Wetland restoration and management in Uganda: Are the approaches sufficient to achieve the NDP III targets?

Overview

The National Environment Act No.5 of 2019, defines a wetland as an area or areas permanently or seasonally flooded by water where plants and animals have become adapted. These are also gazetted and include: marshes, swamps, peat bogs, river deltas, mangroves, river flood plains, and lagoons. Wetlands play an important role in mitigating climate change, conserving biodiversity and providing livelihoods to communities.

With the increase in population and rising pressure on natural resources, wetlands have faced encroachment occasioned by the need to derive livelihoods, settlement and industrial development among others.

Over the years, the Government of Uganda (GoU) has implemented initiatives to restore, improve and manage the wetland cover. The GoU's deliberate plans and ambitions to restore wetlands is further stipulated in the third National Development Plan (NDP III) 2020/21-2024/25 with a target of increasing the percentage of land area covered by wetlands **from 8.9% in FY2020/21 to 9.57% in FY 2024/25**. A number of approaches are being implemented to achieve this target.

This policy brief assesses the sufficiency of the wetland restoration approaches to achieve the NDP III target. It also highlights the key challenges faced in restoration and management of the wetlands, and proposes possible policy recommendations to achieve the set target.

Key Issues

- Uganda has lost its wetland cover at a rate of 2% annually over the last ten years, and the wetland cover has stagnated at 8.9% in the last three years.
- The approaches to wetland restoration are constrained by political antagonism.
- Inadequate manpower especially the Environmental Police Force (EPF), regional NEMA offices, and the Environment and Natural Resources (ENR) offices in LGs.
- Limited prioritization of funding to ENR activities at LG level by the sector continues to frustrate the restoration efforts.

Background

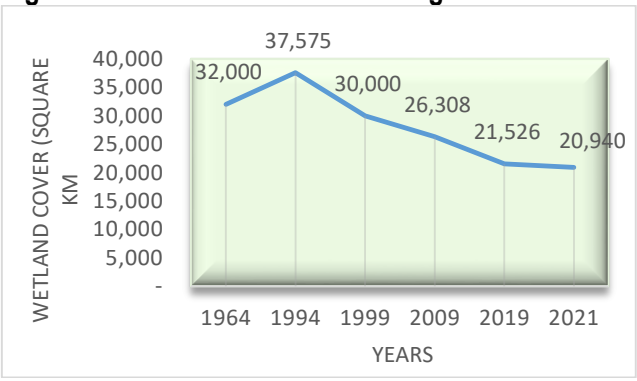
The statutory mandate of wetland management rests mainly with the Ministry of Water and Environment (MWE) and the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA). The other key players are the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD), District Land Boards and Area Land Committees, District Wetland/Environment and Natural resources departments and Lower Local Government (LLGs) Councils.

Since 1986, the Government of Uganda has come up with initiatives, policies, laws and projects to restore, maintain and sustainably manage the ever-decreasing wetland cover. However, this has registered limited success.

According to the wetland mapping exercises undertaken in 1994 and 2015, wetland coverage declined from 15.6% in 1994 to 8.9% in 2021 (Figure 1). The greatest loss occurred between 1986 and 2011 and if this is not halted, Uganda risks losing all its wetlands by 2040[1].

The decline of wetlands has been accelerated by several factors including urbanization, industrial development, population increase at a rate of 3% annually, sand and clay mining, uncoordinated planning and demand for more arable land. Unfortunately, most of these degrading activities are preferably perceived by encroachers as better livelihood opportunities than wetland conservation itself.

Figure 1: Trend of wetland loss in Uganda

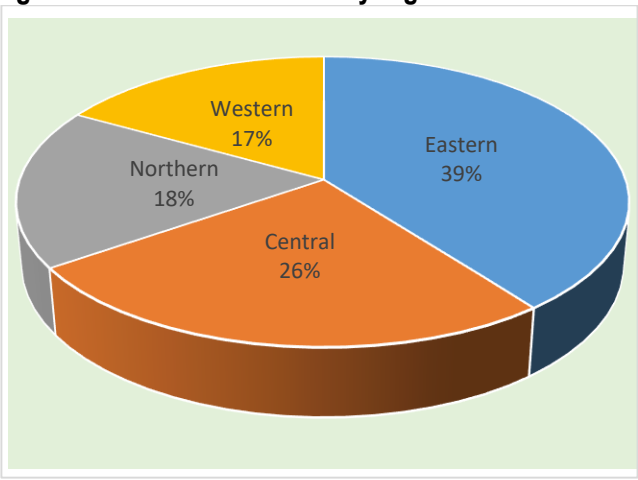


Source: MWE Reports

[1] Wetlands Report 2021

The highest level of wetland degradation has occurred in the Eastern Region with 39% lost to mainly rice growing and settlements, and the least in the Western Region with 17% lost to agriculture (Figure 2). This means that the country loses 293km^2 of wetlands every year indicating a 2% to 2.5% annual loss of wetlands. If this trend is not reversed, Uganda is likely to lose more than 7,325km^2 by 2040[2]. This degradation has contributed to the occurrence of floods, rising temperatures, prolonged dry spells, loss of biodiversity and deteriorating water quality, among others. These effects are more prevalent in the eastern and central regions where degradation is most rampant.

