

**Dividends.** Spurred on by two NGOs and district officials, the communities began appreciating the benefits of conserving the environment, writes **Misairi Thembo Kahungu**.

**M**r Johnson Musinzirwa has made it his main occupation to ensure the wetlands in Mahango Sub-county, Kasese District, are not destroyed. He spends more time moving around the mountainous sub-county to inspect the wetlands than he spends on his gardens.

Mr Musinzirwa is a peasant farmer and not formally employed to manage the wetlands. However, his participation in developing the management plan for Kyanzutsu wetland in 2009 earned him popularity.

He was elected chairperson of the wetland community management committee after he worked closely with the team from Caritas Kasese, a Catholic NGO, and district technical officers.

"I have always dedicated much of my time to visiting the wetlands. I would not spend a week without visiting one of the wetlands in the sub-county because our parents guided us on how to keep the wetlands," says Mr Musinzirwa.

The 250-acre wetland has a catchment area covering six villages in Kyabwenge and Nyamisule parishes. The wetland, which is located in the mountainous area, had been encroached on in the early 2000s due to increasing population.

According to Mr Nelson Thabugha, a resident of Butalimuli village, it would have been disastrous to the environment if the wetland had been left to dry up.

"I grew up here and this wetland was our pride because it provided us with water, herbs, firewood and other special plants that we used to weave baskets and mats, among others. There were wild fruits that we ate all the time," Mr Thabugha says, during a guided tour of the wetland.

He says the wetland was a habitat for many wild animals and reptiles.

#### Wetland dries up

Mr Thabugha explains that when the wetland was invaded by cultivators, it started drying up, especially upstream. He says many natural tree species were cut down for timber, firewood and construction poles.

"People started cultivating upstream in the valley. The wetland dried up slowly. A playground was also established nearby, which further endangered the wetland," he says.

Kyanzutsu is not the only wetland that faced challenges. The other



**Results.** A water source in Kahokya wetland, Lake Katwe Sub-county, that had dried up as a result of encroachment. PHOTOS BY MISAIRI THEMBO KAHUNGU.

# How Kasese residents restored 3 wetlands

was Kahokya in Lake Katwe Sub-county that was largely cut down for cultivation.

Mr Ajuman Muhammad, the chairperson of Kahokya village, says human activity on the wetland had seen the water source for the gravity flow scheme to the water stressed areas of Kabirizi and Kikorongo almost dry up.

"The wetland was eaten up by the hoe. People cultivated and they didn't know that they and their children would face the consequences," Mr Muhammad says.

Many other wetlands in Kyalhumba, Muhokya, Karusandara, Maliba, Kitholhu and Bugoye sub-counties among others were not spared. And to date, most of them have been cleared beyond restoration.

#### Other causes

Other than the cultivators descending on the wetlands, the

Rwenzori Mountains ranges are experiencing a rapid change in weather due to the fast disappearance of the glaciers.

The streams or rivers flowing from the mountains were pouring in lakes George and Edward, and tributaries of major rivers such as Nyamwamba, Lamia, Mubuku, Sebwe, Nyamugasani and Lubirha, among others.

## 300

**Degradation.** Kasese alone has 300 hectares of degraded wetlands.

However, experts have warned that the Rwenzori glaciers may be no more in the near future as global warming continues to bite.

In the same way, wetlands and swamps on the mountain, especially on the side of Kasese District

disappeared. By the year 2000, the swamps and wetlands across the district that were also beneficial to primary schools were gone.

"I remember how we went to the wetland called Kithibitho in Kitabu village to cut papyrus from which we made mats for handwork in my school days. Every school from near and far, would come one afternoon in a term to collect. We individually spread them (papyrus) out to dry and started weaving the mats at school," recalls Mr Elijah Bwambale, a resident of Kyalhumba Sub-county.

Many people also claimed ownership of the wetlands and turned them into farmlands.

#### Restoration efforts

Much the wetland restoration process is not easy unless force is applied, especially from the authorities, three wetlands have since 2009 been restored in the district.

The wetlands were restored through the public-private partnership arrangement that was launched in 2007.

With support from Care International and Caritas Kasese, efforts were made to engage the district natural resources department to restore some of the wetlands.

Ms Annet Masika, then a project officer with Caritas, explains that it took a lot of courage to approach the communities because they would not readily accept blame for the destruction of the wetlands.

#### Convincing locals

"Working with the environment office at the district, we moved to these places to assess the situation first before we could engage the communities directly. We needed to know whether these people could accept to surrender the land they called their own for conservation," Ms Masika says.

