



A forest reawakens: Inside the youth-led conservation movement

GAYO has mobilised more than 100 university students, environmental experts and community actors in a coordinated effort to rehabilitate Nandere Forest through indigenous tree planting and conservation awareness.

BY SHABIBAH NAKIRIGYA

Deep within Nandere Forest, also known as Lazarus Forest, in Nyimbwa Sub-county, Luwero District, a quiet transformation is taking root. Once heavily degraded by years of de-

forestation and human activity, the forest is now witnessing a revival driven by a new generation of environmental stewards determined to restore nature and secure the future.

At the heart of this movement is the Green Africa Youth Organisation (GAYO), which has mobilised more than



100 university students, environmental experts and community actors in a coordinated effort to rehabilitate the forest through indigenous tree planting and conservation awareness.

"We are here to restore what has been lost," said Mr. Isaac Ndyamuhaki, National Director of GAYO Uganda, during the exercise.

"This forest has suffered degradation for years, but today marks a step towards its recovery."

According to Ndyamuhaki, the initiative goes far beyond planting trees. It is about shaping a generation that understands its responsibility towards the environment and is equipped to take action.

"This is not just a restoration activity, it is a platform for learning, inspiration and engagement. We want young people to experience conservation practically so that they can carry these lessons back to their communities," he says.

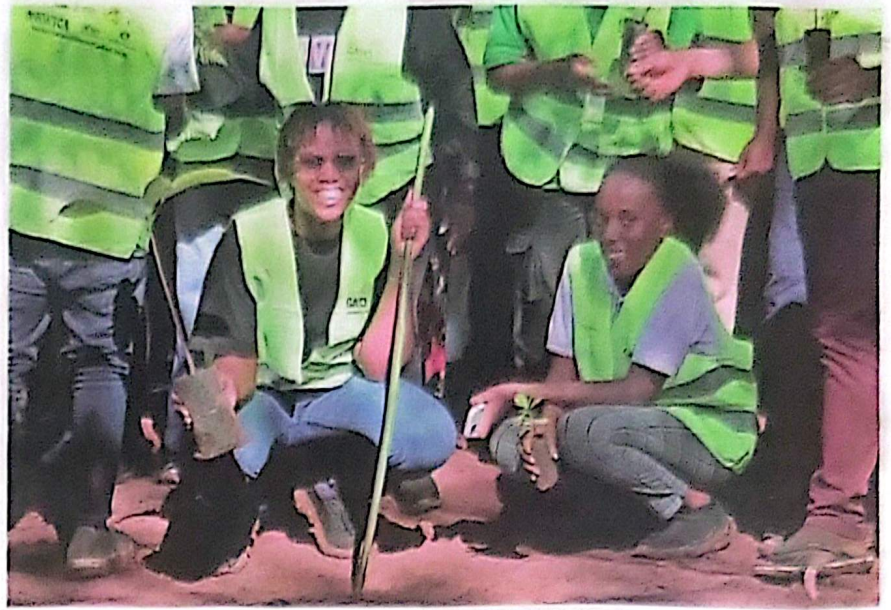
Participants spent the day planting over 2,000 indigenous trees, carefully selected to restore biodiversity and strengthen the ecosystem. But alongside the physical work, the gathering also created space for dialogue and reflection.

"We held conversations about the future of our forests and water systems, conservation is not just about trees it is about livelihoods, biodiversity and the

ABOUT

Nandere forest has a total of 166 indigenous tree species including the musene, musizi, and musenene among others. The forest has a podocarpus tree that is 67 meters high and is believed to be at least 80 years old. It survived the encroachers at the height of the indiscriminate tree cutting between 2004 and 2014.

Left: A team of students, together with Green Africa Uganda restoring Nandere Forest - Luwero District. PHOTOS/SHABIBA NAKIRIGYA



Some of the participants taking part in the restoration process.

sustainability of our natural resources," he says, adding that the Nandere exercise is part of a broader, ongoing effort by GAYO to engage young people in environmental action.

According to organisers, this marks the sixth annual event in a series of conservation activities carried out across different parts of the country.

"We have been doing this for six years in various ecosystems, and we will continue," Ndiyamuhaki said. "Our goal is to build a strong youth movement that connects directly with nature and takes responsibility for its protection," he notes.

Importance of restoration

Forestry experts working alongside the youth emphasised the importance

Ecological balance.

We are planting indigenous species such as *Prunus africana* and *Terminalia brownii* because they support biodiversity and help rebuild natural habitats. These trees are

essential in restoring ecological balance."

Mr Christophe Marvin Tumusiime, Director of Trinity Forestry Services,

of restoring forests using indigenous species, which are better suited to local conditions and provide greater ecological benefits.

Mr Christophe Marvin Tumusiime, Director of Trinity Forestry Services, said the choice of native trees is critical to the long-term success of restoration efforts.

"We are planting indigenous species such as *Prunus africana* and *Terminalia brownii* because they support biodiversity and help rebuild natural habitats," he said. "These trees are essential in restoring ecological balance."

He noted that the current state of many forests reflects years of unsustainable land use, particularly driven by agricultural expansion.

"In many communities, forests are cleared to create farmland because land is highly valued," Tumusiime explained. "People also depend on forest resources for firewood, construction and other needs."

While acknowledging these pressures, he warned that continued degradation without restoration poses serious risks.

"If we do not act sustainably if we do not replant and manage our forests properly we risk losing these ecosystems entirely," he said. "And with that, we lose the benefits they provide, not just for us, but for future generations."

Environmental advocates at the event highlighted the far-reaching impact of forest restoration, noting that trees play a crucial role in regulating climate, protecting water sources and preventing soil erosion.

Mr Isaac Semulondo from the Rural Water Initiative for Climate Action un-

derscored the link between forests and water security.

"Trees are life," he said. "They protect our water sources, preserve soil and even provide medicinal value. Without forests, our ecosystems and our communities are at risk."

Mr Semulondo described the collaboration with GAYO as a growing partnership aimed at empowering young people with both knowledge and practical skills.

"This is my third time participating since 2024, and the impact is expanding. We are reaching more areas and involving more young people each year," he says before calling on youth across the country to take a proactive role in conservation efforts.

"If young people come together, we can plant millions of trees in a short time," he said. "We all have a responsibility to restore our environment."

For the students who took part, the experience offered more than just hands-on training it was a call to action.

Mr Ben Kamoga, a student at Kyambogo University, said youth involvement is critical in ensuring long-term environmental sustainability.

"Our focus is on protecting and preserving forests," he said. "We want to inspire communities and fellow students to take part in conservation efforts."

He stressed the importance of adopting sustainable practices in everyday life, including reducing dependence on forest resources.

"Forestry plays a vital role in our ecosystem. As young people, we must embrace responsible consumption and support sustainable alternatives."

As the sun set over Nandere Forest, the newly planted seedlings stood as symbols of renewal and hope small but significant steps towards reversing years of environmental damage.

According to Mr Ndiyamuhaki, with growing youth engagement and strengthened partnerships, there is renewed optimism that Uganda's forests can be restored.

"We cannot do this alone. It takes collective effort from communities, organisations and government to protect our natural resources."



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Mr Isaac Semulondo from the Rural Water Initiative for Climate Action un-

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