



ROSA MALANGO > CONSERVATION

For a sustainable future, let us protect wetlands

Achieving sustainable development and providing dignified humanitarian assistance requires us to place people and the planet at the centre of our work. We all have a responsibility through our shared humanity to protect our environment and improve the quality of life of all. Uganda has the opportunity to pursue a green growth strategy as it pursues its development aspirations.

Do you want fresh and clean air in Kampala, Mbarara, Mbale or any town in Uganda? Protect its wetlands. Wetlands are a natural sponge that cleans rain absorbing, filtering and storing rain water before it reaches bigger water bodies like lakes and rivers. Despite their importance, it is estimated that at least 64 per cent of the world's wetlands have disappeared since 1990. In Uganda, the wetlands area has reduced from 15.6 per cent in 1994 to 10.9 per cent in 2017 despite the fact that they are ecologically and economically important.

Every year, on February 2, we celebrate, World Wetlands Day to mark the adoption of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and to reflect on the state of this great resource in every country. This year, the global theme is 'Wetlands for a Sustainable Urban Future,' and the theme in Uganda is, 'Urban wetlands, prized land, not wasteland'. This year's themes remind us of the importance of wetlands in urban areas.

As cities expand and demand for land increases, the tendency is to encroach on wetlands. They are degraded, filled in and built upon. In Kampala and Arua where the national commemorations will be hosted, urbanisation, industrialisation, the search for land for settling and farming by the urban poor has led to reclamation and degradation of wetlands

Some urban dwellers also view them as a garbage disposal point, which contaminates the environment and affects the quality of our health and wellbeing. When left intact or restored, urban wetlands make cities livable in many important ways. They reduce flooding, replenish drinking water, filter waste, provide urban green spaces and are a source of livelihoods as well as a habitat for several plants and animal species. As natural sponges, wetlands absorb flood waters during heavy rains and release it in the dry season, which helps communities cope with extreme weather events and protects them from disasters.

Urban wetlands are indeed prized land playing a vital role in making cities safe, resilient and sustainable. This is the aim of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 on sustainable cities and communities and 12 on responsible consumption. In the rapidly growing Kampala urban centre, Nakivubo swamp, for example, remains a buffer for Uganda's capital city. The swamp covers some 550 hectares (1,360 acres), stretching from Kampala's industrial heart through residential areas with around 100,000 households. A 2003 estimate put the value of its natural water treatment services at \$2 million (Shs7.2 billion) per year.

Wetlands also filter the water that seeps into aquifers, replenishing the important water sources while the silt-rich soil and abundant plants in wetlands function as water filters, absorbing some harmful toxins and industrial waste. Urban wetlands also help treat sewage from households. This contributes to SDGs 13 on climate change, 14 on protecting life below water, and 15 on protecting life on land.

If we are to attain sustainable development and inclusive economic growth it remains

Conservation. This wetlands day, let us avoid settling and farming in wetlands, dumping waste in them. Let us plant trees around them and educate our local communities on their importance. On behalf of the United Nations family, I reiterate our commitment to support Uganda as it pursues its socio-economic transformation.

important for authorities and business leaders to integrate wetland preservation into development and investment planning for cities, towns and districts. It makes environmental and economic sense. Every citizen has a role to play in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, the national vision 2040 and the national development plan. Urban authorities, local councils, cultural and religious leaders, private sector leaders and civil society champions must ensure that policies and actions in Uganda help conserve urban wetlands and sustainable development. Uganda has rich heritage linked to its culture, people and environment. Responsible environment friendly development represent an opportunity for positive traditional values of respect and protection of the environment to be complemented by contemporary values outlined in the SDGs.

We have an opportunity to improve knowledge management on this important issue. I'm delighted that last year, our partnership with the government of Uganda in this area, led United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment

Programme to support the development of Uganda's first wetlands atlas in partnership with the Ministry of Water and Environment. We have supported the dissemination of the atlas online and in hard copy to members of Parliament, government, development partners and business leaders. It is my hope that the media will join us in disseminating this important information through your programmes in English and local languages.

UNDP is also working with the National Environment Management Authority to implement the Biodiversity Finance Initiative, which aims to conserve biological resources by identifying cost effective ways of protecting biodiversity in Uganda.

Since World Wetlands Day also marks the adoption of the Ramsar Wetlands Convention, I would like to congratulate Uganda for ratifying this convention and a host of other international agreements including the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention to Combat Desertification.

I urge the government and Parliament to ensure that these legal frameworks are fully implemented at all levels to save this beautiful country from the high price it could have to pay if its environment is depleted while it pursues its development aspirations.

Let us avoid settling and farming in wetlands, dumping waste in them. Let us plant trees around them and educate our local communities on their importance.

On behalf of the United Nations family, I reiterate our commitment to support Uganda as it pursues its socio-economic transformation. Healthy wetlands will guarantee clean and environmentally safe urban centres for us, our children and generations to come. Together, let's eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities and ensure a sustainable approach to development. SDG 17 on partnerships for the goals is key to the successful inclusive development of the Pearl of Africa.

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