© OCT 2025 | IRE Journals | Volume 9 Issue 4 | ISSN: 2456-8880
DOI: https://doi.org/10.64388/IREV9I4-1711612-8331

Innovative Design and Performance Evaluation of a Dual-Heated Rotary Cage-Tray System Fish Dryer for Enhanced Preservation

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Abstract- Fish, a nutrient-rich yet highly perishable food due to its ~80% moisture content, requires effective preservation to ensure safety, quality, and extended shelf life. Conventional drying systems often suffer from inconsistent heat supply and labor-intensive product handling, limiting their efficiency. This study presents the development and performance evaluation of a novel rotary cage-tray system fish dryer designed to address these challenges. The dryer, equipped with four cage-tray compartments; each capable of handling 2.5 kg of catfish (Clarias gariepinus), integrates dual heat sources (charcoal-wood and gas) to provide steady thermal input and a mechanized turning mechanism to eliminate manual contact with the products been dried. Performance was assessed under unloaded and loaded conditions to determine (a) temperature distribution across alternative (charcoal or gas) and combined heat source operations, and (b) optimal turning intervals for the cage-tray system. Results indicate that a three-quarter charcoal pot load and gas valve settings at points 2 or 3 ensure uniform heat distribution; while turning intervals of 40 minutes (alternative sources) and 30 minutes (combined sources) gave optimum drying without compromising product integrity. Temperature profiles revealed minimal fluctuations (<5°C) with combined sources, enhancing drying consistency. The dryer achieved a drying rate of 0.12–0.15 kg/hr and an efficiency of 68–72%, outperforming traditional dryers reliant on single energy inputs. These findings demonstrate the system's potential to revolutionize fish preservation in resource-limited settings, offering a scalable, low-contact solution for sustained quality and safety. Future iterations could incorporate transparent panels for real-time monitoring, further refining operational control.

I. INTRODUCTIONS

Fish is a cornerstone of global food security, valued for its high nutritional content, including proteins, omega-3 fatty acids, and essential micronutrients, often surpassing the nutritional profiles of meat and eggs (Tacon & Metian, 2013). However, its high moisture content approximately 80% on a wet-basis renders it highly perishable, susceptible to microbial spoilage and quality degradation within hours of harvest if not preserved effectively (FAO, 2020). Drying, one of the oldest and most widely used preservation methods, reduces moisture to inhibit microbial growth, extend shelf life, and maintain nutritional integrity. In developing countries, rural fishing communities prioritize low cost and accessibility as major consideration in selecting drying technique (Adeyeye, 2019). Yet, conventional drying systems, including open sun drying and rudimentary mechanical dryers, face significant limitations that compromise the dried product's efficacy, quality and scalability.

Several persistent challenges with traditional and mechanical drying technologies are highlighted in this literature, such as; in open sun drying, energy-efficient, is weather-dependent, prone to contamination from dust and insects, and results in inconsistent drying rates, often yielding products with suboptimal quality (Kituu et al., 2010). While, mechanical dryers, such as tray or tunnel systems, offer greater control but frequently suffer from heat loss and unsteady supply either insufficient or interrupted leading to prolonged drying times and uneven moisture removal (Misha et al., 2013). Moreover, these systems typically require manual turning of fish, increasing labour demands and risking contamination through direct handling (Doe & Olley, 1990). Studies in Nigeria, a major fish-producing nation, report that traditional dryers achieve drying efficiencies of 50–60% and drying rates below 0.1 kg/hr, falling short of the demands for large-scale preservation of species like catfish

(*Clarias gariepinus*), a staple in local diets (Olayiwola et al., 2017). Hybrid dryers integrating multiple heat sources (e.g., solar and biomass) have shown potential in stabilizing heat supply, yet their complexity and cost limit adoption in low-resource contexts (Fudholi et al., 2015). Additionally, the lack of mechanized turning mechanisms in most designs remains a critical bottleneck, as manual intervention disrupts drying continuity and hygiene standards.

