THE AMOUNT

Shs2.9b

Most expensive. The amount of money that the Wetlands Management Department is allocated annually

What must be done to preserve Wakiso vast wetlands?

Way forward. In the last part of this series, **Gillian Nantume** explores what is required for wetlands to be preserved.

Wakiso District has only two people mandated to manage its wetlands and considering the number of developments going on in the district, the task is colossal.

"Can we really manage the entire Wakiso, even up to the wetland behind the airport?" Esau Mpoza, the district environmental officer, asks, continuing: "The annual budget for the environment office (wetlands and forestry) is Shs8m. One thinks we can do wonders with Shs8m. We are not God to perform miracles. Even if the district collects local revenue, there are more pressing needs than wetlands conservation."

In June 2017 the district wetlands officer only visited three wetlands - all in Busiro county.

Dismal budget for wetlands management

The National Environment Management Authority (Nema) police has to rely on donors to fund its activities.

The commander, David Dauna, says: "Unless government allocates 30 per cent of its budget to the environment, the degradation of wetlands is unstoppable. Can you imagine in the last quarter the environment officer of Kumi District was given a budget of Shs60,000. How can you spread Shs60,000 over four months?"

According to Oloya, the Wetlands Management Department is allocated Shs2.89 billion annually.

"We have told the Parliamentary Committee on Natural Resources that if they could increase our budget to a minimum of Shs15b, it would go a long way in facilitating our work. At the centre, we will remain with Shs5b for developing and restoring deep wetlands, such as, Katonga, Mayanja, and Mpologoma, while Shs10b will be sent to the districts to do the same work."

"Our challenge is manpower and logistical support," Mpoza says, adding: "The district has only one vehicle to do inspections. That vehicle is used by the forestry, wetlands, lands, and physical planning offices. If we are sharing one car, how are we going to do our work? In wetlands conservation if you do not do inspections to collect evidence then it becomes a joke. If someone calls me today to tell me people are dumping murram in Matugga, what can I do? Today (July 11, 2017), the vehicle has been taken to Namayumba for a tree planting activity. How do I reach Matugga?"

In the 2016/2017 financial year, the Committee has allocated the Department an additional Shs5billion to cover staff recruitment.

Cancelling of land titles

In 2014, Cabinet directed that all land titles issued in wetlands after the 1995 Constitution be cancelled.

"We were waiting for the statement of financial implication from the Ministry of Finance and we have just received it," Collins Oloya, the commissioner, Wetlands Management Department says, adding: "We have already developed a roadmap to begin following this directive in July. We have just received the statement of financial implication from the Ministry of Finance and we have sent the Uganda Wetlands Atlas to the Ministry of Lands to superimpose on the cadastral map."

The people who are encroaching on wetlands on a large scale are wealthy and are fully aware of the impact of their actions.

"Government should come up with a way to preserve, at least, one wetland in Wakiso, such as, Lubigi (Mayanja-Kato wetland), because of its importance to Kampala," Dauna says.

> People dump in the wetlands at night and you know at that time they are ready to do anything to protect their investment. Enforcement is risky. Those encroachers can beat you or do worse
>
> **STELLA NAMUMANSI, ENVIRONMENT OFFICER, WAKISO DISTRICT**

Housing solution needed

Wetland degradation should be looked at vis-à-vis population growth. Without a functional and realistic national housing policy, slums - filled with urban migrants - will continue to spring up in wetlands because that is the only available cheap land.

"Recently, Nema carried out a survey on 2,000 people countrywide to determine citizens' awareness and responsibility towards wetlands," Okurut says, continuing: "We discovered that people are aware of the importance of wetlands but they do not have the responsibility not to degrade them."

It is evident from statistics provided by the Uganda Wetlands Atlas that Ugandans do not consider wetlands a priority even after sensitisation is done by government officials.

"In Kira, people are building in the wetland," Mpoza says, continuing, "We have held sensitisation workshops, carried out enforcements, given technical guidance and monitored, but nothing is changing. The people who attend these sensitisation workshops are not the ones degrading the wetlands. You can speak for three hours while the real culprits are busy doing their work in the wetlands. I guess we just have to continue doing what we have been doing because we are not going to reinvent the wheel."

"The irresponsible behaviour of our people with regards to wetlands protection is going to cost us," Byarugaba cautions, adding, "There is population pressure on the little arable land available but that does not mean we should destroy our future. If you are trying to fight poverty by planting eucalyptus trees in a wetland, what do you expect will happen? Of course, the wetland will dry up."

Eviction needs funds too

Recently, President Museveni issued a directive for people to be evicted out of urban wetlands at whatever cost and most environmentalists are optimistic. The effects of climate change being felt in Uganda - out of season rains, floods, and heat - probably informed the president's directive.

"By the time we realise the damage we have done to the environment, it will be too late," Mpoza says, adding, "Forests are being lost and it is not easy to replant them. How many years will it take before we start benefiting from replanted forests? Once a wetland is lost, it is almost impossible to restore it to its natural state."

The president's directive includes the removal of all eucalyptus trees from wetlands. However, this kind of exercise has financial implications. Environmental officers need to be facilitated; they need (facilitated) policemen to protect them and casual workers to cut the trees. The idea is that the encroacher is supposed to reimburse the government for the resources used in an eviction exercise, but how many encroachers are willing to pay the government for destroying their livelihood?

Instead, many of them - especially those who encroach on a small scale - are ready to die for their property, and are prone to assaulting environment officers. In July 2009, Patrick Kalemera, a forest patrol officer was burnt to death together with his pregnant wife and three-year-old daughter in Kiwafu, Mukono District. A month earlier, a mob had attacked and hacked to near-death a forestry official and set his vehicle ablaze, after the official arrested four illegal tree fellers in Bufumbe Central Forest Reserve in Mukono.

"Our work is frustrating because we do not have the funds to hire backup," Wakiso's lone environment officer, Stella Namumansi says.

In the beginning, government officials will be overzealous to carry out evictions, but how long will that morale last if the funds used in an eviction exercise in July are going to be reimbursed in December? Without financial resources, the presidential directive on riding wetlands of encroachers may have the same result as whistling in the wind.

2,000

Survey. Nema carried out a survey on 2,000 people recently and discovered that majority were aware of the importance of conserving wetlands.



Regulation. A man digging for clay in Qawaali swamp, Wakiso District. Although clay mining is a permitted activity in wetlands, it has to be regulated by Nema, which has manpower challenges. PHOTO BY GILLIAN NATUME

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