

disappearing wetlands

NUMBER

50

Enforcement. The number of men that are supposed to monitor more than 7000 wetlands in Uganda.

Why conservation efforts are failing

Period. Wakiso authorities predict these wetlands will vanish within 10 years because of colossal infrastructural developments, weakness on the part of Nema and other enforcement bodies and also political interference from 'above' in wetland management as **Gillian Nantume** writes.

One of the most challenging factors in wetland conservation is the weakness in enforcement and the lack of coordination between the relevant bodies.

Assistant superintendent of police David Dauna, who commands National Environment Management Authority (Nema) police, has a difficult time remembering the exact location of some of the wetlands on Entebbe Road.

It soon emerges that Nema police last inspected the wetlands along Entebbe Road in December 2016 and he does not know what is happening in those areas now.

"The problem is that although we have vehicles, we do not have fuel to carry out patrols," he says, adding, "Sometimes, we go a week or two without being given fuel. I have only 50 men to monitor the 7,000 wetlands in Uganda. You cannot blame me for the lack of manpower."

In March 2016, the Environmental Protection Police Unit (EPPU) carried out evictions in Lubigi swamp. Mr Godfrey Taire Idhwege, the EPPU commandant, seems lost for words that encroachers are thriving in Lubigi.

"I do not think they are back. It is not possible. We evicted them because they had gone into cultivation. The environmental police are supposed to move around the wetlands on a daily basis but that cannot happen because we are subject to availability of logistics. The (financial) year has just begun so we don't have funds."

He takes a swipe at Wakiso District's environment office saying: "I am baffled. We have environment officers in Wakiso but they are silent. I may not know what is happening in different wetlands but these people are paid by the government. What is their work? If only they would inform us, we would do enforcements. That is why we are failing."

However, Mr Esau Mpoza, the Wakiso's district environmental officer is bitter at Idhwege's accusations.

"In conservation, we begin to fail when we point fingers. [Mr] Idhwege commands a force which has vehicles. They are given fuel, but how much [inspection] have they done in a year? How many times have I called them to give us support in enforcement and they have failed?" he asks, adding: "If I see a degrader today and my wetlands officer calls EPPU but they come the next day, it is obvious that they will not find anyone in the wetland. That alone disturbs me because it has to do with intelligence."

He explains that a degrader dumps 40 trucks of murram in a wetland within three hours of the night.

This, according to him, is enough time to cause irreversible damage before police re-

sponds the next morning.

But Mr Tom Okurut, the Nema executive director, vows to go to Lubigi wetland and evict encroachers.

"When we first evicted those people, they were willing to leave, but the LC5 chairman of Nsangi Town Council (Mr Abdul Kiyimba), who is also Wakiso Dis-

Shs20m

Amount. It is reported that a developer investing Shs20m in a wetland can obtain a certificate of approval and wetland user permit from Nema at Shs250,000 and Shs100,000, respectively.

trict's NRM chairperson, brought them back. Wakiso can evict them if they really wanted to, but those local politicians are compromised. They pretend to work with us but after we leave, they team up with the encroachers because they know inspections are our greatest weakness."

A problematic land tenure system

Qawwali swamp, behind Kajjansi trading centre, on Entebbe Road, is part of Lumpewo wetland system. A large part of the swamp lies between two villages - Birongo and Lweza Zone B -- before it narrows down to Lake Victoria.

The part of the swamp between the two villages is engulfed in a long-standing land wrangle.