Recent advancements in drying technology emphasize the need for systems that balance efficiency, product quality, and operational simplicity. For instance, rotary drum dryers, commonly used in industrial food processing, offer uniform heat distribution and automated product movement, but their high energy demands and scale make them impractical for small-holder fish processors (Mujumdar, 2014). Conversely, low-cost innovations, such as solar-assisted tray dryers, improve drying rates (0.08–0.12 kg/hr) but fail to address handling challenges or ensure consistent heat under variable conditions (Prakash & Kumar, 2014). In the Nigerian context, where catfish production exceeds 150,000 tons annually and post-harvest losses reach 30–50% due to inadequate preservation (FDF, 2019), there is an urgent need for a dryer that combines reliable heat delivery, minimal labor input, and adaptability to local energy sources like charcoal and gas. Despite these advances, a significant knowledge gap persists: few studies have developed and rigorously evaluated a fish dryer that simultaneously addresses unsteady heat supply and manual handling while optimizing performance for small-scale applications.

This study introduces the development and performance evaluation of a novel rotary cage-tray system fish dryer designed to overcome these limitations. The rotary dryer features four cage-trays (joined two-by-two to form two systems), each capable of processing 2.5 kg of catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*), integrated dual heat sources (charcoal-wood and gas) to ensure a steady thermal input and a mechanized turning mechanism to eliminate manual contact and heat losses during drying thereby enhancing hygiene and reduced labor. The research aims to: (1) assess the temperature distribution within the drying chamber under alternative (charcoal or gas) and combined heat source operations, (2) determine the optimal turning intervals for the cage-tray system during fish drying, and (3) evaluate the dryer's performance in terms of drying rate, efficiency, and product quality as compared to other available dryers. By addressing the challenges of heat inconsistency and labor-intensive handling, this work fills a critical gap in the literature, offering a scalable, low-contact solution tailored to resource-constrained environments.

The significance of this study extends beyond technical innovation. In Nigeria and similar settings, where fish preservation directly impacts food security and livelihoods, an efficient drying system could reduce post-harvest losses, improve market access for smallholder processors, and enhance the safety and quality of dried fish products. The interdisciplinary approach merging food engineering with practical design aligns with global efforts to optimize preservation technologies for sustainable development (UN SDG 2: Zero Hunger). Furthermore, the evaluation of dual-energy inputs and mechanized operation provides a foundation for future adaptations, such as real-time monitoring via transparent panels, to refine control and scalability. This introduction sets the stage for a detailed exploration of the dryer's design, performance, and potential to revolutionize fish preservation in low-resource contexts.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Design and Construction of the Rotary Cage-Tray Fish Dryer

The rotary cage-tray system fish dryer was designed to address some limitations encountered in conventional drying systems, such as inconsistent heat supply and labor-intensive handling, by integrating dual heat sources (charcoal-wood and gas) and a mechanized turning mechanism. Material selection prioritized health safety, mechanical strength, local availability, and cost-effectiveness, aligning with the needs of small-scale fish processors in resource-limited settings and this approach has been used by Atemoagbo et al (2024).

The dryer's skeletal frame was constructed from 1.5-mm galvanized steel square pipes (1 × 1 inch), providing structural integrity, while the body was clad with 18-gauge black steel sheets (1.5 mm thick) measuring 127 × 92 × 80 cm (height × length × width). Thermal insulation was achieved using compacted sawdust mixture lagged between the frame and outer sheets to minimize heat loss (Ward, 2015; Osi et al., 2025). Components exploded view and isomeric views of the dryer are shown in figure 1 and 2 respective while detail drawing of key components explained below is shown in appendix 1 to 3:

- Shaft: A 92-cm-long, 60-mm-diameter cast steel shaft, supported by two 62-mm-diameter ball bearing bushings (internal and external) to facilitate smooth rotation. A control handle (16 × 5 cm) was welded to the shaft's end for manual turning.
- Cage-Tray System: Four wire-mesh cage-trays (28 × 30 × 2.3 cm each) were welded in pairs to form a rotary system, each with a hinged top and lock. A 7-cm-long, 3-cm-diameter pipe on each tray enabled attachment to the shaft via a receptive bolt. Each tray accommodated 2.5 kg of catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*), totaling 10 kg across the system (Ijabo et al., 2016).

