# HOW SIRONKO FARMERS ARE RESTORING NAMATALE FOREST

In Sironko district, a transformation is taking place inside the Namatale Central Forest Reserve. As trees are replanted and wildlife begins to return, the ecosystem is starting to restore its delicate balance, thanks to farmers who have chosen conservation over encroachment. **Hope Mafaranga** and **Javier Omagor** write.

SIRONKO

Milton Sande stands beside his young coffee trees, their glossy leaves thriving under the shade of indigenous species recently planted across the reserve. A few years ago, Sande cultivated annual crops inside the forest, like many others struggling to feed their families.

"I did not know that by farming carelessly, I was destroying the forest that gives us rain and firewood. Now, I grow coffee using conservation methods. I no longer cut trees," he said.

A forest with deep roots, Namatale Central Forest Reserve lies in the upper catchment of eastern Uganda, forming part of the broader Mount Elgon ecosystem and an important water towers in the region.

Seasonal streams flowing from the highlands feed into wetlands and tributaries that support agriculture and domestic water supply in Sironko and neighbouring districts.

According to Sande, Namatale was dominated by indigenous tree species that supported diverse birdlife, small mammals, and medicinal plants used by surrounding communities.

"It also served as a buffer zone, protecting soils from erosion and regulating water flow from the mountainous terrain into the lowlands," he said.

However, over time, population growth and land pressure pushed communities to encroach on the forest. Trees were cut down to create farmland. He said charcoal burning and timber harvesting followed, and in a short time, large sections of the reserved forest had been converted into crop gardens.

Leonard Cherop, a forest officer in the Ministry of Water and Environment, recalls the situation. "About four years ago, the forest was full of farmlands. People used to cultivate in this forest," he said.

### RESTORATION

The permanent secretary of the water and environment ministry, Alfred Okidi, said the restoration of Namatale is ongoing after the Government received funds from the Global Environment Facility through the African Development Bank for the development of the Strengthening the Adaptive Capacity and Resilience of Communities in Uganda's Watersheds Awoja Catchment (SACRiAC) project.


Okidi, PS of water and environment ministry

Okidi said the project is to build the adaptive capacity of rural communities, reduce their vulnerability to climate change, and improve rural livelihoods and food security through integrated watershed management, climate-resilient infrastructure, and sustainable agriculture.

"The $8.9m project is promoting climate-smart agriculture and sustainable land management in critical catchment areas and is implemented in the districts of Bukedea, Sironko, Kapchorwa, and Bulambuli within the Awoja catchment downstream of the sub-catchments of Komirya, Sironko, Simu-sisi, Muyembe, and Sipi," he said.

Okidi said the four-year project has four major components that include climate resilient infrastructure development, institutional and community capacity development, climate information and early warning systems and project management and adaptation learning.

"We have managed to restore this forest to how it's looking right now. We planted natural trees that used to exist in the forest, about 15 species, together with the community and the protection status of the forest has changed," he said.

He said about 70% of the degraded area has so far been restored. Indigenous species have been replanted to revive the forest's ecological integrity, improve biodiversity, and stabilise soils along the slopes.

### CHANGING FARMING PRACTICES

For restoration to succeed, communities had to find alternative and sustainable livelihoods. Sande said he shifted from growing maize inside the forest to cultivating coffee outside fragile zones using agroforestry techniques.

Julius Kiboli also has embraced zero grazing. Previously, his cattle roamed freely into forested areas, degrading young trees and wetlands. Today, he keeps them in a controlled unit near his home.

"Zero grazing has reduced pressure on the forest," Kiboli notes.

### A FOREST RECLAIMING IDENTITY

The restoration is slowly showing visible results and young indigenous trees are taking root. Bird species that had disappeared are slowly returning. Streams that had begun to dry up during prolonged dry spells are showing signs of recovery.

Eng. Gorge Alito, the principal engineer and branch manager at the Water and Sanitation Development Facility-East (WSDF-East), said Namatale's role as a catchment area is critical.

"The forest helps regulate water flow from Mount Elgon's slopes, preventing flash floods in lower areas while ensuring sustained water availability during dry periods. By protecting soils from erosion, it also safeguards farmland productivity downstream," he said.

Alito said without restoring such forests, communities would face more severe impacts of climate change, including landslides, drought and declining agricultural yields.

### ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION

Okidi warned that leaving land bare exposes communities to soil degradation, flooding, landslides and food insecurity, emphasising the need for ecosystem restoration and sustainable land use practices.

He said when soil is left without vegetation cover, rainwater easily washes away the fertile topsoil, undermining agricultural productivity and threatening livelihoods.

To address these challenges, Okidi said the SACRiAC project is supporting the community in agroforestry and conservation agriculture and implementing ecosystem restoration initiatives aimed at improving environmental protection and strengthening community resilience.

He noted that communities have received fruit tree seedlings and other crops such as coffee to integrate with their farming activities and are now seeing the benefits of coexisting with the ecosystem.

### HOW DISTRICTS BENEFITED

In Bukedea, Okidi said a total of 7,942 farmers, including 4,158 men and 3,784 women, benefited from conservation agriculture, while 3,911 people, comprising 2,323 men and 1,588 women, participated in agroforestry initiatives.

