

# Sustainable cities must have well managed forests and green belts



**JOSHUA ZAKE > GREENBELTS**

Today, Uganda joins the rest of the world to celebrate International Day of Forests. The global theme for 2018 is: 'Forest and Sustainable Cities.' This theme is timely and well thought out largely because, for instance, the rapid urbanisation rate at 5.4 per cent per annum (World Bank, 2015), presents great pressure on urban forests and green belts in Uganda. Subsequently, most of the central forest reserves in urban areas such as Kitubulu in Entebbe Municipality; Kajjansi in Kajjansi Municipality; Namanve in Kiira and Mukono Municipality and Mbarara in Mbarara Municipality, among others, have been destroyed and degraded through encroachment and other illegal activities.

This is common in a cases where land use and infrastructure plans do not proactively integrate urban forests and green belts as part of the developments, but also weak enforcement of forestry policies and laws as well as poor governance in the forestry sub-sector. The national celebrations are organised at Entebbe as part of the week-long events - from March 17-23 under the 1st Uganda Water and Environment Week organised and coordinated by the Ministry of Water and Environment.

Without keen proactiveness to save and conserve the remaining and gazetted urban forests and green belts, there is a huge risk of losing them. Certainly, this will have serious

implications in terms of huge expenditures on cooling systems and air conditioners and also on treatment of ailments from air pollution, most especially the respiratory system infections. The high air pollution and heating in the cities and urban areas generated by human activities such as industrial production, transportation must be avoided and or cleaned and cooled to allow city dwellers enjoy a clean and healthy environment as provided for in Article 29 of the Constitution. Thus, this is the more reason why each development project must do an environment impact assessment as a requirement under the National Environment Act, 1995.

Interestingly, in addition to implementation of the mitigation actions in the environment impact assessments by developers, the urban forests and green belts present a nature-based solutions for temperature, air and flood regulation and contribution to soil and water conservation that is more cost effective and sustainable.

Thus, contributing to adaptation of the urban population to climate change impacts, Urban trees and forests give an attractive green townscape hence communicate the image of positive, nature-oriented cities and towns. They indirectly promote tourism and enhance economic development. They provide the water catchment and hence recharge water

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sources that supply water for livelihood and economic activities in the nearby towns and cities. They are also known for health benefits as parks and green areas provide opportunity for healthy physical and recreation activities thus helping the urban population to relax. Urban forests also provide forest products such as honey, mushrooms, herbs, timber, fuel wood, and poles for the urban communities. Such forests in the cities and urban areas are as well easily accessible for supporting education and research activities.

The existing National Forestry Policy, 2001 and National Forest and Tree Planting Act, 2003 in Uganda strongly recognises urban forests and green belts. It calls for conservation and sustainable management of these resources. For example, there are 506 central forest reserves and 192 local forest reserves,

some of which are found in urban centres across the country. Besides, as stipulated in the Uganda Constitution as well as in the National Forest and Tree Planting Act, 2003, the government, through the relevant ministries, authorities, departments and district forest services, is mandated to hold in trust and manage these forestry resources sustainably for the current and future generations.

Unfortunately, most of the stakeholders and the public may not be aware of the location of these urban forests and green belts. As a result, they are not holding the government accountable. Besides, institutions with the mandate for sustainable management of forests such as the Ministry of Water and Environment, Forest Sector Support Department, National Forest Authority, Urban Authorities and local governments, among others, rarely provide regular reports for status of urban forests and green belts to Parliament and the public as part of the reporting and accountability requirements.

Therefore, commemoration of the International Day of Forests presents a great opportunity for all Ugandans to reflect by finding practical solutions and actions for targeting city development and urbanisation, which can co-exist with urban forests and green belts so as to deliver on the multiple benefits from this arrangement as the Uganda is steered to middle income status following a green growth path. This is possible because it has been done in other cities and countries such as Tokyo in Japan; Belfast in Northern Ireland; Curitiba in Brazil; and Washington. Possibly their lessons up-scaled to fit within the context of cities and urban areas in Uganda.

**Dr Zake is the executive director Environmental Alert. joszake@gmail.com**

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