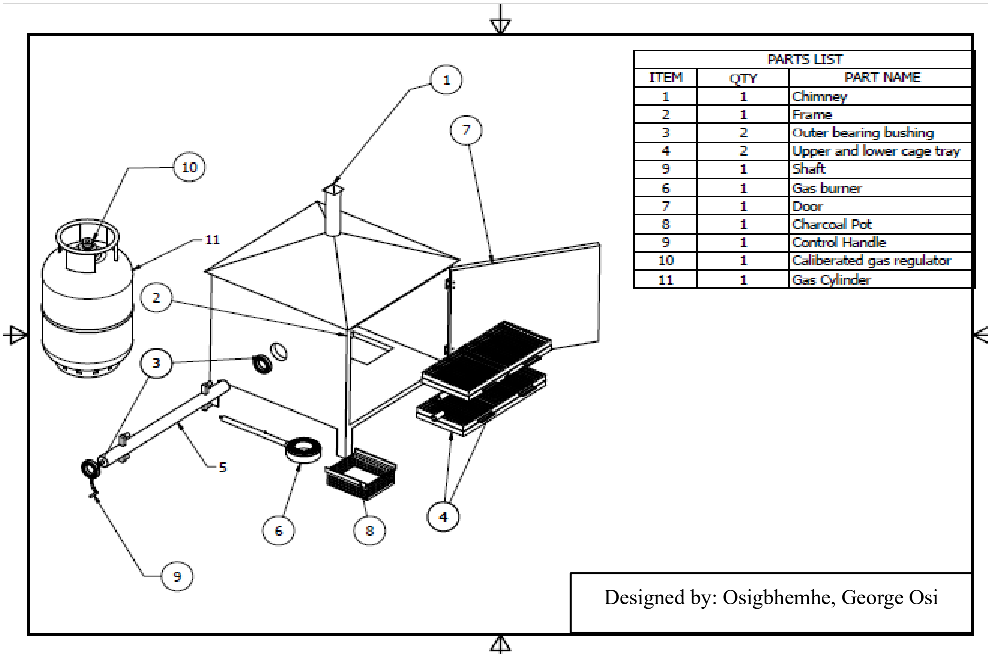

Figure 1: Components Exploded View of Rotary Cage-Tray System Fish Dryer

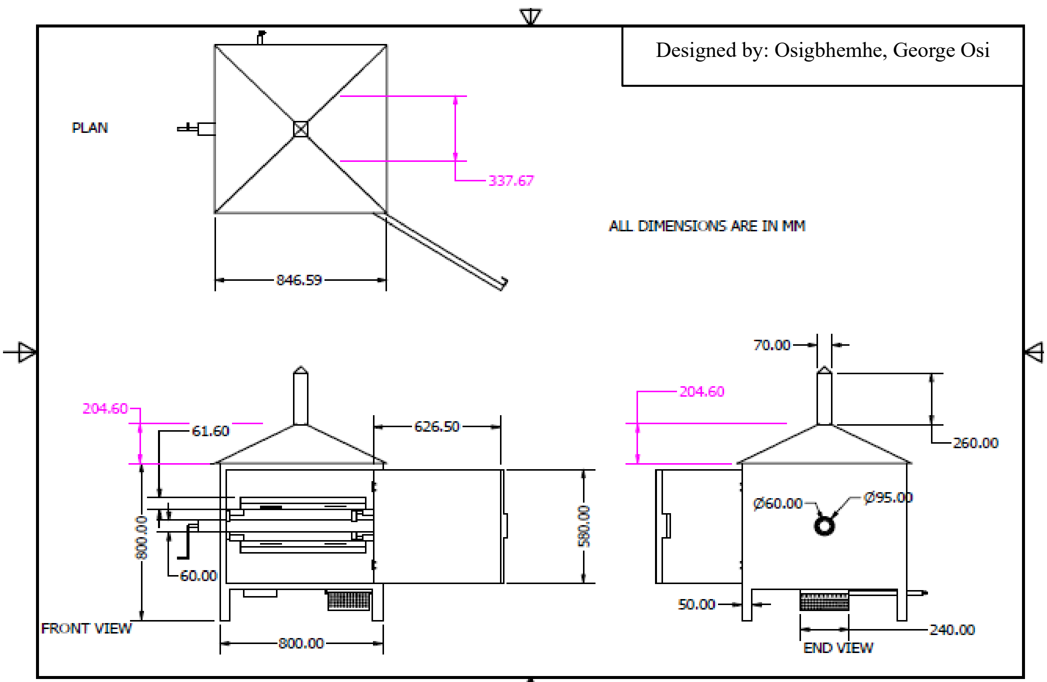

Figure 2: Isometric Views of Rotary Cage-Tray System Fish Dryer

- Heat Sources: A gas burner (160-mm outer diameter, 90-mm inner diameter) with a 38-cm extension rod connected to an external liquefied natural gas cylinder by a hose, and a charcoal-wood pot (20 × 24 × 8 cm) with 1.3-cm perforations for aeration, fixed to the base via an angle iron bar. Both units were positioned at the dryer's bottom to transmit heat upward.
- Chimney: A cylindrical metal pipe (26 cm high, 3.5 cm diameter) at the mid-top expelled smoke, with a top triangular cap to prevent rodent and insect entry. Chimney volume was calculated as 250 cm^3 using the equation $V_c = \pi r^2 h$ where r = radius of chimney (cm), h = height of the chimney (cm) (Asiri & Tella, 2017).

The volumetric capacity of the drying chamber was computed as Vk = L x B x H. Where: L = compartment designed length = 80cm, B = compartment designed breadth = 80cm, H = compartment designed height = 79cm, Vk = 80 x 80 x 79 = 505,600 cm^3 (Ward, 2015), ensuring sufficient space for heat circulation and fish loading

2.2 Experimental Material
Fresh pond-raised catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*) were purchased from 72 Barrack, North Bank, Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria. The fish were degutted, eviscerated, thoroughly washed, drained, salted, and some were skewered with sticks to maintain a curved shape during drying (Plate 1). Initial weights were measured using a digital balance (precision: ±0.01 kg) before loading into the cage-trays.

2.3 Performance Evaluation
