

Uganda helps farmers grow trees for money in bid to reverse forest loss

By [Christopher Bendana](#)

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From tree-planting drives to tighter laws on illegal logging, countries worldwide are searching for a silver bullet to stop the loss of forests vital for nature and climate protection.



Women drying their beans on a tree plantation owned by Peter Kasenene in Mawojo, central Uganda, 24 June 2019. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Christopher Bendana

After decades of losing thousands of hectares each year, Uganda has found a way not only to slow deforestation but to reverse it - mainly by helping people grow their own trees to cut down instead of clearing ecologically valuable rainforest.

New data released by the state-run National Forestry Authority (NFA) in May showed the proportion of the country covered by trees rose from 9% in 2015 to 12.4% in 2017.

In a tweet about the figures, the NFA said its 2019 National Biomass Study, due out in December, will likely show that tree cover has increased further.

Stuart Maniraguha, the NFA's director of plantations development, said the data - collected using remote-sensing equipment and researchers on the ground - suggests things could be looking up for Ugandan farmers struggling to grow mainly rain-fed crops in increasingly extreme weather.

"As an agricultural country, (more forests) means more reliable rainfall," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "It indicates that we are on a positive journey towards economic and ecology restoration."



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Those who live in and around Uganda's Central Forest Reserves, more than 500 protected areas that cover about 15% of the country, say tree loss has exacerbated the often disastrous effects of erratic weather patterns for communities.

Last year, more than 700,000 Ugandans living near lakes and rivers were displaced from their homes after a year of unusually heavy rain caused the worst flooding since records began.

The NFA said that before the reversal of Uganda's tree loss, the amount of land covered by forest had plunged from almost a quarter in 1990 to 9% in 2015.

In its 2016/2017 state of the environment report, the National Environment Management Authority attributed the sharp decline mainly to land-hungry farmers, noting that of the 1.9 million hectares of forest and wetland lost between 1990 and 2015, about 80% had been converted to grow crops.



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Sustainable plantations

To restore the forests, Maniraguha said the NFA has used a range of methods, including promoting agroforestry - growing trees and crops together on the same land - and running tree-planting programmes.

And to stop people felling trees in protected areas, the authority gives technical help to farmers growing tree plantations, backed by partners including the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and local charity NatureUganda.

The biggest gains in tree cover over the past few years have occurred in the southwest, where farmers grow trees for use as timber, firewood and electricity poles, Maniraguha said.

The NFA has a goal for 24% of Uganda's territory to be covered with trees by 2040, he added.

Peter Kasenene, who owns a 200-hectare (500-acre) plantation in Mawojo, in central Uganda - 70 hectares of which he planted under the FAO programme - said farmers like him are helping drive sustainable development on a local level.

"You work only in the first year after planting. Then the trees grow on their own," said the 75-year-old former university professor who served as a finance minister from 2001 to 2006.

"That one you see there is the third generation - I cut, I replant," he explained, pointing to a patch of eucalyptus trees which, along with pine, make up most of his plantation.

Kasenene said the FAO pays him 800,000 Ugandan shillings (\$225) for every hectare he plants and he also earns a healthy income from selling the wood from the mature trees.

"You get the buyers, they cut the trees and put money in my account - I am comfortable," he said.



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'Forests are our jewels'

Achilles Byaruhanga, executive director at NatureUganda, welcomed the increases in tree cover but said he was concerned reforestation was only happening on tree farms, even though they do offer an alternative source of firewood.

"We need to stabilise the (natural) forest cover and then increase it. We cannot afford to lose more. Natural resources - especially forests - are our jewels," he said.

For NFA head Tom Okello, growing more trees is not enough if Uganda is going to sustain its success - more needs to be done to stop the root causes of encroachment and deforestation.

"You can't stop a desperate person looking for firewood from entering into a forest. We must provide an alternative for energy, improve agricultural productivity and fight poverty," he said.

Nearly 95% of Ugandans rely on firewood or charcoal for cooking, according to the energy ministry.



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In Buikwe district, which includes the Mabira Central Forest Reserve, tree farmer John Tabula urged the government to give communities more power to manage the rainforest in their areas.

Tabula belongs to a group of farmers who had an agreement with the NFA to manage a 3km tract of forest inside the reserve where they grew eucalyptus to sell for electricity poles and terminalia, also known as Indian almond, for timber.

In return, they patrolled the forest looking out for illegal loggers, he said.

But the agreement expired in 2016 and the government has not renewed it, despite several requests, said Tabula, who also runs a private plantation with support from the FAO.

Okello said the NFA is grappling with a long-term budget crunch, which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and has affected some conservation activities in the reserve, including the renewal of the agreement in Buikwe.

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"We have to evaluate their performances before we renew their permits," he said.

But Tabula said each day the government stalls on renewing the agreement is another day when the forest is left vulnerable to illegal loggers and encroachment.

"We, the community, would protect the forest," he said. "But we don't have legal backing."

Source: Thomson Reuters Foundation

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