

Call for Action to Save Urban Wetlands!

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On 2nd February 2018, Uganda will join the rest of the world to celebrate World Wetlands Day in Arua district. The global theme is, '**Wetlands for a Sustainable Urban Future,**' and the national slogan is '**Urban wetlands: prized land, not wasteland.**' The overall aim of World Wetlands Day is to raise awareness about urban wetlands contribution to the future of sustainable cities. The celebrations and theme selected are timely because most of Uganda's urban wetlands (such as *Lubigi, Nakivubo, Kinawataka in Kampala; Mabamba bay ramsar site in Wakiso and Mpigi districts; Kibingo, Kashasha, Bujaga, Kibuba-Kongoro, Rucece, Rubindi and Rushanje in Mbarara district; Namanve wetland in Mukono district*) are highly depleted and degraded largely due to inadequate regulation of urbanization and industrial development. Hence, over the last 17 years the national wetland coverage reduced from 13% in 2000 to 10.9% of the total land cover in 2017 (Ministry of Water and Environment, 2017).

Uganda's urban population is estimated at 20 million by 2040 (World Bank, 2015). The high growing rate of urbanization and industrial development in Uganda is a good step towards transformation and transition of the country to middle income status by 2020. However, this transformation has both positive and negative impacts on the environment if it's not informed by effective planning, policy formulation and implementation. The benefits are visible from improved infrastructure development, creation of employment opportunities, income generation, improved livelihoods, well-being and overall national economic development.

On the other hand, some of the negative impacts on the environmental such as degradation and pollution of water sources within the cities and other urban areas across the country are very visible. The wetlands are among the immediate environment and natural resources that are directly negatively impacted on the high growing rate of urbanization, industrial development, settlements, large scale infrastructure projects (e.g. *Lubigi drainage channel, Northern bypass, Southern Express highway*), urban agriculture, sand and clay mining for brick laying, indiscriminate waste disposal.

Unfortunately, all this destruction happened and is still happening in various parts of the country when all Ugandans are watching! Thus, some Ugandans are the culprits, others are supporting the developers (especially the private sector) through various ways and means and a few others are taking some measures to conserve and manage these wetlands sustainably. But the facts and realities show that efforts to conserve and manage the wetlands sustainably are like picking a spoon from a sack of sugar.

This is unsustainable because conversion of the urban wetlands through drainage and indiscriminate dumping means that the goods and ecosystem services of wetland resources are compromised and lost. Some of these include: *Employment creation and income generation through making crafts and building materials; Ecosystem functions – water recharge, temperature regulation and carbon storage in above ground vegetation and in soil thereby contributing to climate change mitigation; Habitat for various species e.g. Shoebill and Uganda cranes (Uganda's National symbol) among several other bird species; Sewerage and water treatment, thus urban wetlands play an important function in water supply through the purification of the sewerage and waste water during the treatment process before its released back into the lakes and*

river system. Hence, National Water and Sewerage Corporation sewerage and water treatment plants are located within urban wetlands. For example: Nakivubo waste water treatment plant in Nakivubo wetland; Kinawataka pretreatment and pumping station in Kinawataka; Lubigi Water and Sewerage treatment plant in Lubigi wetland.

None the less, the impacts of degradation of urban wetlands is evident such as: *Loss of livelihood for urban population, which makes various products (e.g. herbs, mats, brooms and crafts.) from wetlands; Loss of the rich biodiversity; damage to infrastructure, increase in deaths and communicable diseases and other impacts on businesses and economic development. Wetlands degradation costs the country about Ug.Shs 2 billion per annum.*

Therefore, the World Wetlands Day celebrations provide opportunity for reflection and call for action for all Ugandans to be cautious of the decisions and actions they implement to ensure that they prevent adverse effects on the wetlands. The responsible regulatory and enforcement agencies for wetlands protection (*i.e. Ministry of Water and Environment, Wetlands Management Department, National Environment Management Authority, Ministry of Lands and Urban Planning, Kampala City Council Authority, Local Governments and other Urban Authorities* among others) should be adequately facilitated for effective enforcement of policies and laws for protection of wetlands.

The Presidential directive on cancellation of titles in wetlands and forests reserves and associated call in 2014 for voluntary departure of encroachers from wetlands and forest reserves is timely. However, the approved roadmap for its implementation by Cabinet in 2017 should be allocated adequate resources for effective implementation and enforcement and should involve all the key stakeholders within a clear time frame.

In the medium term, the national wetlands policy (1995) should be reviewed to address the several emerging issues (population growth, climate change) after over two decades of implementation.

The religious and cultural institutions and CSOs should support policy implementation through advancing targeted awareness and regular monitoring of government programs at community, local and national levels.

Promotion of alternative livelihood and income generation opportunities (*such as bee keeping; Eco-tourism; livestock & poultry keeping; Fruit-tree production*) in communities to reduce pressure on wetland resources.