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UGANDA NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

The Crisis in Uganda's Biodiversity Policy Making Process

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Introduction

In the recent past, it emerged that President Museveni had met with officials of the Ministry of Water, Lands and Environment and the National Forestry Authority (NFA) to give them directives to stop evicting people from the forest reserves. This meeting was precipitated by the outcry of encroachers that were being evicted from South Busoga Forest Reserve. The credibility and manner in which the evictions by NFA are being done aside, the current intervention by the President in the operations of a statutory agency of Government is not surprising. To those who have been keenly watching the actions of Government in the field of the environment in the last ten years, this intervention only epitomizes the deepening crisis in the Government's policy making processes in this sector. In this article, we have opted to use the example of the process to formulate a National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) as an illustration of a crisis that is slowly growing out of proportion.

Background

It is important to recognize that Uganda's efforts to transform her economy, social services and politics are directly tied to the fate of our biological resources. Uganda's stock of biological diversity including forests, wildlife, wetlands, micro-organisms, etc is the basis for sustainable agricultural productivity, tourism development and social protection, among others. Ugandan policy makers and politicians need to be reminded consistently of the indivisibility of economic growth and the sustainable management of biological diversity. Statistics generated during the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) revision process show that the environment and natural resources contribution to the national economy is about US\$1,726 million. The same studies also show that the annual cost of biodiversity degradation to the national economy is estimated at UGX506 billion; soil degradation at UGX225 billion; rangeland degradation at UGX815 billion and wetlands encroachment at UGX2 billion.

This is why the failure to finalize and publish the National Biodiversity Strategy Action Plan (NBSAP) 6 years after it was completed is a major indictment on our policy making process. A closer scrutiny of the NBSAP process and other related processes in key sub-sectors such as wildlife and forestry leads one to question the commitment of Government to prudent strategies for the sustainable management of biological diversity.

Reflecting on government commitment to fight poverty through sustainable Natural Resources Management

There are so many reasons why the failure to complete the NBSAP formulation process reflects negatively on Uganda Government's national policy making processes and the quality of functioning of Cabinet as the policy making organ of Government. First, a close examination of the Uganda Vision 2025 and the current edition of the Poverty Eradication Action Plan makes it apparent that Government has a sense of purpose and direction of the immense value and importance of biological diversity to national economic development and prosperity.

Uganda Vision 2025 articulates the need to utilize our biological resources in a manner which does not undermine their continued existence. The PEAP recognizes the central role of natural resources in both economic and livelihood terms. But these statements can only be seen beyond the rhetoric if specific actions are articulated in a National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan and the extent to which such actions are being implemented. Instead, failure to have a shared vision around which we can mobilize financial, human and institutional resources to ensure effective management of our biological diversity can only serve to undermine our efforts to achieve the objectives set out in these national strategy documents.

Secondly, it is important to recall that Uganda is one of the

countries that participated in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992. The Uganda Delegation led by President Yoweri Museveni participated fully in the UNCED deliberations and signed on the Convention on Biological Diversity, the blueprint international legal instrument to guide inter-state relations regarding the conservation, equitable utilization and benefit sharing arising from the sustainable utilization of biological diversity.

Article 6 of the Convention enjoins parties to the Convention including Uganda to develop comprehensive and action focused national strategies, plans or programmes for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity or adapt for this purpose existing strategies, plans or programmes, which shall reflect, inter alia, the measures set out in the Convention. Essentially, the purpose of such strategies or adaptation is to ensure coordination, create efficiency in terms of costs and actions taken to address both the drivers and causes of biodiversity degradation.

Because of huge economic dependence on biodiversity and our national commitment to preserve our natural heritage, this international obligation that we chose to incur voluntarily should have provided the necessary momentum for a more prudent policy process to develop our national NBSAP. Yet, since 1999 when the draft of the strategy was first prepared and submitted to the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), this draft has moved between the NEMA Board, the Ministry of Water, Lands and Environment, the Policy Committee on the Environment (this is a statutory committee established under section 7 of the National Environment Act, Cap 153 and chaired by the Prime Minister.

One could argue that an NBSAP is not necessarily an essential instrument in the scheme for the effective management of

biological diversity in this country. Indeed, reference could be made to a host of other national policies, strategies and plans such as the National Environment Policy 1994, the Uganda Wildlife Authority Strategic Plan, the Forestry Sector Strategic Plan, the Wetlands Strategic Plan, etc. But the value of reflecting on the NBSAP process at this point in time lies in three crucial dimensions: Uganda's inability as a country to adhere to internationally agreed commitments; absence of mechanisms for ensuring responsibility and accountability when it comes to investing public resources in the policy development process; and the nature of policy and decision making in general.

First, preparation of the NBSAP is a legal requirement under the Convention which Uganda has signed and ratified. Consequently, Uganda's failure to complete the process of formulating and later on implementing the NBSAP reflects Uganda's inability as a country to take international commitments seriously. Despite the progress made in the area of biodiversity, including enactment of key legislation, we still owe the international community and our posterity a duty to respect the commitments that we have signed to at different levels.

Secondly, the NBSAP process was supported by funding from the Global Environment Facility of the United Nations (UNEP/GEF). Over US\$100,000 was spent on preparing the strategy document. Yet, to the extent that there is no final product six years later, someone needs to give a full account of why such resources should be invested in a process that Government didn't consider worthwhile after all. The failure to complete this NBSAP process leads us to question the utility of the financial and human resource investments in the process. If we didn't need the plan to guide our actions in this area, why did we have to invest our resources in the process and who takes responsibility for the failure to deliver on the intended output over a six years period?