For her tireless efforts towards restoration of wetlands, Ms Masika was nicknamed Bisesa, a Lhukonzo word for wetlands. She narrates how they managed to make a breakthrough by holding meetings with people whose land was neighbouring the wetlands.

"When we went to Kasindi in Mahango Sub-county to meet the people surrounding Kyanzutsu wetland, the response was positive. The people appreciated that they had



## GOVT'S WETLAND RESTORATION PLAN

Late last year, the Ministry of Water and Environment kick-started the restoration process of 760 square kms of degraded wetlands and associated catchments in 20 districts.

"We want to restore these wetlands because they have been heavily degraded. The affected people will get livelihood options," said Mr Paul Mafabi, the director of environment.

The eight-year project will cost \$44.26m (about Shs159b) with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) providing \$26.14m.

The projects is targeting about four million beneficiaries in eastern and south-western regions whose wetland systems have been severely destroyed mainly for agriculture.

The project is part of Uganda and development partners' efforts to promote Sustainable Development Goal 13 on climate action in line with the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. The agreement, which Uganda

ratified in 2015, is aimed at keeping global temperatures below 2 degrees Centigrade

The project will focus on restoration of wetlands and associated forests, improved agricultural practices and alternative livelihood options in the wetland catchment areas as well as strengthening farmers' access to climate and early warning information.

At the beginning of last year, President Museveni gave wetland encroachers one month to leave or be forced out.

"All those occupying swamps should leave in peace before police comes for them. If you have planted crops, harvest and go away," Mr Museveni said then. Despite his directive, many wetlands remain occupied.

Section 36 of the National Environment Act, prohibits any person from reclaiming, erecting or demolishing any structure that is fixed in, on, under or above any wetland.

By Paul Tajuba

**Benefits.** Kyanzutsu wetland in Mahango sub-county after being restored.

management committee members were supposed to monitor the wetland, discuss findings and report to the district environment officer regularly.

### Minister's support

On September 17, 2011, the then State minister for Environment, Ms Flavia Munaba, launched the management plans for the three wetlands. Two separate functions were held at Kasindi Trading Centre for Kyanzutsu and Kakone wetlands and another at Kahokya Primary School for Kahokya wetland in Lake Katwe Sub-county.

Speaking at the launch, Ms Munaba decried the low budget allocations for environmental conservation efforts in the country.

"The water and environment ministry is underfunded even when it cuts across every sector in the country. The tourism industry cannot do well if the environment is not conserved and likewise other ministries rely on water," Ms Munaba said then.

### Results

Two of the three wetlands; Kyanzutsu and Kahokya that are being managed by the communities are still intact. However, Kakone wetland continues to be encroached on.

Mr Musinzirwa, the coordinator for wetland management activities in Mahango Sub-county, explains that it was not easy to save Ka-

formed by the community has helped to sustain the management efforts.

"For Kakone (wetland) the community around failed the efforts of implementing the management plan. The group disintegrated as the owners of the land neighbouring the wetland reclaimed it. So there is just a small part remaining. But here at Kyanzutsu, we [followed] all the advice from Caritas. So, people are happy to co-exist with the wetland," Mr Musinzirwa said.

Monkeys and other animals are also back in the wetland. There is enough water flowing from the wetland currently.

### Animals return

"We are seeing the importance of managing the wetland. Animals, especially monkeys, are back because they have enough to eat without even raiding our gardens. As a community, we have also maintained the grass in the playground as we were advised because it was important for it to remain for the development of our children's talents," Mr Thabugha said.

The water source for the gravity flow scheme in Kahokya wetland is now restored and according to Mr Muhammad, the community around is enjoying good weather and drawing safe water for home use. According to Mr Koli, inadequate funding for natural resources supervision may in the near future affect the wetlands under management. He says that

started experiencing heat, which was never heard of when the wetland was still intact. This was our entry point," she narrates.

She adds that as a way of convincing the people to vacate the wetlands, they gave them more than 60 goats in form of a revolving fund.

Together with Mr Augustine Koli, the district senior environment officer, Ms Masika and other Caritas staff mobilised and educated the communities through regular meetings and radio talk shows

## ABOUT KASESE WETLANDS

**Rivers.** Kasese District has five major rivers that flow from the mountains into lakes George and Edward.

**Conservation.** There are currently three wetlands under management.

**Endangered.** Kasese alone has 300 hectares of degraded

plan. The same strategy worked for Kakone and Kahokya wetlands.

According to Mr Koli, formulating the management plan involved residents discussing and agreeing on how to restore and manage the wetlands without any conflict.

"The community was cooperative along the way as we engaged them in meetings. The people agreed to manage the wetlands. They made their own by-laws and what punishments the offenders would suffer. So as a district and civil