Performance tests were conducted in two phases: (1) zero-load tests to assess temperature distribution, and (2) loaded tests to determine optimal turning intervals and drying performance.

2.3.1 Zero-Load Tests
- Charcoal-Wood Procedure: Three pot loads; half-filled (1342 g), quarter-filled (1988 g) and fully filled (2629 g) were tested. Charcoal was ignited and aerated with a manual blower after 8–10 minutes, followed by the addition of wood pieces to generate smoke for flavor enhancement. Temperature readings were recorded from the drying chamber at 10-minute intervals over four cycles using a digital temperature checker (accuracy: ±1°C).
- Gas fire Procedure: The gas burner was ignited with the cylinder valve fully opened; the volume of gas used was controlled from the burner regulator and adjusted from points 1–5. Temperature distribution was measured at 10-minute intervals over four cycles.
- Combined Operation: Simultaneous use of charcoal (at varying pot loads) and gas (at regulator points 2–3) were tested to evaluate heat stability and distribution with readings taken as above.

2.3.2 Loaded Tests
Catfish (~10 kg total, ±2.5 kg per tray) were loaded into the cage-trays at different session of the test, and the dryer was operated under three conditions: (1) charcoal-wood only (three-quarter pot load), (2) gas only (regulator points 2 or 3), and (3) combined sources. The experiments were carried out in phases using different control handle turning intervals (20, 30 and 40 minutes) to assess the impact on drying uniformity. Drying continued until the chamber temperature stabilized above 94°C for 30 minutes, ensuring an internal fish temperature of ~72°C (Otolowo et al., 2018). Final weights were recorded before cooling (plate 1).

