fascinated with the role food security plays in public health overall. I knew, as a Nigerian who cares so much about the health of my fellow Nigerians, I wanted to be involved with this work,” said Ogunlaja.

The Fish Innovation Lab-funded project Ogunlaja joined (*From Harvest To Plate: An Analysis of the Aquaculture Post-Harvest Chain in Nigeria*) is part of a bigger effort that drew on resources from several organizations and local Nigerian experts. The effect of this collaboration has been to develop an in-depth understanding of the aquaculture sector to leverage aquaculture to increase income, improve nutrition, improve food security, and empower women and youth.

These are lofty goals but entirely possible to reach according to Julius Nukpezah, an assistant professor at Mississippi State University and PI on the Fish Innovation Lab project.

“By understanding the whole value chain more thoroughly, specific interventions and technologies can be developed that target the areas most ripe for improvement,” said Nukpezah.

Ogunlaja carried out work that was vital to the success of the Fish Innovation Lab project.



Ahmed Ogunlaja and team member Kanar Dizyee speaking with a fish retailer in the market. Brianna Bradley/Worldfish

PROJECT TEAM

Nigeria PI	Nhuong Tran, PhD WorldFish
U.S. PI	Julius A. Nukpezah, PhD Mississippi State University
U.S. Co-PI	Joseph Steensma, EdD Washington University in St. Louis

“Through this project, I worked with people from diverse fields—economists, fish experts, nutritionists, and environmental health professionals from Nigeria and around the world. I enjoyed interacting with the people whose lives are impacted by a healthy and thriving aquaculture sector,” said Ogunlaja.

Ogunlaja was amazed by the commitment people had to making the sector better for all parties.

“The willingness of the women in the market to give information about their business practices, sources, challenges, profit margins, hopes, and aspirations was nothing short of inspiring. One wholesaler brought out her

book of records and dished out exact figures regarding purchases, sales, costs of transportation, shop acquisition, wages, and the type of customers she has. It was easy to see how important fish is from an economic standpoint. As important as the economic aspects are, through my travels and interactions with farmers, wholesalers, retailers, and consumers, I have come to realize the profound food security and public health implications of aquaculture as well,” said Ogunlaja.

Having completed his graduate degree in the United States, Ogunlaja is eager to go back to Nigeria and use his new understanding to help those he serves.

“I believe we have a more complete understanding of Nigerian aquaculture and how to make it as safe and profitable as possible. Also, thanks to the people who led the study, I have a much better understanding of how aquaculture impacts food security and public health. I will use this experience to inform my patients as to the benefits of aquaculture, fish consumption, and the healthiest ways to procure and consume fish,” Ogunlaja said.

ABOUT THE FISH INNOVATION LAB

The Fish Innovation Lab supports the United States Agency for International Development’s agricultural research and capacity building work under Feed the Future, the U.S. Government’s global hunger and food security initiative. Mississippi State University is the program’s management entity. The University of Rhode Island, Texas State University, Washington University in St. Louis, and RTI International serve as management partners.

www.feedthefuture.gov
www.fishinnovationlab.msstate.edu