Creating Certainty and Predictability in Policy Making Process

The major lesson that we have learnt from the NBSAP process is the extent of uncertainty and unpredictability in our policy and decision-making processes. Uncertainty in the sense that Government embarks on formulating a policy without any clear idea of the timeframe within which the policy process should be completed. The NBSAP has already taken six years and we don't know how much more time will lapse before it is approved. The process of formulating a national food and nutrition policy started sometime in 1994 and the policy was



Runoff and its effects in Kyantole village, Kabale district

not published until 2002. The soils policy process has been dragg-i-ng on for over 10 years even at a time when there is mounting evidence of huge costs of soil degradation in the country. The

process of developing a Sector Wide Strategy and Investment Plan (SWAP) for the Environment and Natural Resources Sector has been dragging on for the last three years. Someone must take full responsibility for this level of inefficiency in Uganda's policy making process.

Indeed, it is shocking to learn that while policy makers and practitioners have been referring to the Wildlife Policy 1999 as the statement of Government policy on wildlife, it has never been debated or approved by Cabinet. But even in these circumstances, evidence is mounting that significant pressures in the form of agriculture expansion, poaching and politically



*Carcasses seized from poachers recently.
'The New Vision' Wed., Sept., 14, 2005*

motivated dega-zzettment of wildlife protected areas are significantly impacting wildlife and undermining sus-tainable biodiversity management initiatives. A recent Uganda Wildlife Authority Aerial Wildlife Census (25-27 August 2004) concludes that populations of buffalo, kob, hippo, and waterback in Queen Elizabeth National Park are significantly lower compared to the figures from a similar survey in 2000.

The report further observes that the kob and buffalo populations in Kyambura are the lowest ever recorded. Combined with unresolved mystery of the massive death of hippos in Queen Elizabeth National Park and the reported anthrax outbreak on Lake Mburo National Park, these examples show the deepening crisis in addressing pressing biodiversity policy problems.

In addition to the uncertainty in the policy and decision-making process in this country, there is also the element of lack of predictability. Unpredictability in the policy process exists because there is no clear line of responsibility and accountability. Consequently, one can spend public resources to engage in an endless process of policy making like the NBSAP and nobody takes responsibility for its failure. Hippos in Queen Elizabeth National Park and Zebras in Lake Mburo National Park are dying undermining the very basis of this country's economy and heritage but the only response is non-committal and uncoordinated statements coming from different Government

officials. The classic example of this lack of sense of responsibility and accountability is the statement by Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) issued in response to a story on the death of wildlife in Lake Mburo National Park that was reported in 'The New Vision' of April 25, 2005. In their response reported by 'The Monitor' of May 6, 2005, the Management of UWA was keen to clarify that the mandate to declare any disease outbreak lies with the Commissioner for Livestock. But the problem being raised here was about the death of the animals which goes to the heart of our national economy and the livelihoods of many Ugandan tax payers who foot UWAs bill. And this is in spite of whether the animals are dying of anthrax, fever, etc. That is beside the point.

As Uganda strives to achieve the PEAP objectives, agencies responsible for biodiversity policy and decision-making need to move beyond the mere tradition of listing achievements in the end of year statements and reflect more critically on the current crisis in the policy and decision-making process in this country. Unfortunately, with the current political environment in the country, it is likely that the situation will get worse rather than improve at least in the short and medium-term. The potential concentration of decision-making authority in selected power centres within Government that could arise from the ongoing constitution review process could even aggravate the problems. In fact, the recent directive by President Museveni stopping the National Forestry Authority from forest reserves demonstrates a deepening of this crisis. It is important for the president's concern about the poor encroachers but failure to act through established institutions only undermine the very institutions he has worked hard to establish.

Conclusion

The point is, within Government, someone owes Ugandans an explanation on why the country should be having a messy, uncertain and unpredictable policy making and decision-making processes. If this situation doesn't change sooner than later, we are not only undermining the very basis of our economic survival but also our national heritage as a major biodiversity country. In 'The Monitor' of May 19, 2005, President Museveni while issuing directives to the NFA to stop evictions of encroachers in forest reserves is quoted as saying: "ours is not a colonial government, we derive our power from the people and therefore they are in charge." Although we agree with the president that power belongs to the people, such power must be exercised judiciously and for a proper purpose.

Politisization of conservation issues must stop and mandated institutions should be given space to execute their statutory functions without political influence. It is also important for the parliamentary committee on Natural Resources to stand up to its task and hold the responsible ministries and institutions accountable.

The President and his cabinet need to be advised that destruction of a country's biological diversity is like a slow but sure process of impoverishing the population which the government is purportedly working hard to deliver from poverty. It is not only wrong but it is also being economically and politically irresponsible for a democratically elected Government to be an accomplice in this process of conscious self destruction. That is the reason why the approval of the NBSAP as a strategy for long-term economic and social development of this country becomes an urgent issue.

The Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE) is an independent Public Policy Research and Advocacy Think Tank registered in Uganda working in Eastern and Southern Africa. ACODE's publications can be accessed by writing to the ACODE Library of Law and Public Policy at library@acode-u.org or visiting our website at www.acode-u.org