Figure 2: Wetland cover loss by region from 1994-2020



Source: MWE Reports

Approaches to wetland restoration and management

Uganda's National Policy for the Conservation and Management of Wetland Resources was launched in 1995 to promote the protection of Uganda's wetlands to sustain their ecological and socioeconomic functions. Despite the formal policy, wetlands continue to be drained and converted into other uses. In addition, projects have been approved under the MWE to specifically address wetland degradation through restoration and sustainable management. This is aimed at securing and maintaining the wetland's hydrological, ecological and biodiversity integrity. Some of the approaches used to restore and manage wetlands are assessed hereafter:

Wetland mapping and classification: The MWE took the initiative to classify the wetlands based on soil type, plants and animals living in the wetland. They were also classified as either seasonal or permanent wetlands. This was to ascertain the level of degradation and the restoration measures to undertake. A wetland classification system for Uganda developed by the National Biomass Study, 2003 was adopted to describe the wetland use/cover types. The human activities and climate change effects have however altered the status and classification of certain wetlands. Some of the formally permanent wetlands have become seasonal hence the need to change the restoration and classification approaches for such wetlands.

Preparation and implementation of community-based Wetland Management Plans: The Government with support from the Green Climate Fund (GCF), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) started the development of Wetland Management Plans (WMPs) in 2017. This is implemented through the project; "*Building Resilient Communities, Wetland Ecosystems and Associated Catchments in Uganda*". The WMPs aim to optimize equitable access to wetland resources for income generation to all the local communities. The plans also guide the restoration and sustainable management. However, this project targeted only two regions of the country (Eastern and Southwestern). There is a need to prioritize the central region since it is one of the most affected by wetland degradation. To date, over 120 WMP and District Wetland Action Plans have been developed, and the MWE is in the process of developing six more WMPs. The slow progress in the development of the WMPs delays the implementation of the restoration measures.

Integration of Environment Protection Force (EPF) in environmental management: The MWE in a bid to further strengthen NEMA's mandate created the Environmental Protection Police Unit (EPPU) in 2011. The EPF's roles include monitoring, community policing, enforcement of restoration orders, environment and social impact assessments (ESIAs) conditions of approval, and regulation of environmentally violating activities with a concentration on wetlands and forests.

[2] Natural Resources, Environment, Climate Change, Land and Water Management Annual Programme Performance Report, MWE October, 2022

Unfortunately, the recruitment, training, equipping and deployment has not been fully undertaken due to the absence of a statutory instrument to operationalise the EPF. Additionally, the limited number of EPF personnel (a total of 186 EPF in 2020) affected compliance and enforcement activities in the wetlands. Some NEMA regional offices have only four EPF staff to undertake enforcement in more than 16 regional districts.

Cancellation of illegal titles issued in wetlands: The Government of Uganda through a Cabinet minute on 16th April 2014, approved the cancellation of all land titles issued in wetlands on public land acquired unlawfully (after 1995) as one of the measures to restore wetlands. The MLHUD was to commence with the cancellation of illegal titles in Kampala as soon as the wetland atlas was ready. The atlas in 2015 revealed that 479.48ha of wetland were degraded with 20.9% of that vanquished in Kampala, Wakiso and Mukono. This in turn affected over 600 illegal land titles. As of February 2020, a total of 300 illegal land titles had been cancelled by MLHUD.

The key concern is that the cancellation is not impartial. Consequently, the least degraders are evicted and the biggest degraders are spared, for example, the large-scale rice growing and sand mining in Lwera wetland in Masaka LG. This discriminative approach to the cancellation of illegal titles and Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) doesn't favour the efforts towards achieving the NDP III target.

Designation of wetlands as Ramsar sites: Uganda ratified the Ramsar Convention in 1988 and since then the country has made strides in implementing the principles of the convention. Since 2020, two sites have been designated to bring the total number of Ramsar sites in Uganda to 12. These wetlands of international importance cover an area of 454,303ha. Due to the international importance attached to these wetlands, special mechanisms are put in place to protect them not only from encroachment but ensuring that they are restored. This has chased away encroachers in these ecosystems however, some of these Ramsar sites continue to face encroachment by the surrounding communities due to uncontrolled fishing and bird hunting.