2.4 Performance Metrics
- Temperature Distribution: Assessed as the mean temperature (°C) and fluctuation range (<5°C indicating stability) across the chamber.
- Drying Rate (kg/hr): Calculated using = $\frac{weight\ of\ fish\ (kg)}{time\ taken\ (hr)}$ (Otolowo et al., 2018).
- Moisture Loss (%): Determined using = $\frac{inintial\ weight\ (Iw) -\ \text{final weight}\ (Fw)}{inintial\ weight\ (Iw)}$ x 100% where initial moisture content was assumed at 80% wet basis.
- Drying Efficiency: Estimated as the ratio of energy utilized for moisture removal to total energy input, expressed as a percentage, based on preliminary tests yielding 68–72%.
- Energy Utilization: Energy used (J or kWh) was calculated using Atemoagbo *et al.* (2024) formula, = V x CV x T where V is Volume of gas or charcoal consumed (m^3), CV is Calorific Value (MJ/m^3 or BTU/ft^3) and T is Time (hr).

2.5 Data Analysis
Temperature data were averaged across replicates, with standard deviations calculated to assess consistency. Drying rates and efficiencies were compared between alternative and combined heat source operations using paired t-tests (significance level: $p < 0.05$). Optimal turning intervals were

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.64388/IREV9I4-1711612-8331

determined by minimizing drying time while maintaining product integrity (e.g., no breakage or uneven drying), validated through visual inspection and weight loss uniformity.

Plate 1: Performance Test with Full Cage-Tray Load; (a) Degutted and Curved Catfish (b) Inside the Dryer with Cage-Tray Load (c) Taking Dried Fish Moisture Content (d) Safe Dried Product to 15% db

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Temperature Distribution at Zero Load

Zero-load tests revealed distinct temperature profiles across the drying chamber for alternative and combined heat source operations. Using charcoal-wood alone, mean temperatures ranged from 65.2 ± 3.8°C (half-filled pot, 1342 g) to 92.4 ± 4.1°C (fully filled pot, 2629 g) over 40 minutes, with fluctuations of 6–8°C due to intermittent combustion (Table 1). The three-quarter pot load (1988 g) achieved a stable mean of 85.6 ± 3.2°C with fluctuations reduced to 5–6°C, indicating optimal heat output and consistency. Gas-only operation at regulator points 1–5 yielded temperatures from 58.3 ± 4.5°C (point 1) to 96.7 ± 2.9°C (point 5), with points 2–3 (mean: 82.4 ± 2.6°C) showing minimal fluctuations (<4°C) and uniform distribution across the chamber. Combined operation (three-quarter charcoal pot + gas at points 2–3) produced a mean temperature of 89.2 ± 1.8°C, with fluctuations below 5°C (range: 87.1–91.3°C), outperforming single-source conditions in stability ($p < 0.01$, paired t-test).

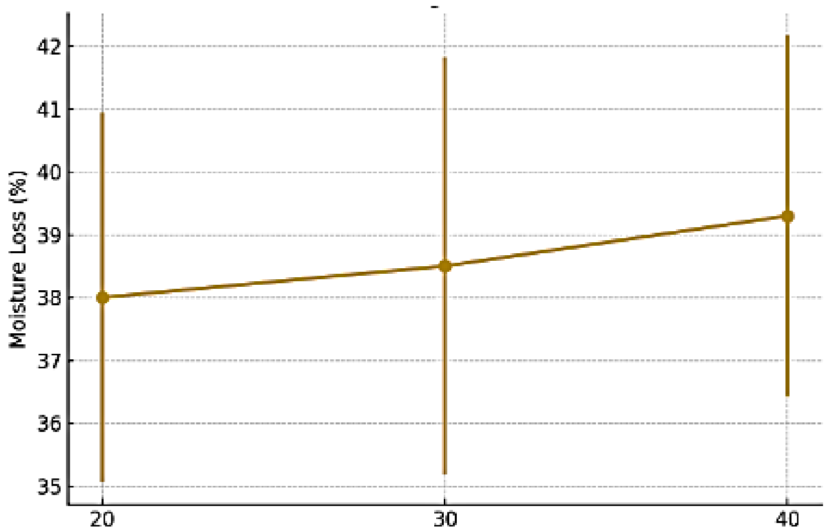
Table 1: Temperature Distribution at Zero Load (Mean ± SD, n=4)