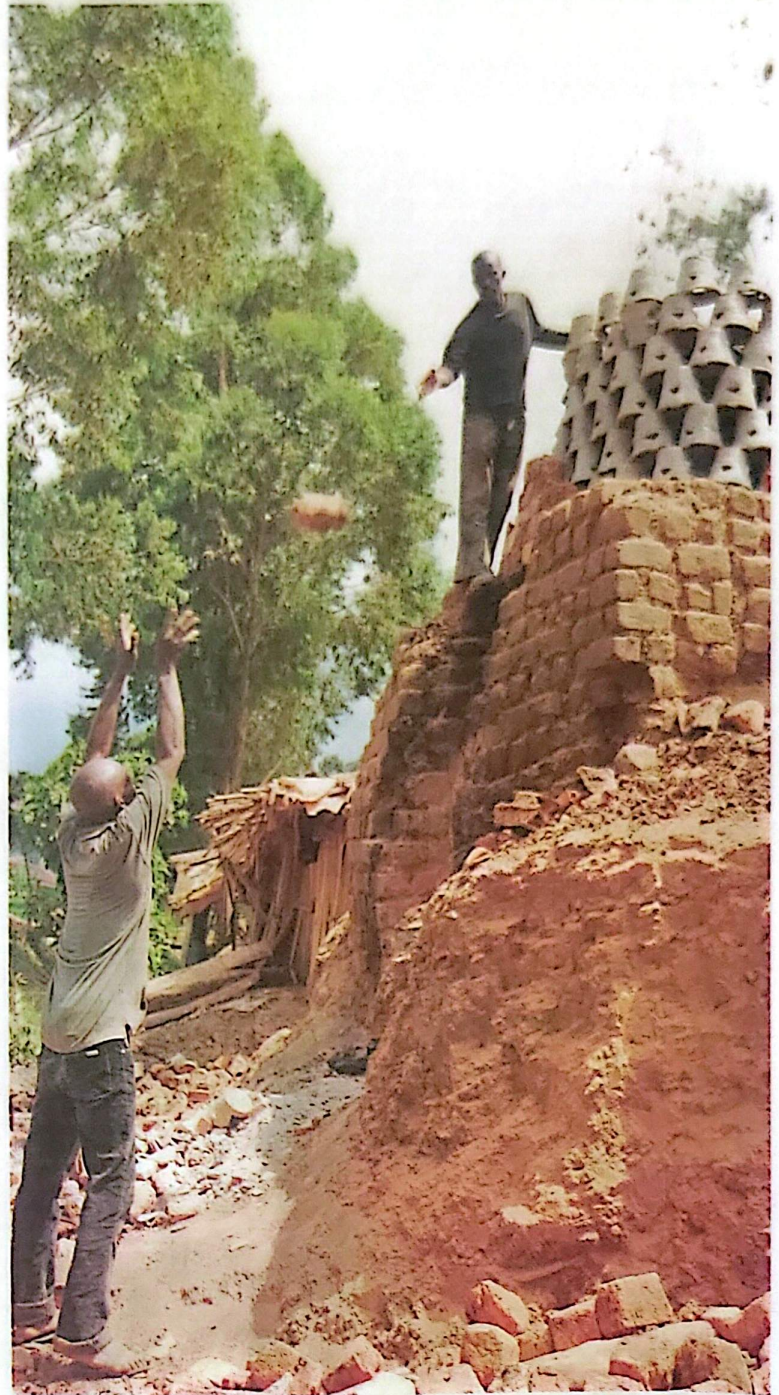
An Asian man, Harshad Damani, had the land title of the two villages and Qawwali swamp. However, in 2008, Mr Jamada Musisi of Kikonyogo Investments won a case in court against Mr Damani for the land title.

A long court battle ensued between them, which they eventually settled out of court. They became partners in Lakeside City Investments Limited, with the agreement that Mr Musisi would take Birongo Village and half of the swamp, while Mr Damani would take Lweza Zone B and the other half of the swamp.

In between this land dispute is Siraje Tenywa who has a thriving clay business in Qawwali swamp. Mr Tenywa moves around with a panga (machete), inspecting his businesses.

This prompted Lakeside City Investments to hire armed men to intimidate Mr Tenywa to move out of the swamp, accusing him of trespass.

Three years ago, Mr Musisi was carrying out sand mining in the swamp. He had also allowed the villagers to cultivate



Business. Men pack clay stoves on top of a kiln at a makeshift clay factory behind Kajjansi Trading Centre recently. PHOTOS BY GILLIAN NANTUME

tomatoes inside the swamp.

In December 2016, after he had exhausted the sand, he filled the upper part of the swamp with murram, intent on dividing it up into plots, for sale.

However, Nema halted the development and confiscated the number plates of his graders.

Mr Francis Chenglaci, the manager of Lakeside City Investments, says they obtained the land title more than seven years ago from Wakiso District.

"We do not intend to destroy the swamp but we want to control it."

Ownership of wetlands

By law, people on mailo land are allowed to own wetlands. Mr Matia Lwanga Bwanika, the LC5 chairman for Wakiso District, does not have a problem with people owning land title of wetlands.

"The only issue is the kind of work they are doing in the wetland and if they are complying with environmental laws," he

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Weakness. "I am baffled. We have environment officers in Wakiso but they are silent. I may not know what is happening in different wetlands but these people are paid by the government. What is their work? If only they would inform us, we would do enforcements. That is why we are failing." *GEORGE KULE, DIRECTOR, ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION POLICE UNIT COMMANDANT*



Fishing. Workers dig fish ponds at Njanjo on the periphery of Lutembe Bay wetland.

says.

