

Planting trees is good but let's ensure they mature into forests

Across Uganda, tree planting has become a familiar and encouraging sight. Schools, religious institutions, government agencies, companies and community organisations regularly gather to plant seedlings.

Such efforts deserve recognition. Many individuals and institutions are genuinely motivated by concern for the environment and a desire to protect Uganda's natural heritage.

Yet amid this growing enthusiasm for planting trees, an important question deserves honest reflection: Are these trees actually growing into forests?

Every March 21, the world marks the International Day of Forests, a global moment to reflect on the importance of forests and their role in sustaining livelihoods, ecosystems and climate stability. The day encourages countries to strengthen efforts to protect and restore forests. For Uganda, it also presents an opportunity to reflect honestly on the effectiveness of our tree planting campaigns.

Uganda's forest cover has declined significantly over the past century, with estimates suggesting that roughly 88,000 hectares of forest are lost each year. This loss is not simply an environmental statistic buried in reports. It has direct consequences for the country's economy, agriculture and public health. Forest loss influences livelihoods, food security and environmental stability.

Tree planting campaigns are an important response to this challenge. However, planting a seedling is only the first step in restoring a forest. The true measure of success is not how many trees are planted on a particular day, but how many are still standing several years later.

Too often, reforestation efforts emphasise the ceremonial moment of planting rather than the long-term process of nurturing trees to maturity. Seedlings may be plant-

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Tree planting



ed without sufficient planning for maintenance, watering or protection. Livestock often graze freely in newly planted areas, damaging young trees. In many cases, there are limited resources allocated for follow up care.

Land ownership can also complicate restoration efforts. Trees are sometimes planted on land where tenure arrangements are unclear, leaving communities uncertain about who is responsible for protecting them. Without sustained stewardship, even well-intentioned campaigns may fail to produce lasting environmental impact.

Ecological considerations also matter. Fast growing exotic species are sometimes favoured because they provide quick visual results for planting campaigns. Yet without careful planning, such choices can undermine biodiversity or fail to match the ecological conditions of particular regions. Effective restoration requires attention to species diversity, site suitability and long-term ecosystem health.

These challenges do not mean tree planting campaigns are misguided. Rather, they highlight the need to shift the national conversation from planting trees to growing trees. When communities see tangible bene-

fits from trees such as fruit production, timber income, improved soil fertility or shade for crops they are far more likely to protect and nurture them.

Agroforestry offers one practical path forward. By combining crops and trees on the same land, farmers can improve soil health, stabilise agricultural yields and diversify sources of income.

Transparency and accountability are also important. Publicly funded tree planting initiatives should measure success not only by the number of seedlings distributed but also by survival rates over time.

The private sector also has a vital role to play. Industries that depend on Uganda's natural resources from agriculture to manufacturing and telecommunications benefit directly from stable ecosystems. Supporting forest restoration should therefore be viewed not only as corporate social responsibility but also as an investment in environmental sustainability.

Equally important is protecting the forests that still remain. Replanting trees while existing forests continue to disappear is like pouring water into a leaking bucket. Forest reserves require clear boundaries, stronger enforcement against illegal logging and community-based management systems that provide incentives for conservation.

The stakes extend beyond environmental preservation. Forests contribute directly to agricultural productivity, food security and climate resilience. Conversely, restoring tree cover strengthens rainfall reliability, protects watersheds, improves soil health and supports biodiversity. It also strengthens the economic resilience of rural communities where agriculture remains the backbone of livelihoods. The goal, ultimately, is not simply to plant more trees. It is to ensure those trees mature into forests that sustain ecosystems, livelihoods and future generations.

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