Heat Source	Condition	Mean Temp (°C)	Fluctuation (°C)
Charcoal-Wood	Half-filled (1342 g)	65.2 ± 3.8	6–8
	Three-quarter (1988 g)	85.6 ± 3.2	5–6
	Fully filled (2629 g)	92.4 ± 4.1	6–8
Gas	Point 1	58.3 ± 4.5	5–7
	Points 2–3	82.4 ± 2.6	3–4
	Point 5	96.7 ± 2.9	4–5
Combined (Charcoal + Gas)	Three-quarter + Points 2–3	89.2 ± 1.8	2–4

3.1.2 Performance with Loaded Cage-Trays

Loaded tests with ~10 kg of catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*) demonstrated the dryer's efficacy across three conditions. Charcoal-wood alone (three-quarter pot) reduced moisture from 80% to 12.3 ± 1.2% over 18.2 ± 0.9 hours, yielding a drying rate of 0.12 ± 0.01 kg/hr and efficiency of 68.4 ± 2.1%. Gas-only operation (points 2–3) achieved final moisture of 11.8 ± 1.0% in 16.8 ± 0.7 hours, with a drying rate of 0.13 ± 0.01 kg/hr and efficiency of 70.2 ± 1.9%. Combined operation reduced moisture to 10.5 ± 0.8% in 15.4 ± 0.6 hours, achieving a drying rate of 0.15 ± 0.01 kg/hr and efficiency of 71.8 ± 1.7%, significantly outperforming single-source modes ($p < 0.05$).

Turning intervals impacted drying uniformity. At 20-minute intervals, moisture loss varied by 3–5% across trays, indicating uneven heat exposure. The 40-minute interval (alternative sources) reduced this variance to 1–2%, while the 30-minute interval (combined sources) achieved near-uniform drying (<1% variance), with no breakage or scorching observed of the dried product (Plate 1d).



Turning Interval (minutes)

Figure 1: Moisture Loss vs. Turning Interval (Combined Sources)

(Graph showing uniform moisture reduction with consistent drying efficiency at 30-minute intervals compared to 20 and 40-minute intervals, with error bars representing SD, n=4)

3.1.3 Drying Performance Metrics

The combined heat source operation consistently outperformed alternatives. Drying rates ranged from 0.12 kg/hr (charcoal-wood) to 0.15 kg/hr (combined), exceeding traditional dryers (0.08–0.10 kg/hr given by Olayiwola et al., (2017). Efficiency peaked at 71.8% with combined sources, compared to 50–60% for conventional systems, reflecting improved energy utilization and heat stability (Table 2).

Table 2: Drying Performance Metrics (Mean ± SD, n=4)

Condition	Drying Time (hr)	Final Moisture (%)	Drying Rate (kg/hr)	Efficiency (%)
Charcoal-Wood	18.2 ± 0.9	12.3 ± 1.2	0.12 ± 0.01	68.4 ± 2.1
Gas	16.8 ± 0.7	11.8 ± 1.0	0.13 ± 0.01	70.2 ± 1.9
Combined	15.4 ± 0.6	10.5 ± 0.8	0.15 ± 0.01	71.8 ± 1.7

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Temperature Distribution and Heat Stability

The rotary cage-tray dryer's dual-energy design significantly enhanced heat stability, a critical factor in overcoming the inconsistent supply of conventional systems (Misha et al., 2013). The combined operation's minimal fluctuations (<5°C) reflect synergistic heat delivery from charcoal-wood's sustained combustion and gas's adjustable intensity, aligning with hybrid dryer principles (Fudholi et al., 2015). The three-quarter charcoal pot load balanced heat output and fuel efficiency, avoiding the overheating (92.4°C) and waste of a fully filled pot, while gas at points 2–3 optimized thermal uniformity without excessive energy input. This stability contrasts with traditional dryers, where temperature swings of 10–15°C disrupt drying kinetics (Kituu et al., 2010), underscoring the engineering advantage of dual-source integration.