Okidi said in Sironko, 8,086 beneficiaries took part in conservation agriculture and agroforestry, of whom 2,703 were men and 5,383 were women.

He said Kapchorwa registered 3,332 farmers benefiting from conservation agriculture, including 1,865 men and 1,467 women, and the district also recorded 2,259 beneficiaries in agroforestry, comprising 1,439 men and 820 women.

Okidi said in Bulambuli district, 3,080 people, including 1,956 men and 1,124 women, benefited from agroforestry programmes, while 3,284 farmers, comprising 2,010 men and 1,274 women, were supported under conservation agriculture initiatives.

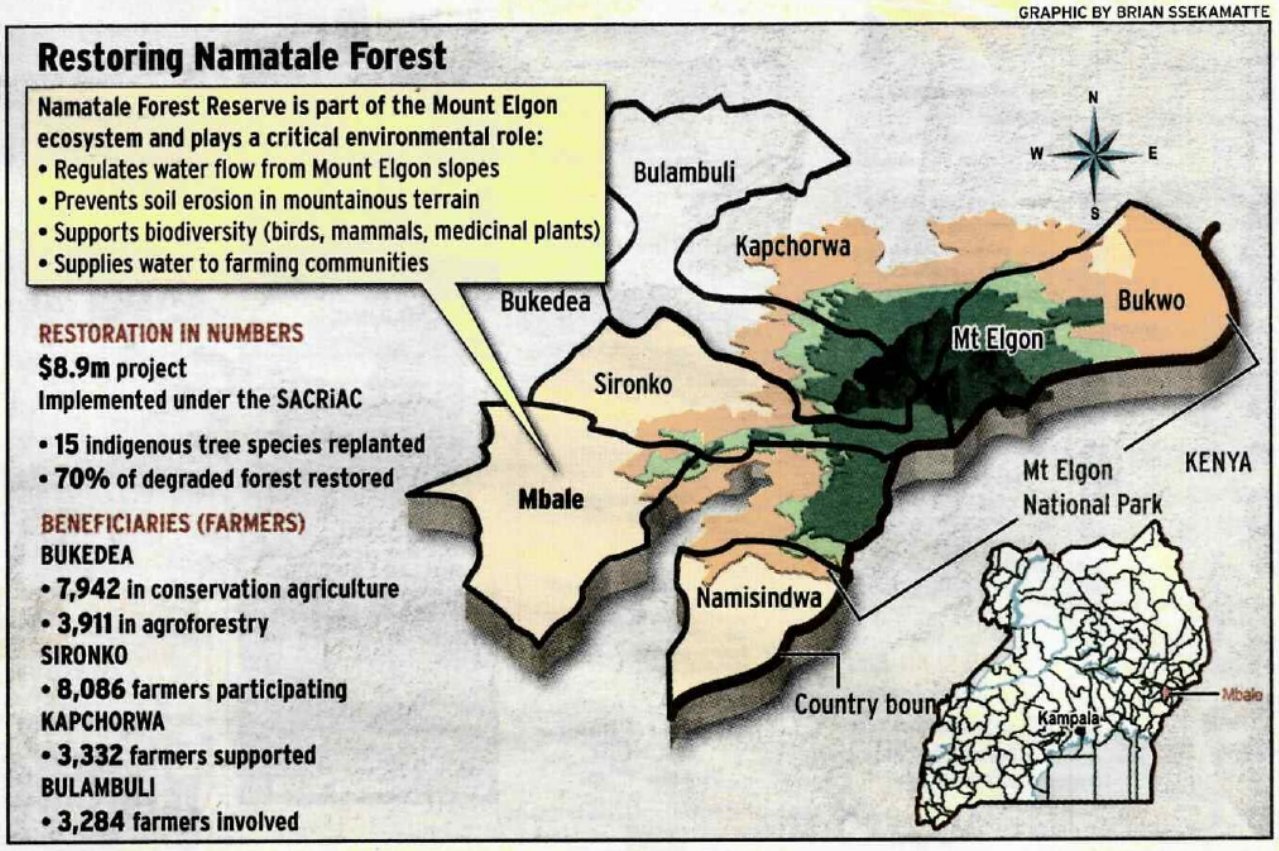
Another key intervention, Okidi said has been the protection of riverbanks to reduce environmental degradation and government has demarcated riverbanks to prevent cultivation close to rivers. He noted that silted rivers often lead to flooding and pollution.

Namatale's recovery provides a model that can be replicated in other fragile catchments across Uganda, Martha Akia, the senior regional communications officer at the water and environment ministry, said.

### AREA MP SPEAKS OUT

The area Woman MP elect, Asha Nabulo Lumolo, emphasised that forests are essential for regulating rainfall, protecting soil and supporting biodiversity.

GRAPHIC BY BRIAN SSEKAMATTE




### ALTERNATIVE COOKING ENERGY

The permanent secretary of the water and environment ministry, Alfred Okidi, said there is a need to promote alternative cooking energy to reduce pressure on forests. "In Uganda 90% of people use biomass for cooking. Even in towns where electricity is available, many people still use charcoal because of mindset," he said.

He said the Government is promoting energy-efficient cooking stoves as a transitional solution.

He added that long-term plans include expanding access to cleaner energy sources, such as liquefied petroleum gas.