

Wetland's Contributions to Climate Change Regulation! Is this a Missed Opportunity for Uganda?

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Every year, Uganda joins the rest of the world to commemorate the **World Wetlands Day (WWD)** on **2nd February 2019**. This day comes 10 years since Uganda ratified the **Ramsar Convention** on **4th July 1988**. As a signatory, Uganda participated in the 13th Conference of Party for the Convention held in Dubai 2018, in which resolution XIII.16 focused sustainable urbanization, climate change and wetlands.

It's therefore, not surprising that the global theme for the WWD 2019 is, '*wetlands and climate change.*' According to the Ministry of Water and Environment, the National celebrations will be held in **Pallisa on 2nd February 2019 at Limoto Primary School**. The celebrations largely focus on the achievements of the Convention for awareness creation about wetland wise use; and furthermore mobilize public's appreciation for the role of wetlands for supporting community climate change adaptation and mitigation. Besides, the Wetlands restoration Project called, '*Building Resilient Communities and Ecosystems through Restoration of Wetlands and Associated Catchments,*' will be officially launched. This is a 44.3 million dollars project implemented in 20 districts (*i.e. 10 in Easter Uganda and 10 in South Western Uganda*) with financing from the Government of Uganda, the United Nations Development Program and the Green Climate Fund.

Climate change is a development issue, that impacts on all sectors, related community livelihoods and overall economic development country wide and globally. Like other natural resources, wetlands are fragile ecosystems which are directly and indirectly affected by climate and variability. The impacts such as: prolonged droughts and increasing temperatures worsen the impacts on wetlands from illegal conversion through human activities including: *agriculture, unregulated urbanization, illegal sand mining, and indiscriminate waste disposal*. Wetlands degradation and loss is common country wide. It's associated with conversion of the soil organic matter stored for long in the peat soils into cabondioxide, which is released in the atmosphere. In some circumstances, wetlands are known to release other greenhouse gases such as methane and nitrous oxide. This is a natural behavior, however, there is inadequate research done on this and therefore, it's not yet known whether wetlands at different scales are net sinks or sources of greenhouse gases (Manudeo, 2016).

These gases accumulate in the atmosphere causing a greenhouse effect, which is associated with the phenomenon of global warming that brings about climate change effects such as flooding and prolonged droughts. Otherwise with good management and sustainable use of wetlands has great potential for mass carbon sequestration and storage. This opportunity can only be harnessed if national wetlands coverage is restored and maintained. The national wetlands coverage 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). Thus, the national target is to increase wetlands coverage to 12% of the total land coverage by 2030 (Uganda's Nationally Determined Contributions, 2015).

Wetlands worldwide are also reported to be lost 3 times faster than forests (Ramsar Secretariat, 2018). The wetlands loss and degradation directly impacts on community livelihood and economic growth and

development. Thus, in the short and media term it compromises both community, national and global benefits from wetlands goods and ecosystem services. Some of these are: *Employment creation and income generation through making crafts and building materials; Provision of water for domestic, irrigation and industrial use; Water recharge, temperature regulation and carbon storage; Habitat for various species e.g. Shoebill and Uganda cranes (Uganda's National symbol) among several other bird species;*

Therefore, the WWD celebrations are timely for reflection on the Government's commitments at International and national levels in respect to effective implementation of existing policy and regulatory frameworks for conservation, protection and wise use of wetlands country-wide. It's a day for stakeholders (*i.e. Government, Development Partners, Civil Society and Private Sector*) to re-position by identifying plausible approaches, best practices and innovations to deal with the challenges as presented by mega trends *e.g. climate change, rapid urbanization*, and their implications for protection, conservation and sustainable use of wetlands for delivery on national sustainable development goals and inclusive green growth targets.

The ongoing national wetlands policy (1995) review coordinated by the Wetlands Management Department with support of Development Partners and Civil Society Organizations is a great opportunity for articulating emerging issues to come up with practical and effective strategies to save Uganda's wetlands and healthy lives for the estimated 45 million Ugandans. For example 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. However, the policy review process should be fast-tracked for implementation of interventions for wetlands, protection, conservation and sustainable use. Besides, the process should consider compressive and effective stakeholder engagement (*i.e. consultations and participation*) at all levels including the wetlands adjacent communities that are organized as wetlands associations around wetlands of local, national and international importance in Uganda. This is because they interact with the wetlands resources regularly.

Likewise this year's national budget review and development process should consider adequate resources allocation to support implementation of interventions for protection, conservation and sustainable use of wetlands and associated catchments.