

Workers grade a site at the Uganda Industrial Park in Namanve in Kampala in 2013. According to a report, the location of the Park will be disastrous for Namanve wetland

By Billy Rwothungeyo

Will industries be the death of our wetlands?

THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN STATES THAT MANUFACTURING IS ONE OF THE AREAS TO POWER UGANDA'S DREAM OF ACHIEVING VISION 2040. BUT AT WHAT COST WILL THE COUNTRY PURSUE THIS NOBLE DREAM?

While heavy trucks are filling up the Kinawataka wetland with murram to make way for another factory, you may simply shrug your shoulders and tell yourself it does not affect you in any way.

Then the following day, as you make your way to the city centre from Kireka, the road is cut off by flooding around Kyambogo area and you arrive late for a job interview. This particular flooding is a direct result of the degradation of the Kinawataka wetlands.

The 2016 Uganda Wetlands Atlas, prepared with the support of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Environment Programme, points at industrial development as one of the key drivers of wetland degradation in Uganda.

"Wetlands have traditionally been seen as vast, cheap and unencumbered land available for development. The allocation of wetlands for industrial development; for instance through the Kampala Development Plan 1972, set the stage for wetlands encroachment. Industries put pressure on wetlands through heavy pollution loads and drainage for infrastructure development, among others," the report says.

The report also states how industrialisation is killing the bio-filtering role of wetlands.

"In Kampala, for instance, the number of industries has increased rapidly, infilling the wetlands with murram, reducing the vegetation and increasing the pollution load from industrial sewerage discharge. Consequently, the wetlands are now unable to undertake their regulating and ecological functions," the report says.

A SIT Graduate Institute study titled *The Use and Misuse of Wetlands in Kampala*, spells out the impact of industries on wetlands in the city. The report states that the major wetlands in Kampala, Nakivubo, Lubigi and Kinawataka, which are major tributaries to Lake Victoria, bear the brunt of this pollution.

"Currently, both Nakivubo and Kinawataka are heavily encroached upon for industrial development, settlement and cultivation. Kinawataka is also being polluted by an upstream industrial development," the report says.

Authorities deny blame

Stella Kanyike, the Uganda Investment Authority (UIA)'s spokesperson, says the authority is not to blame for industries encroaching on wetlands as most culprits are "local investors".

"In the current Investment Code Act 1991, it is mandatory for all foreign investors to have an investment license, which is not the case for domestic investors. Since land in Uganda is owned by the people, most of the mushrooming investment projects in wetlands are owned privately and their acquisition is not controlled by UIA," she argues.

Kanyike further says all projects in the industrial parks manned by UIA are licensed and approved by NEMA before investors develop their industrial plots, and that whenever environmental issues come up, licenses are put on hold.

"The land UIA was offered in Namanve was a forest reserve that was gazetted to be developed into an industrial park," she says.

However, according to the 2016 Uganda Wetlands Atlas, the location of the Kampala Industrial and Business Park in Namanve (KIBP) will be disastrous for the wetland near the park.

"The location of the KIBP (which is close to Namanve wetland), is likely to have several negative impacts on the wetland, including pollution from industrial effluent and other waste material, once the business park is fully functional and encroachment from the increased population attracted to the area. Namanve wetland eventually flows into Lake Victoria, which is the source of drinking water for the population," the Atlas states.

Christine Akello, the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA)'s deputy executive director, says the failure to combat the degradation of wetlands for industrial purposes is down to a lack of proper co-ordination among different institutions such as NEMA, UIA, National Forestry Authority and district authorities.

"Looking after the environment is a responsibility that falls on the shoulders of different institutions. We need to ensure that our capacity improves in order to monitor what happens to the wetlands," she says.

"Local authorities are also supposed to monitor activities in their localities. Are they well equipped to handle this task? These are the things we are supposed to look at," Akello adds.

As a result of this lax co-ordination, some quick thinking individuals are getting away with 'murder'.

"What happens in many cases is that people have land that has both dry and wetland. So, when they want to set up a factory, they seek the environmental impact assessment of NEMA. We tell them to use only the dry part of the land, but they still go ahead and construct in the wetlands as well because they think that this is idle land," Akello explains.

Solutions

Wetlands keep our ecosystem functioning well and sieve aquatic pollutants from the earth.

According to *www.environment.nsw.gov.au*, wetlands cover about 9% of the earth's surface and are estimated to contain around 35% of global terrestrial carbon. Wetlands act as sinks for carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, especially if their vegetation is protected and their natural processes are maintained." Wetlands also play the invaluable role of keeping biodiversity alive.

"A significant number of birds and mammals depend on freshwater wetlands for breeding or feeding. Wetlands are some of the planet's most productive ecosystems. They provide spawning grounds for fish and ideal conditions for other species groups such as dragonflies and amphibians," *biodiversity.europa.eu* says.

So, how do we drive industries and factories out of the wetlands?

The 2016 Uganda Wetlands Atlas says land titles in wetlands should all be cancelled,i ncluding those held by industrial set-ups.

"A Cabinet directive issued on April, 16, 2014, instructed that all titles in wetlands on public land acquired unlawfully (after 1995) be cancelled. This is especially for land titles on the 200m lakeshore protection zone. There is opportunity to enforce this instruction and promote compliance through education and incentives so as to compel behavior change, " the reprt says.

The report further says the Government should gazette and restore the critical wetlands that support the drainage system around the country.

Akello says people also need to sensitise more, so that they can appreciate wetlands more.

"Wetlands are not just wasted space. They are important. So, instead of destroying them, why not go into creative ways of utilizing them like for fish farming instead of dumping murram," she says.

The National Development Plan states that manufacturing is one of the areas to power Uganda's dream of achieving Vision 2040. But at what cost will the country pursue this noble dream? Will Uganda be prosperous without wetlands?

CamScanner