Mr Bwanika denies allegations that his district issues land titles in wetlands.

"Land titles used to be managed by the district but in 2013, the Ministry of Lands created a ministerial zonal office to cater to land matters in all the districts, disregarding the fact that every district has a district land office. The people in the zonal office are from the ministry and I have no authority over them. They have overtaken the roles of my people in the land office, and are issuing land titles in wetlands and forests," he explains.

Mr Mpoza says his office has raised the issue of land titles in wetlands on numerous accounts.

"They have their own reasons why they are doing it. Sometimes, they are misled by area land committees who depend on dishonest land surveyors. On other occasions, the cadastral maps they use do not show wetland locations," he says.

Most of the wetlands in the central region are titled. For instance, Lubigi swamp is owned by the Kabaka (Buganda Land Board).

"When National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC) wanted to construct a sewer system in Lubigi, they had to compensate the Kabaka," Mr Mpoza says.

NWSC established a sewerage treatment plant in the middle of Lubigi swamp to serve northern Kampala. The plant has a treatment capacity of 5,400 cubic metres of waste water per day.

It receives and treats waste brought from a piped network as well as fecal sludge from cesspool emptiers.

Degradation rate

On whether the wetlands may disappear in the next 20 years, Mr Bwanika says: "That is too long. My estimate is between five to ten years. The national agencies are not cooperating with us.

Whenever we try to evict developers, they pull out permits. They are bribing Nema officials for permits."

It is reported that a developer investing Shs20m in a wetland can obtain a certificate of approval and wetland user permit from Nema at Shs250,000 and Shs100,000, respectively.

However, authorities at Nema say some developers forge permits. Nema is soon launching automated certificate and permit printing with additional security features to fight forgery.

Mr Bwanika decries the fact that Wakiso does not have maps showing gazetted wetlands.

"Nema does not give us information. I believe wetland degradation is a deliberate scheme by government officials. I am incapable of fighting them because I do not have the capacity. The environmental police is based at the ministry and when I call them, they demand for facilitation. How can my

environment officers approach encroachers without (police) backup?" he asks.

Since the only free land in Kampala and Wakiso is in wetlands, in environmental circles, there is a belief that behind every huge development in a wetland is a politician.

"Political interference is a real nightmare," Mr Idhwege says, adding: "After an eviction, those investors can take you to court as an individual. Look at what they have done to Wakiso's chairman. I do not want to mention names, but almost all politicians in Wakiso have vested interests in the wetlands."

Illegal mining

On March 2, 2017, the nation was treated to a spectacle of Mr Bwanika exchanging blows with Chinese workers whom he accused of illegally mining sand at Lugumba Landing Site in Kasanje Sub-county. Mr Bwanika had to rely on a police officer passing by to rescue him.

Recently, Wakiso Resident District Commissioner, Mr Ian Kyeyune, during a cross examination by the Commission of Inquiry into land matters, confessed that in May 2014, he sold 42 acres of Nonve forest reserve at Shs164m to pay debts he had incurred during the 2011 elections.

Because of the fear of being labelled economic saboteurs, EPPU police officers have learnt to tread carefully when it comes to evictions.

In 2015, EPPU evicted encroachers in Butabika wetland. The following day, the police officers who took part in the eviction were suspended.

A police officer who took part in the eviction, and spoke on condition of anonymity says: "The people we evicted lied to the Inspector General of Police (IGP) that we had shot some people dead and thrown them into the swamp. The IGP went to Butabika, held a public meeting, and suspended my colleagues. The eviction had been done officially and we had requested for backup from the base. The IGP knew about it but he told the people that no one would ever chase them out of the wetland again."

Both Oloya and Okurut agree their work is disrupted by political interference, but say it is not good for 'business' to name and shame.

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Protection

"I discovered that Nema had grounded the equipment of those Chinese at Kasanje Police Station. However, the equipment was released after orders from 'above'. One of the Chinese men we arrested told me they had been given the go-ahead to mine sand by Salim Saleh (Gen Caleb Akandwanaho) and Brig (Leo) Kyanda. Influential people are the ones degrading the environment. Didn't you see Kyeyune saying he sold a forest because he was broke? Don't you know how we have struggled with Sudhir (Ruparelia) in Lutembe?"

MATIA LWANGA
BWANIKA, LCS
CHAIRMAN FOR
WAKISO DISTRICT.



Brick making. A man makes bricks in Qawwali Swamp which is at the centre of a long standing land wrangle.