

Govt determined to restore forest cover

By Owen Wagabaza

Retired teacher Ismail Sserukenya resides in Magera, Wakiso district. According to him, 50 years ago, the whole area was heavily forested.

"This entire place was covered with thick forests, with very few homesteads dotted in the area," Sserukenya says, as he shows me the area now covered with residential houses.

Forests in Uganda have been faced with continuously worsening trends of encroachment, deforestation and forest degradation.

Forest land is being converted for other land uses including agriculture, urbanisation and rampant felling of trees for timber, firewood and charcoal burning on private and government land.

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, creating a deficit.

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

In The State of Forestry Report 2016, environment minister Samuel Cheptoris says overall, the country has been losing on average of 122,000 hectares of forest every year from 1990 to 2015. "The greatest loss in the country is estimated at 250,000ha of forests annually, according to estimates by the National Forestry Authority for the period 2005-2010. On the other hand, on average, only about 7,000 hectares of planted forests have been 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 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.

Reforestation efforts

The Government is committed to restoring Uganda's forestry cover from the current less than 10% to the original 24% in 1990. The National Development Plan, for example, provides for, among others, increasing state investment in re-forestation, afforestation and forest restoration.



Kakiika at his farm of coffee intercropped with Mszli and Mvule trees

Challenges being faced

Restoration efforts, however, face challenges most notably the continued increase in the population standing at an average of 3.2% annually, rising from 24.2 million in 2002 to close to 40 million people in 2018. The increasing population has come with a greater demand for land for agricultural expansion, increased pressure on forest lands and increased consumption of forest products like timber, charcoal and firewood. Scientists say there is

a big linkage between vegetation cover, forests, livelihood and reducing emissions that result into climate change effects like long dry spell 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 and nourish soils with nutrients that in turn support the agriculture sector.

The plan also looks at increasing private investment in forestry and promotion of agroforestry and instituting a policy, legal and institutional framework for governing privately-owned forests. The Sector Investment Plan for Environment and Natural Resources, which ends this year (2008/09 to 2017/18), keenly looks at restoring degraded forest ecosystems and promoting research.

Measures taken by the Government to restore the lost forest cover include the promotion of agroforestry, which is the growing of trees with crops, a practice that has been practiced in many farming systems in Uganda. For example, in areas where coffee and bananas are grown, several tree species have for ages been grown as shade trees for those crops.

Moses Olobo, an official in the environment ministry, says in a bid to encourage agroforestry, the Government has introduced new agroforestry species for improvement of livestock meat and milk production. These include the Calliandra calothyrsus, Morus alba, Vernonia amygdalina, Sesbania sesban and Leuceana leucecephala, and farmers seem to be embracing

the idea. Mohammed Kakiika, the headteacher of Vienna College Namugongo and a renowned agro forester in Nakifuma subcounty, Mukono district intercropped his farm with mszli, mvule, matooke and coffee.

"It is a mistake to buy land and start planting only trees.

We do not eat trees. Who will supply us with food?" Kakiika asks.

"When mszli is harvested at 15 years, I will remain with my coffee, which I can harvest for up to 50 years," he says.

"Other forms of agroforestry being encouraged by the Government with the potential to restore tree cover include planting trees along boundaries, in homesteads as windbreaks, hedgerows and in woodlots" Olobo says

Other measures include the community tree planting programme. The Government has since 2009 supported community tree planting programmes through an annual budgetary allocation of sh1b to the NFA to raise seedlings for distribution to communities.

NFA works with the district forestry officials to identify communities to whom seedlings are to be distributed during the rainy season.

The NFA has on its part decentralised production of the seedlings to its regional tree nurseries to ease the distribution process. To date

sh5.156b has been availed for this programme and a total of 35.5 million seedlings have been raised and given out to communities.

Corporate tree planting

Corporate tree planting in forest reserves is another measure that has been adopted by the Government.

As a means of involving the corporate bodies in tree planting under their corporate social responsibility, NFA has engaged a number of corporate bodies in rehabilitating some of the degraded Central Forest Reserves. The corporate bodies provide funds for seedlings and their staff participate in planting of trees in areas allocated to them.

Such organisations include MTN Uganda, which

contributed to the restoration of Kyewaga, Kimaka and Namatale Central forest reserves in Mbale. British Council which restored Kallans, Uganda Revenue Authority which worked on Kwoba CFR, Kyambizi and Nakabiso and Barclays Bank, which worked Nonse CFR, among others.

"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.

Recently, NFA approved over 1,000 individuals and companies to carry out commercial tree planting in the Government's central forest reserves. The move is aimed at increasing the forest cover in the country.




Dennis David Kavuma, the general manager of Uganda Timber Growers Association, says the association members have established in excess of 60,000 hectares of plantations in Uganda. "We no doubt plant trees to make money, but by doing that, we are conserving the environment through providing materials like firewood, timber and poles so that people do not have to go into the natural forests to get them," says Kavuma.

He adds that the Government has partnered with United Nations agencies like UNDP, UNEP and FAO, Forest Carbon Partnership facility of the World Bank and the Austrian Development Agency to drive environment conservation.

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

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