



Encroachment. A house that was built in a wetland in Gurua Cell, Arua Municipality. Many people in Arua District are encroaching on wetlands because of rapid urbanisation, which has led to increase of land prices.
PHOTO BY CLEMENT ALUMA

Rapid urbanisation impact Arua wetlands

Developing. Due to rapid urbanisation in Arua, land for development is becoming expensive thus forcing local investors to buy land near wetlands and also raze slums.

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KEY ISSUES

Wetlands. Arua District has 22 designated wetlands with 19 of them heavily encroached on.
Cost. The cost of plots in prime areas of the municipality has increased to between Shs200m and Shs300m for residential plots, while costs of commercial plots in the central business district goes for as high as upwards of Shs500m.

ARUA. The slums as well as wetlands that were once protected are now being submerged by the rapid urbanisation of Arua Town.

The land for development is becoming increasingly scarce as new hotels, residential buildings, and small scale factories continue to spring up.

This, according to the environmentalists, has forced local investors to buy land near wetlands and also raze the slums.

Bibia quarters, once a popular slum but with makeshift houses and poor drainage systems, is slowly vanishing. The poor hygiene and sanitation here was often a menace and exposed the residents to frequent cholera outbreaks.

But this miserable situation in Arua Town is no more as more land, including the slum areas, are demanded to accommodate the rapid pace of urbanisation, which in turn is also quickly taking its toll on the wetlands that have now become home to many.

On a positive note, with quick pace of urbanisation and increased population, has also arisen the need for better living conditions.

Sadly, the quick pace of development means uncontrolled encroachment on the fragile eco-systems by the teeming population in Arua as those who can't match the speed of quick urbanisation are being pushed onto the outskirts of the Arua Municipality to find new settlements.

Mr Issa Kato, the Arua Municipality mayor, says: "Due to the rapid population, we really wanted Barifa forest degazetted so that more space is created and an Eco-city plan implemented because some people now build houses in wetlands. We should work hard to protect the wetlands."

And most of the new settlements on the outskirts of the town are informal and the community is not sensitised on the disadvantages and advantages of preservation of wetlands.

For now, even permanent houses have been erected in the wetlands without any municipal council approval.

The district has 22 designated wetlands with 19 of them heavily encroached on.

Mr John Acidri, a town resident who constructed a house near River Enyau, says failure by the town residents to acquire land in better areas has forced them to build in swampy areas.

"The challenge is the high population that want to stay in town and the shortage of land automatically forces them to settle in the wetlands," he says.

Mr Moses Alo Findru, the municipal physical planner, says the cost of plots in prime areas of the municipality has increased to between

Voices

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Shs200m and Shs300m for residential plots (60x120 feet), while costs of commercial plots in the central business district goes for as Shs500m and above (45x60 feet).

The slums have now been cleared to give way to more modern and permanent houses, especially after a terrible outbreak of cholera in 2008 that affected at least 38 people in the municipality.

But there still remain places with poor sanitation, including Gurua, Congo and Chongaloya cells in Arua Hill Division, Upper Bibia, and Swalia in Oli Division.

Some of the remaining slums in Oli still paints a grim picture of sanitation with a mix of houses with baked bricks, iron sheets while others are grass-thatched with a single room costing about Shs30,000 and occupied by about four family members. The members share the few pit latrines with no sewer in place.

A survey conducted by Act Together and Uganda Slum Dwellers Federation in 2010, on the slum areas in Arua Municipality, indicates that there are only a few toilets that empty into septic tanks but most families use pit latrines for disposal of human waste.

The report says there are no drainage systems and waste water flows freely on the settlement paths thus posing great danger of water-borne diseases to residents.

For instance, Upper Bibia that has a population of about 3,390 residents with more than 624 households, has about 280 pit latrines owned by individuals.

The National Environment Regulations of 2009, require owners or operators of facilities, whose activities are likely to have a significant impact on the environment to establish environmental management systems in collaboration with the National Environment Management Authority (Nema).

Shs500m

THE COST OF COMMERCIAL PLOTS IN ARUA CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT

Mr Joachim Andiandu, the district environment officer, says: "Our wetlands are heavily encroached on because of urbanisation, bush burning, charcoal and clearance for farming. We have already issued warning to those who have built near or in wetlands to start leaving. But only few have left and we shall use the law to demolish the houses of those who defy the order to move."

He says as a result of the loss of the wetlands, there is increased decline in water quality, loss of wildlife habitat and floods, especially along R. Osu and in Swalia cell.

Mr Andiandu says encroachment outside the municipality is mainly by agriculture, yet the rain pattern is now affected.

Environment experts also say there is increased high temperatures in the municipality and constant flooding, especially during the rainy season.