

By Gerald Tenywa

Water is life, so goes a popular saying. To the contrary, some of Kampala's residents have coined another saying. "Water is life if you do not live in Bwaise." This is because the rainy season comes with floods to Bwaise, a city suburb and is often accompanied by many perils, including drowning and water borne diseases.

According to experts in environment management, water becomes a curse when ecological assets such as wetlands are destroyed. For instance, Bwaise was a wetland that used to get water from the neighbouring hills of Makerere, Kyebando and parts of Kawempe. They say, Bwaise used to release the water to the nearby Lubigi swamp.

Today, Bwaise is crammed with houses and water is blocked from flowing to Lubigi by the concrete barriers (buildings and paved surfaces).

"Water is a blessing, but people have turned it into a curse," said Paul Mafabi, the director of environment management and planning in the Ministry of Water and Environment.

"People who are destroying wetlands and forests are also hurting the economy," he adds.

Mafabi said the wetlands around Lake Victoria, which used to shield the lake from pollution, have also been invaded. As a result, waste water from Kampala and soil erosion have been contributing to the escalating pollution of the lake.

"The cost of treating water at Gaba Water Works in Kampala has increased by five times within the last three decades," said Mafabi, adding that this cost is passed over to the public that consumes the water.

He was speaking ahead of this year's United Nations (UN) World Environment Day celebrated under the theme - "Nature for Water", which explores how we can use nature to overcome the water challenges of the 21st century.

"Environmental damage, together with climate change, is driving the water-related crises we see around the world. Floods, drought and water pollution are all made worse by degraded vegetation, soil, rivers and lakes," stated the UN website. "When we neglect our ecosystems, we make it harder to provide everyone with the water we need to survive and thrive."

The statement added; "Planting new forests, reconnecting rivers to floodplains, and restoring wetlands will rebalance the water cycle and improve human health and livelihoods."

Uganda holds first water week

As a way of increasing awareness about water and the need to protect environmental assets, which President Yoweri Museveni refers to as "water granaries", the Ministry of Water and Environment is celebrating the Water Week starting 17th to 22nd March. The theme of the water week is: "Water and environment a catalyst for achieving

Protect the environment to keep precious water



A home submerged in water after a heavy downpour along northern by pass in Bwaise. Water becomes a curse when ecological assets such as wetlands like Bwaise are destroyed

UGANDA W&E WEEK

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middle income status by 2020."

The event mirrors the World Water Week, which is an annual event celebrated in Sweden since 1991 by Stockholm International Week, one of the world's leading water institutes.

More Investments needed

As Uganda strides towards a middle income economy by 2040, a study conducted by the Industrial Economics on environment management to Uganda's economy, meeting Uganda's vision 2040 growth targets will require tripling of reliable water deliveries relative to today's levels.

"This means to achieve Uganda's growth targets in 2040 will require heavy investments and environmental

management," said Alfred Okot Okidi, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Water and Environment.

Okidi was speaking during a press conference at the Ministry of Water and Environment in Luzira, a Kampala suburb. He called the press conference to launch the water week.

The study observes that if water for manufacturing is limited because of poor management, 2040 (Gross Domestic Product) could decline by 5%.

Input of drought

The devastating drought that hit the East African region including last year left an indelible mark on many parts of Uganda. The expansive chains of wetlands in eastern Uganda such as Limoto shared by Pallisa and Kibuku were reduced to a muddy pond.

President Museveni ordered encroachers to vacate the wetlands ahead of restoration.

From crisis to opportunity

A crisis can sometimes create opportunities. This has been the case with Pallisa town, which has been hit by climate change that has been accelerated by environmental degradation at Limoto wetland.

"The climate change and environment crisis in the country is not entirely bad," said Dr Callist Tindimugaya, a Commissioner in the water ministry.

"It has helped push the environment higher up the political agenda," he said.

He added: "President Museveni is now going around the country telling people to vacate wetlands and to cut down the eucalyptus trees which they had planted in them."

The water minister, Sam Cheptoris, followed in Museveni's footsteps by launching the demarcation of the boundaries of Limoto wetland. This was done to make cultivators vacate wetlands.

Bob Nuwagira, the officer in charge of Environment Education and Communication, said the cultivators left voluntarily.

The wetland has recovered and many people living around Limoto say they will not suffer from water scarcity again.

Community efforts to save Ntungamo wetland

In Nyamirama village in Ntungamo district, swathes of the wetland that had been converted into farmland are being reclaimed after Godber Tumushabe, an environmental activist, mobilised the local residents to restore the swamp. The swamp formed a belt across villages in Ntungamo and provided residents with water, but it had dried up after being converted into farmland.

As the government takes initiatives to promote the wise use of wetlands, citizens at the grassroots should follow Tumushabe's example and secure their ecological assets. Communities in rural areas are likely to suffer more than the people in urban areas because they directly depend on natural resources. The Government needs to invest in water resources for Uganda to achieve sustainable development goals and vision 2040 - middle income economy status.