

Calming effect of trees in schools

By Umar Nsubuga

"Anyone looking for good academic performance from any school may have to first pay attention to the environment around the learners, teachers or trainers," Fagil Mandy, a veteran educationist, who is now a private education consultant, says.

He says we must all protect nature. His statement rings a bell on the value of protecting the environment, which is the duty of both students and schools. Trees do not only have a calming effect to help manage the stress that may result from academic pressures, but also have a cooling effect, making it unnecessary to invest in expensive equipment like air-conditioning and fans.

This green environment defines co-existence of human beings and the environment that you cannot miss while driving past St Catherine Primary School in Kawanda, on the Kampala-Gulu highway.

The school has a four-acre compound, all planted with trees.

"Children need to see the value of a good natural environment if they are to appreciate the importance of its protection," the school proprietor, Lawrence Bombokka, says.

Vincent Sigenyi, a science teacher at the school, says a clean environment is key for a healthy mind.

Value of trees

Apart from providing firewood and preserving the environment, trees are vital in education. They form a natural learning environment.

Sigenyi says at times, they use the trees for practical lessons.

"Trees are part of the topics we teach. It is easy to teach the topic because the children can touch and see the trees, making it easier for them to understand," he says.

Children are taught about the different types of leaves, germination and the growth process of plants, flowers and pollination.

They are also taught the values of trees, such as providing medicinal herbs, fuel, construction materials and acting as wind breakers.

Peter Lwanga, a Primary Seven pupil, says: "We learn transpiration by tying a polythene bag on leaves of trees and they release excess water. We also learn about the types of seeds from the trees in class."

"During hot weather, the pupils can revise their books under the shade. There are no fans in our schools," Malende says.

Alice Atugonza, one of the parents at the school, says, "Children are what we teach them. It is important that schools teach them

about protecting the environment."

"My 10-year-old daughter has flower bed at home. She learnt this at school," she adds.

Sigenyi also notes that many schools, including theirs, use firewood, which is the more reason they should plant trees.

"If we do not protect the environment, yet schools contribute to environmental degradation, we will be doing the country a disservice," he says.

Forestry authority's concerns

According to the National Forestry Authority (NFA), Uganda loses over 120,000 acres

of forest cover annually to settlements, cultivation, charcoal burning and lumbering. This has prompted NFA to ask organisations, schools and individuals to plant trees in over 10 forest reserves in the country.

Michael Malinga, the NFA marketing manager, argues that it is everyone's responsibility to conserve the environment.

"Plant a tree. Trees are one of the planet's natural cleaners. They take in carbon dioxide and sprout life-giving oxygen," he advises.

He also says they protect watersheds by binding the soil so that it does not wash into water sources.



A pupil watering a palm tree

"The more trees we plant, the better our environment will be."

Why schools?

His argument is backed by the fact that there are 23,534 schools in the country. Of these, 1,882 use firewood as the main source of fuel, according to the education ministry's statistics data. This means that, on an estimated average, each of these schools could be using six trucks of firewood per term, making 11,292 trucks of firewood every term.

Schools are only one of the big consumers of firewood, contributing to the worrying loss of forest cover. Uganda's forest cover was in 1990, estimated at 4.9 million hectares covering 24% of the total land area. Schools are only making an already bad situation, worse.

Firewood and charcoal are still the most commonly-used sources of energy for cooking, even in households. According to the Uganda National Household Survey Report 2009/2010, up to 95% of the households still used wood fuel.

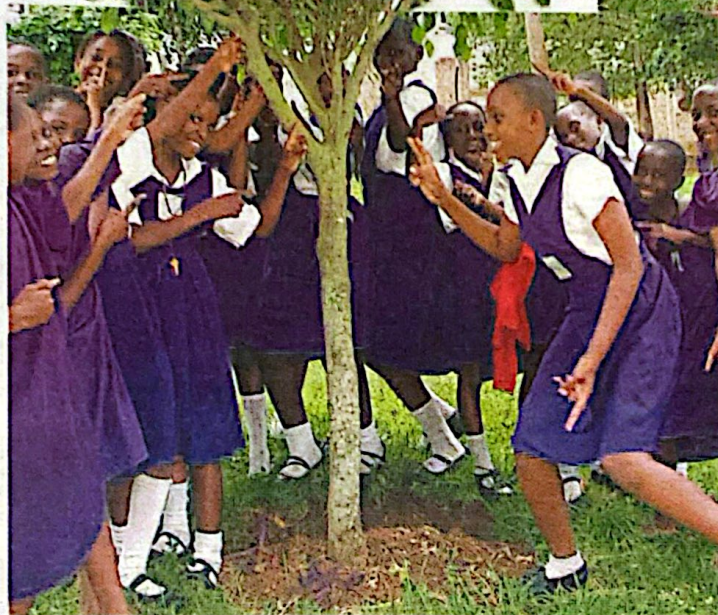
According to Malinga, if trees are planted in schools, pupils will become ambassadors of environmental protection.

"When trees are planted in schools, pupils will be more involved in educating the public about conserving the environment and planting more trees," he says.

Moses Baguma, an environmentalist in western Uganda, says environmental education connects pupils to the world around them.

"Teaching pupils about the nature makes them desire to protect it," Baguma argues.

He says it raises awareness on issues impacting the environment, on which we all depend, and the actions we can take to sustain it.



Pupils of St-Catherine Primary School, Kawanda playing in the school compound



Pupils enjoying the vast cool green environment. Photos by Umar Nsubuga



Teacher Sigenyi conducting a science lesson in the compound