

FAO is spearheading a campaign on commercial and small-scale tree planting in the country

By Daniel Edyequ

Located in Kamokol village, Karenga sub-county in Kaabong district, Doreen Imen's vast land sits adjacent to Kidepo Valley National Park.

To live sustainably close to a national park, as she puts it, requires surplus levels of endurance. Imen says this arises from the recurrent human-wildlife conflict.

"In the past, I have planted crops, such as sorghum, sunflower and maize, on a commercial scale on this land. But wake up one morning to find the wild animals have eaten up and destroyed crops on a huge stretch of the plantation," she laments.

"It is discouraging. Yet, it is very hard to keep the wild animals away," Imen explains.

As a way of co-existing with wildlife, Imen, with help from UN food agency Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), is changing tactics.

On 16.5 hectares (about 41 acres) of her land, she is establishing a commercial tree plantation comprising of the *Melia vorkensii* and *Grevillea robusta* tree species.

Each acre of land can take up to 1,111 tree seedlings in accordance with the 3x3m spacing recommendation. The 41 acres, therefore, will take up 45,551 tree seedlings.

Commercial tree planting is a venture Imen has kept a close eye on in her quest for knowledge on the enterprise.

"I visited Swaziland in 2012 and met a family that told me they had lived on their commercial forest for 11 generations. It is where the family earns a living," Imen says.

"It made me realise trees are the most reliable long-term investment. I am a mother of four. I need to invest in trees to pave the future of my children. I have already prepared the land for the trees," she explains.

Through the five-year Sawlog Production Grant Scheme (SPGS), FAO, together with the Government and European



A mother works in a tree seedling nursery bed in Moruita sub-county in Nakapiripirit district. Photos by Daniel Edyequ

Commercial tree planting taking root in Karamoja

Union (EU), are spearheading a campaign on commercial and small-scale tree planting in Uganda.

The initiative is aimed at mitigating the impact of climatic change as well as enhancing the earnings of households through trade in timber.

The scheme provides both quality tree seedlings and advisory services to beneficiaries.

Whereas the scheme has supported establishment of over 50,000 hectares of plantations for timber, poles and fuel wood since its inception in 2004, Karamoja sub-region that comprises seven districts, is getting on board for the first time.

Even then, the initiative started on a lukewarm note. Leonidas Hitimana, the SPGS project co-ordinator, explains that when invitation

for applications was sent out at the start of this year, only eight people from Karamoja applied, out of which two qualified.

"Given the fact that this area is semi-arid and the rate at which the forests are cleared for various purposes is high, we felt this was worrying," Hitimana says.

"We focused our attention here and sent out the second round of invitation for applications in May. A total of 50 applications were received, out of which 36 qualified," he adds.

However, the distribution of the beneficiary commercial tree farmers is a concern.

None of the 36 that qualified is from Amudat district, while only one is from Moroto district. Most of them are from Abim, Kaabong and Napak districts.

"In Karamoja, trees are cut for fencing *manyattas* (homesteads), burning charcoal, building huts and for firewood, among others. At this rate of loss, it requires a more than proportionate effort to replace what is lost lest the weather impact hits so hard. Our target for Karamoja is to reach 1,000 hectares (24,700 acres) by 2020," Hitimana observes.

The area being semi-arid, Hitimana says FAO came up

with drought-tolerant tree species.

These include *Gmelina arborea*, *Melia vorkensii*, *Grevillea robusta* and *Casuarina equisetifolia*.

Besides being drought-tolerant, these tree species, according to FAO, have desirable characteristics for timber and fuel wood production.

For Michael Okello, 42, a resident of Katabok parish in Morulem sub-county in Abim district, his decision to practise commercial tree farming on 40 acres of his land, is a precautionary measure to cushion his retirement.

"I intend to plant clonal eucalyptus, pine and teak tree species, in almost equal proportions," Okello says.

"The reason I have chosen to plant all the three species for strategic reasons," he adds.

Clonal eucalyptus takes about eight years to mature. Pine takes 15 years and teak

about 25 years.

"Given the sequential phased maturity periods, it means I can start harvesting the clonal eucalyptus as the other species are maturing. Then I pick the subsequent specie and the last as I re-afforest the cleared land," Okello explains.

According to the State of Uganda's Forestry Report, 2016, the country has been losing an average of 122,000 hectares (301,340 acres) of forest cover every year since 1990.

The loss is mainly attributed to widespread encroachment on central forest reserves, high population growth and urbanisation and increased forest deforestation and degradation.

From 4,880,484 hectares, which comprised 24% of Uganda's land surface in 1990, the forest cover in the country has dropped to 1,829,779 hectares stretching 9% of Uganda's land surface by 2015.

REPLACE WHAT IS LOST

■ In Karamoja region, trees are cut for domestic use, such as building huts and firewood. To counter the rate of loss, there should be a more than proportionate effort to replace what is lost.

Of the current forest cover, 697,986 hectares (1,724,026 acres) are privately owned, while 1,131,793 hectares (2,795,528 acres) are government-protected.

Andrew Napaja, the Moroto district chairperson, explains that getting residents within Karamoja sub-region into the habit of planting trees will require concerted efforts.

"Not many people know the benefits of planting trees. Here, trees grow freely in the wild. Anybody who needs a tree just goes and picks at no monetary cost," he says.

"Technical people need to come out regularly and explain to the people the dangers of cutting trees as well as the benefits of planting them. We face frequent food shortages here. We need more trees than any part of the country," Napaja says.

Given the circumstances, tree planting for Karamoja may not be a matter of choice, but a priority, to mitigate the subsequent hostile weather effects. But the message ought to sink deeper to earn the required response.

WHAT THEY SAY

We are on track, however, there is still a long way to go...



Sebastian Muhuku, director of Karamoja Tree Foundation

There is still a long way to go to encourage people to plant trees. To begin with, attitude must be changed, which requires a lot of efforts.



Doreen Imen, commercial tree farmer in Kaabong

Although farmers have been educated by FAO on how to take care of trees, we need community extension workers to help us on some issues, such as maintenance.



Andrew Napaja, Moroto district chairperson

Since Karamoja is a livestock-keeping community, as leaders of the region, we have to encourage our people to keep animals away from tree plantations.



A man works in a tree seedling nursery bed in Moroto