Lake Kivu is the largest water body in Rwanda and provides a long borderline with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The lake offers economic activities including fishing and water transport, which is one of the most cost-effective methods of moving large, perishable, and heavy products across.

Remy Ugirashebuja, a businessman born and raised in Rusizi District took the commercial opportunities that the lake offers venturing first in fishing and later into water transport.

Born from Nkombo Island in Lake Kivu, Ugirashebuja kicked off his fishing career at a young age of 16 years in the mid 1970s. At the time, going to school was not common and when he was given an opportunity to join the fishing crew he never looked back.

Remy Ugirashebuja is a businessman dealing in fishing, transportation and hospitality in Rusizi District

Fishing at the time was done with the use traditional fishing boats (canoes) and they would take many nights and days away from home waiting for a good catch. Nonetheless, he persevered working his way up to an old man and still loves the fishing job.

“During the early days when I started fishing, we moved many kilometers into Lake Kivu, for example from Rusizi to Nyamasheke and would spend there at least three weeks,” explains Ugirashebuja.

Development was slow at the time and the use of traditional equipment produced literally low fish catches. It took Ugirashebuja years to own a boat, but he continued to save as he had spotted another business opportunity in the waters which was transportation.

Water transport was underdeveloped in those years, but was vividly a potential employment opportunity, mainly moving goods because of lack of good inland road network infrastructure.

The Waterways transport sub-sector is one of the oldest economically and environmentally sustainable modes of transportation and in some areas, the only means of mobility and access to basic services as the case for Nkombo.

In 1993, Ugirashebuja acquired his first cargo boat with capacity to load 35 tonnes operating in Kivu waters. He worked hard whereby in the following year, he bought another 70-tonnes boat and in 1998 acquired his third boat with 180 tonnes capacity.

He continued with the two businesses, fishing and water transport. Today, he conducts fishing together with his colleagues in a 24-member cooperative that employs over 80 workers.

With his vast experience in the sector, Ugirashebuja previously served as the head of a union of fishing cooperatives that has more than 470 members in Rusizi District.

These businesses have created employment starting with fishermen and others in the value chain as well as those working on the cargo boats. When loading one boat, about 70 workers are employed for the job.

He notes that he had an urge to continue his business ventures as a way to develop his home area. Rusizi and Nkombo Island which were particularly underdeveloped in many ways and he felt providing employment and services was a step in rebuilding his motherland that had been devastated by the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.

VENTURING into hospitality sector

After recording achievements in business, Ugirashebuja found more reasons to invest in development ventures and this time it was the hospitality sector.

Having founded Paramountcy Ltd, the company ventured into hospitality by building Nyumbani Guesthouse. This facility currently offers rooms to guests with an ultimate target to introduce more hospitality services.

The inspiration behind Nyumbani Guesthouse was to develop Rusizi because of its serene and beautiful scenery that is a big tourism potential.

Ugirashebuja notes that Rusizi has a big potential as a district that neighbors Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi. He says that trade to the two countries passes through Kamembe and therefore leaves something for the area as well.

The Founder of Paramountcy attributes Rwanda’s progress to the current leadership that has put citizens at the centre of development. The political will to develop the country has ensured that citizens are well catered for to improve livelihoods.

Ugirashebuja observes that places that had lagged behind in previous regimes like Nkombo now have a say. Nkombo Island is no longer the remote island but has basic necessities like health facilities, schools, electricity and water.