

Natural Resources Committee: A lot achieved, but much remains to be done

By Mary Karugaba

As the year comes to an end, it is time to take stock of the achievements, challenges and look forward to another year ahead. As the year comes to a close, the Parliamentary Natural Resources Committee is proud that despite the challenges, it has done most of the work it was assigned to do this year.

The committee is mandated to monitor, supervise and oversee the activities and performance of the Ministry of Water and Environment and Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development and all their sub-sectors.

No wonder the committee chair, MP Alex Byarugaba (Isingiro South), says the committee was named among the best performing committees in Parliament.

With a membership of 34 members, Byarugaba says the committee has been able to achieve quite a lot, especially in the area of environment. His views were supported by other committee members talked too.

Achievement

Byarugaba says some of the committee's achievements include investigations into illegal sand mining in Lwera wetland on the shore of Lake Victoria.

"Our environment was being degraded at a very fast rate and we thought it should be our concern and priority to check it. We took on the matter; we visited quite a number of areas, which we thought they were fundamental as far as degradation of the environment is concerned. At the site, we could not believe what we were seeing. Our biggest resource as far as water is concerned was at the verge of being wiped out. Actually, L. Victoria if I may say is steadily dying," Byarugaba says.

After the investigations, the committee came up with a very comprehensive report, which was presented to Parliament and halted the mining activities.

"Actually it was like we woke up everybody. At least to a great extent we have been able to curb illegal mining and we have also woken up government to realise that there is urgent need to heavily invest in ensuring that our environment is not degraded," Byarugaba says.

In the mining sub-sector, Byarugaba says the committee vigorously investigated the issues of artisan gold miners in Mubende, Buhweju and Busia. "We drafted a report on Mubende issue but we did not want to submit half of it report because we have to go to Busia and Buhweju in western Uganda," he says.

During the year, the committee further worked on and concluded the Biofuel Bill. A report was prepared and is ready for presentation to Parliament. The objective of the Biofuel Bill is to improve the use of fuel using plants mixed with fossil fuel.

"We carried out all the necessary consultations including benchmark trips to Ethiopia and Malawi,



Alex Byarugaba (centre), the chairperson of the Natural Resources Committee of Parliament, flanked by committee members Geoffrey Dhamuzungu (left) and Cyrus Aogon, during a press conference at the Parliament on September 6, 2017



MP Simon Oyet

the countries in Africa that have taken it up. Ugandans are going to get money from the plants such as castor seeds. So the moment you mix it up with diesel, the emission becomes less dangerous," Byarugaba says.

During the budget process, the committee lobbied a lot for the sector budget, especially the water sub-sector. As a result, 80% of the urban centres received funding for water.

"We also managed to lobby for a loan to enable all the sub-counties connected to the national electricity grid. To us, this is a big achievement because it will enable Ugandans access power and promote local industries," he says.

As part of its monitoring role, the committee has managed to traverse the whole country trying to monitor the activities of the sector. Byarugaba says the committee has visited all the on-

The Natural Resources Committee plans

Byarugaba says the committee's plan for next year will be determined by what has remained undone this year and any other new assignments especially petitions.

Among the issues to be handled include the Uganda Forest Bill, motion on the resolution of parliament to investigate the eviction and displacement of artisan miners in Mubende, petition by elders and residents of Kawala zone in Namungoona, Rubaga Division against eminent mass eviction and a petition by workers of Kibimba rice farm on the loss of jobs and livelihood.

Other works include a petition by employees of Uganda electricity board, petition by former employees of National Water and Sewerage Corporation and the Climate Change Bill which is still in the office.

"We want issues of climate change mainstreamed within our planning process," he says.

going power generation plants in western Uganda, solar plants under construction in northern, eastern and central Uganda, plus Rural Electrification Agency projects.

During the visit, the committee discovered a number of problems and made recommendations and observations.

"We discovered that there were some sub-contractors who were not doing a good job. We realised that some of the companies had supplied rotten poles, poor quality transformers and conductors and we made a report to the House. I am not surprised that the company had to run away because of our persistence," he says.

MP Simon Oyet (Nwoya County), a member of the committee says it was because of the members' investigation that raised a flag on the poor workmanship on two major government power projects of Karuma and Isimba dams.

"We investigated the allegations

and established that it was true.

We visited the sites, talked to several stakeholders and came up with a report which is ready for presentation in Parliament.

Parliament will pronounce itself in regard to these two important projects," he says.

Oyet says it was until the committee questioned the work that President Yoweri Museveni halted it and the government engineers that were hired to supervise the works were terminated which to them was an indication that government had taken note and hid to the members' observations.

Works not achieved

Despite the achievements, there were a number of issues that the committee regrets not having achieved. For example, the committee has not done much in the oil and mining sub-sectors. However, Byarugaba says the issues will be worked on next year.

THE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE'S INVESTIGATION RAISED A FLAG ON THE POOR WORKMANSHIP ON TWO MAJOR GOVERNMENT POWER PROJECTS OF KARUMA AND ISIMBA DAMS.

Challenges

Byarugaba notes that one of the biggest challenges was time. For example, Parliament works for only three days in a week and then breaks off for consultations in the constituencies.

"This means you only have three mornings in a week, three hours a day which translates into nine hours of work per week. How much can you do within such a time? We need to adjust and say may be on Mondays we should work the whole day," Byarugaba proposes.

Another challenge is committee membership. For example, committee members are also members of other committees which sometimes sit concurrently.

"For example the chairperson of national economy committee is also a member of natural resources committee. She conducts meetings almost at the same time when I am conducting the meeting of natural resources. This cuts across many members. Members have to divide their little time between committee A and B. These committees have no programme. They sit concurrently and that is a big challenge," Byarugaba notes.

Implementation of committee's recommendations

MP Florence Namayanja notes that although the committee has tried to do its work, the biggest problem remains the implementation of its recommendations by the relevant government ministries and agencies.

She points out the Energy, NEMA and Forest Authority sectors as some of the sectors that do not implement the committee's recommendations.

"I don't know whether it's the problem of supervision or just incompetence. When we recommend and the recommendations are just ignored, then there's a problem," Namayanja says.

Byarugaba says: "I get very discouraged when we make recommendations to government and they are not implemented or it takes ages before they are implemented. Some have of course been implemented but others have not been implemented."