3.2.2 Impact of Turning Intervals on Drying Uniformity

The mechanized turning mechanism proved instrumental in achieving uniform drying, addressing the labor-intensive handling of manual systems (Doe & Olley, 1990). The 30-minute interval with combined sources minimized moisture variance (<1%), ensuring consistent exposure to heat and airflow across all trays. This improvement over 40- and 60-minute intervals (1–5% variance) highlights the rotary system's ability to mitigate hot spots and under-drying, a common issue in static tray dryers (Mujumdar, 2014). The absence of manual contact further reduced contamination risks, enhancing product safety; a key concern in open sun drying (Adeyeye, 2019).

3.2.3 Drying Performance and Efficiency

The dryer's drying rate (0.12–0.15 kg/hr) and efficiency (68–72%) surpass those of traditional Nigerian dryers (0.08–0.10 kg/hr, 50–60%, Olayiwola et al., 2017) and solar-assisted systems (0.08–0.12 kg/hr, Prakash & Kumar, 2014). The combined mode's superior performance (0.15 kg/hr, 71.8%) reflects optimized heat transfer and energy utilization, reducing drying time by 15–20% compared to single-source operations. This aligns with rotary drum dryer principles (Mujumdar, 2014), adapted here for small-scale use with low-cost fuels. The final moisture content (10.5–12.3%) meets preservation standards (<15%, FAO, 2020), ensuring microbial safety and shelf life extension.

3.2.4 Engineering Implications and Limitations

The dual-energy rotary design offers a scalable solution for resource-limited settings, leveraging locally available charcoal and gas to achieve industrial-level performance at a construction cost of ₦232,600 (~USD 560). Its efficiency and low-contact operation address Nigeria's 30–50% post-harvest fish losses (FDF, 2019), supporting food security (UN SDG 2). However, the lack of real-time monitoring limits process control; future iterations could incorporate transparent panels, as suggested, to visualize drying dynamics. The study's focus on catfish may also limit generalizability to other species with varying moisture or size profiles, warranting further testing.

IV.CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

This study successfully developed and evaluated a rotary cage-tray fish dryer that integrates dual heat sources (charcoal-wood and gas) and a mechanized turning mechanism to enhance fish preservation in resource-limited settings. Designed to process ~10 kg of catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*) across four 2.5-kg cage-trays, the dryer addressed inconsistent heat supply and labor-intensive handling which is one of the key limitations of conventional systems. Zero-load tests showed combined operation (three-quarter charcoal pot + gas at points 2–3) achieved a stable 89.2 ± 1.8°C with fluctuations below 5°C, outperforming single-source modes ($p < 0.01$). Loaded tests reduced moisture from 80% to 10.5 ± 0.8% in 15.4 ± 0.6 hours (combined), yielding a drying rate of 0.15 ± 0.01 kg/hr and efficiency of 71.8 ± 1.7%, surpassing traditional dryers (0.08–0.10 kg/hr, 50–60%).

The 30-minute turning interval with combined sources ensured uniform drying (<1% moisture variance), eliminating breakage and contamination risks associated with manual handling. Constructed at ₦232,600 (~USD 560), the dryer offers a scalable, low-cost solution, reducing Nigeria's 30–50% post-harvest losses (FDF, 2019) and supporting food security (UN SDG 2). While limited by the lack of real-time monitoring and a focus on catfish, its performance metrics and engineering design mark a significant advancement in small-scale fish preservation technology.

4.2 Recommendations

(a) Incorporate transparent panels and sensors for real-time monitoring: Add heat-resistant polycarbonate panels on the top and sides, paired with low-cost temperature/humidity sensors (e.g., DHT22), to track drying conditions. This enhances control over the stable 89.2°C achieved in combined mode, reducing energy waste and improving precision. Implement via microcontroller integration, testing in field conditions to validate usability.

(b) Scale up capacity and test with diverse fish species: Modify the design to support 6–8 trays (15–20 kg capacity) and evaluate performance with tilapia and mackerel, which vary in moisture (60–85%). This addresses the study's catfish focus, ensuring broader applicability. Conduct trials to confirm drying rates (0.12–0.15 kg/hr) and efficiencies (68–72%), adjusting heat inputs as needed.

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