Sensitization/awareness creation and dissemination of information and environmental literacy. Sensitization is one of the key activities undertaken in the wide use of wetlands and is promoted in all districts through the District Environment Officer and Wetlands Officers. However, this is affected by the limited budgets and shortage of manpower, especially at the lower local governments (LLGs).

In terms of funding, over the last three financial years, the LG's share of the ENR budget has ranged between Ug shs 3bn to 3.5bn (0.6%) and this is shared by all the 145 LGs. In the end, some LGs get Ug shs two million to restore and manage wetlands in their areas of jurisdiction.

There is also inadequate staffing within the district wetland and natural resources departments. Some sub-counties do not have active natural resources committees to sensitize masses and ensure wetlands conservation.

Wetland boundary demarcation: Over the years, the MWE has restored wetland cover through the demarcation of wetlands by planting concrete pillars along boundaries. This has followed a process including sensitization, voluntary exit or forceful eviction. Between 2016 and 2020, a total of 1,728.5km of critical wetlands boundaries were demarcated with pillars and live markers which resulted in 10,263.6ha of degraded wetlands being restored countrywide. However, there are limited post-demarcation follow-ups by officials especially those restored by LGs due to limited facilitation.

Additionally, the non-existence of a central database for the cumulative kilometers and hectares of demarcated and restored wetlands over the years by all stakeholders has posed a statistical challenge. This is worsened by re-encroachment on previously demarcated and restored wetlands as the case is with the Limoto Wetland in Pallisa District.

Challenges

1. **Inadequate manpower** leading to ineffective enforcement and compliance with policy, legal and regulatory frameworks on wetland management.
2. **Inadequate funding**. This is prevalent in the LGs where the environment and natural resources departments are poorly funded to manage the ENR activities and oversee wetland management at that level.
3. **Increasing land conflicts** associated with the issuance of land titles in wetlands by the MLHUD and District Land Boards. For example, encroachers on the Lwera wetland have land titles thus disregarding the NEMA recommendations on the sustainable use of wetlands.
4. **Political antagonism/interference** in restoration initiatives occasioned by the selfish interests of

politicians who encourage the communities bordering wetlands to illegally use them and in some cases re-encroach on restored wetlands. This is exacerbated by political pronouncements on the use and allocation of certain wetlands to 'investors' which contravenes the existing regulations and guidelines on sustainable wetland use and management.

5. **Conflicting policies among sectors** resulting from inadequate institutional synergies and coordination. For example, the infrastructure and industrial sectors have caused the degazzettement of several wetlands to establish industries. These industries have turned out to be polluters of the ecosystems.
6. **The lack of an updated comprehensive wetland inventory** has exposed many wetlands to encroachment and exploitation. This is exacerbated by the absence of a specific law on wetland encroachment with clear sanctions and penalties on encroachers and degraders.
7. **Non-provision of alternative livelihoods.** In some instances, the evicted persons are not provided with alternative livelihood yet this has proven to be a more sustainable practice internationally. This has led to re-encroachment on reclaimed wetlands as the affected persons have no alternatives.

Conclusion

The government's efforts to reclaim the degraded and encroached wetlands have yielded mixed results. The rate of destruction has surpassed the restoration efforts evidenced by the declining wetland cover. This has been attributed to the increasing population with the associated pressure on land, negative political interference and funding shortages, especially at the LGs level. The stagnated growth in wetland cover despite the approaches used and efforts put in by the MWE and its partners in the last decade points to the need to review the implementation methodologies and ensure consensus among the stakeholders. If this is not done, the achievement of the NDP III target of increasing the area of land covered by wetlands to 9.57% by 2025 may never be realized.

Policy Recommendations

- The MWE should expedite the development of a statutory instrument to operationalise the EPF. This should be accompanied by recruitment, training and deployment of the EPF officers.
- The MWE should prioritise funding of the ENR and wetland departments at the LG level to ensure the effective implementation of ENR activities.
- The Director of Public Prosecution (DPP) should indict individual officers who issue and aid the issuance of illegal land titles in protected wetlands. In addition, the politicians who encourage communities to degrade wetlands should be held liable and prosecuted.
- The MWE should strengthen the collaboration and coordination mechanisms across all sectors and all stakeholders to ensure harmonized planning and implementation of interventions that have an impact on wetland ecosystems.
- The MWE should expedite the development of a comprehensive wetland inventory.
- The MWE should fast-track the enactment of a wetland-specific law and advocate for the designation and equipping of an environmental court to expeditiously prosecute environmental-related cases.
- The MWE should intensify awareness campaigns on the sustainable use of wetlands. Alternative livelihoods in all wetland restoration projects such as irrigation farming especially for crops previously grown in the wetlands should be encouraged to strengthen sustainability efforts.

References

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