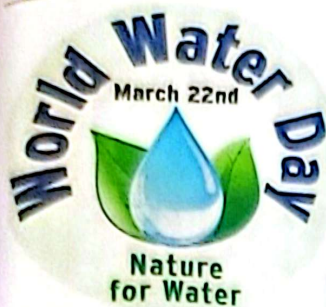




In the run-up to the World Water day, *New Vision* is publishing daily features highlighting key issues in the sector and what the public can do to save the environment and water resources. Today **Owen Wagabaza** looks at how we can increase forest cover

"During the colonial days, no one could cut down a tree in a private or government forest without authorisation from local leaders. Local leaders had powers to enforce environmental laws without having to appeal to any higher authorities in the colonial government. During those days, the environmental department was very effective, unlike today," says Mzee Salamuka Baliruno from Kayunga district.

From 1934 up to the early 1970s, the Permanent Forest Estate was well-managed by the Forest Department and local authorities under carefully prepared forest management plans. This led to an enviable international reputation for some of the best forest management practices in tropical forestry.

Currently, the National Forestry Authority (NFA) is the one charged with the protection of the 506 central forest reserves against encroachment. However, large tracts of government forest reserves have been cleared over the recent years under the watch of the authority.

Paul Mafabi, the director of environment in the Ministry of Water and Environment, says Uganda has lost up to a million hectares of forest cover over the last 10 years, yet the Government has planted less than 150,000 hectares.

"There is a big deficit. It is evident when one takes any direction from Kampala, the land is bare and the effects of climate change are felt more due to the absence of tree cover," Mafabi says.

In *The State of Forestry Report 2016*, the Minister for Water and Environment, Samuel Cheptoris says overall, the country has been losing on average 122,000 hectares of forest cover every year from 1990-2015.

"The greatest loss in the country is estimated at 250,000 hectares of forests annually, according to NFA estimates for the period 2005-2010. On the other hand, on average, only about 7,000 hectares of forests are established on a yearly basis in the last 15 years," notes the minister.

This imbalance of 7,000 planted against 250,000 lost, according to the

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Who will save our forests?



One of the forests that was burnt down in Kikandwa, Mityana district in 2014

WE NEED FORESTS

Scientists say there is a link between vegetation cover, forests, livelihood and reducing emissions that result in climate change effects such as long dry spells and extreme temperatures, which Uganda is currently experiencing.

Forests are also a source of food to humans and animals, influence rainfall formation, provide energy, promote employment and enhance incomes. They also nourish soils with nutrients, which in turn support the agriculture sector.

minister, is a result of weak institutions, unco-ordinated implementation of policies between different sectors of the economy, insufficient funding and limited capacity at all levels. This, Cheptoris says, has undermined effectiveness and efficiency in developing and sustainably managing forestry resources in Uganda.

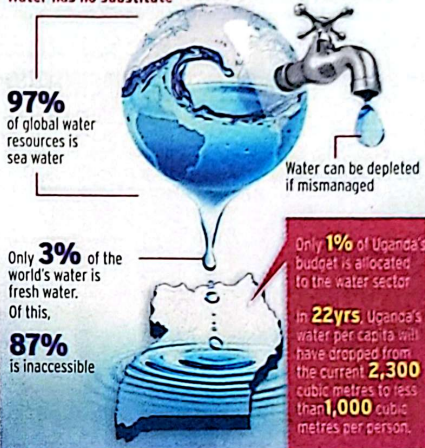
Why forests are getting depleted

By the early 1950s, most of the forest reserves had been gazetted. However from mid 1972 up to mid 1986, there was unprecedented break down in law and order, making it difficult for the forest department to effectively execute its functions. This period also saw an influx of encroachers invading some forests, leading to massive destruction of the forest resource.

Michael Sizomu Kagolo, a forester, says in other cases, the destructions were a result of state-driven policies such as the double crop production

Fact file

Water has no substitute



What needs to be done

Dr Adonia Ssesanga, a specialist in natural resources management, says if Uganda is to recover the lost forest cover, unpopular decisions have to be adopted, such as stopping further clearing of land for agriculture, settlement or other infrastructure development, things Dr Ssesanga says will be hard for the government to implement.

Land fragmentation should be dealt with by bringing people in concentrated small areas with better infrastructure and all the other land being amalgamated to create bigger farms or forests. This, however, would, require massive investment and planning.

Ssesanga further cites political interference as a hindrance for conservationists to protect the current forests.

"In the current setup where democracy is the issue, politicians need votes and voters use it as bait. If you do not allow them to use the forest, they shall not vote for you and politicians normally yield to this pressure," Ssesanga says.

forest products such as timber, charcoal and firewood.

The economy has also grown, with the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growing at an average of 7.5% per annum. Such growth meant that various sectors such as construction, energy for small and medium-scale processing industries, as well as farmland, which use forest products increased their demand, compounding the pressure on forest resources and forestlands.

Interventions

Mafabi says the Government is determined to restore forest cover to its state as of 1990, spanning 3.46 million hectare or 24% of Uganda's land cover.

Analysts, however, say this is an ambitious goal, going by the fact that most households and businesses use charcoal or firewood for cooking and large tracts of land are being sought for agriculture and settlement.

"The country is determined to increase incentives for forestry resources development, sustainable forest management and benefits sharing from Uganda's forestry resources, both in public and privately owned land," Mafabi says.

He says the Government has partnered with United Nations agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Environment Programme and Food And Agriculture Organisation, as well as Forest Carbon Partnership facility of the World Bank and the Austrian Development Agency to drive environment conservation.

To demonstrate the government's commitment, Mafabi cites the country's target of planting 200 million trees by the year 2020 embodied in the 2012 National Tree Planting Strategy.

campaign that encouraged the clearing of forests for food production. It has led to the slashing of forests near major roads to deny rebels hiding places and uncontrolled tree cutting for timber, firewood, charcoal burning and settlement.

"Inadequate funding of the forest department and low staffing levels compounded the situation that culminated in the encroachment problem that has dogged successive forest administrations to date," Kagolo says.

The change of government in 1986 brought with it changes in forestry administration. The forest department was de-linked from the agriculture ministry and placed under a new ministry for environment protection.

In 1990, the Forestry Rehabilitation Project (FRP), a consortium of donors co-ordinated by the World Bank was established.

The FRP provided the much

needed resources, including funding, equipment, staff development and the rehabilitation of both forests and infrastructure in them, with funding of up to \$37.58m.

However, despite the interventions under the FRP which ran between 1990-95, the forest department's performance could not match the increased pressure on forest resources as the reconstruction of the country picked momentum following decades of war.

Population explosion

Aside from the reconstruction is the continued increase in the population at an average of 3.2% annually, rising from 24.2 million in 2002 to 31.8 million people in mid-2010. The increasing population has come with a greater demand for land for agricultural expansion and increased pressure on forests. The high population has also caused an increase of consumption of