



Grow food crops or plant trees? The binary dilemma of sustainable forest production and consumption

Preamble

It's 21 March 2022, and it's International Day of Forests (IDF). How about a glimpse of uncomfortable reminders! Whereas forests cover 31 per cent of the earth's surface, 32 million acres of forest are lost annually (almost the size of England). And yet; over 300 million people live in forests, 80 per cent of the planet's terrestrial species live in forests,¹ 25 per cent of world's medicine - including cancer-fighting drugs - comes from tropical forest plants, over 70 per cent of world's total economy is directly or indirectly dependent on trees, and over 40 per cent of the world's total renewable energy is from wood fuel.²

The IDF 2022 is guided by the theme "*Forests and Sustainable Production and Consumption*". For people less familiar with the debate and practices on forests and forestry, 21 March was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly as the International Day of Forests to raise awareness and celebrate the importance of all types of forests. IDF remains an important day commemorated globally to celebrate forests as one of the natural sources of the environment and an essential link in the ecosystem.

During the sitting on 21 December 2012, the United Nation General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/67/200 proclaiming 21 March each year as the IDF to "celebrate and raise awareness of the importance of all types of forests and trees outside forests". During the proclamation, UN Forum on Forests, in collaboration with the Food and Agricultural Organisation (UN FAO), were requested to facilitate the implementation of the IDF in cooperation with respective Governments and support of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF). Actual commemorations started in 2013.³

The refugee contexts and dilemma

With increasing refugee numbers coupled with the ongoing reductions in funding and further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR wrestle with food insecurity. Over the past years, refugees have witnessed an unprecedented and heart-wrenching reduction in food and non-food items, with a significant decline in caloric intake and food expenditure.⁴

¹ <https://rainforests.mongabay.com/deforestation/>

² <https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/international-day-of-forests-22/>

³ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N12/490/60/PDF/N1249060.pdf?OpenElement>

⁴ <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-cuts-refugees-food-rations-uganda-funding-declines>

Refugees in Uganda are surviving on 60 per cent of a full ration. They currently receive 19,000 UGX, 0.2 kilogramme of salt, 0.5 litres of cooking oil (or 4,000UGX if not available at the time of distribution), 7 kilogrammes of Maize or Sorghum depending on what is in stock for the month, 1.5 kilogrammes of Beans, 1 piece of soap, 2 pairs of underwear for females above 16 years, and 1 facemask. All the above are per person per month and irrespective of the household size.⁵ Since June 2019, after the UN World Food Programme was accused of negligence over food aid deaths and sicknesses in Karamoja, the distribution of porridge flour has remained suspended, including to refugees.⁶

As a Centre for Justice and Forced Migrants and a human rights-based organisation courageously promoting tree growing in and around refugee-hosting areas, we are privy to the fact that many refugees are at the tail end of disasters associated with the destruction of existing forests. Still, refugee and host communities are tremendously shouldering afforestation and reafforestation loads in their communities.

Since 2017, and with generous funding support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, RLP has proactively engaged multiple stakeholders in bringing to the fore the environmental issues affecting refugee and host communities. We have also actively contributed to bringing to bear the commendable initiatives of refugees and host communities in tackling ecological challenges including activities related to tree growing. Since then, we have contributed to growing trees on over 207 acres of otherwise unutilised land in the refugee hosting districts of Adjumani, Kiryandongo, and Lamwo.

What does sustainable production and consumption mean for refugees?

As we commemorate this important day, we ought to be reminded that the debate on *"Forests and Sustainable Production and Consumption"* in relation to refugee contexts requires further critical discussions and additional work. Specifically, we implore all people living in Uganda to;

Address the land question in refugee-hosting areas. As refugee numbers continue to rise (Uganda currently hosts over 1.5 million persons of concern to UNHCR), the struggle for land is exacerbated. Land is an essential element in tree growing, and yet currently, refugees are allotted 30x30m of land within which they are expected to erect their shelter, grow food, and grow a few trees. The refugee management regime of Uganda is sitting on a potential time bomb waiting to explode in a few years to come if the subtle and yet brewing land-related concerns and tensions are not addressed. Government only has limited acres of land to offer to refugees in, especially western Uganda – leaving most support in the hands of host communities who have to offer their land in support of refugees.

⁵ Information obtained from February 2022 distribution in Kiryandongo refugee settlement and corroborated with findings from https://www.jointdatacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/JDC_RDD_Uganda.pdf

⁶ <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2019/06/19/wfp-uganda-food-aid-deaths-accused-negligence>

However, this comes at a time when i) Uganda is grappling with contentious conversations regarding ‘compulsory’ acquisition of land⁷, ii) residents of refugee-hosting districts including Lamwo are lately demanding agreements for use of land by refugees⁸, iii) OPM officials (including the minister in-charge⁹) are being arrested for allegedly grabbing land¹⁰ iv) studies show the need to reclaim land offered to refugees,¹¹ and above all v) refugee management leadership has been issuing ‘xenophobic’ and resentful statements relating to the land offered to refugees. Hon. Hilary Onek, for example, furiously once said,

*“If that land [given to refugees] was used for maybe farming and other activities, maybe we would be getting more out of it. But it is now lying idle because refugees are there [emphasis added]. Maybe we need to assess the value of giving this land and add it to our financial contribution”.*¹²

Harmonise the binary conflicts between forestry and agricultural land uses. The promotion of forestry on the one hand and the pressure for increased agricultural production to sustain ever-growing populations on the other is among the contemporary catch-22 situations; promoting one often leads to the destruction of the other. It is estimated that agriculture is responsible for approximately 80 per cent of tropical forests loss.

The relationship between agriculture and forestry is an essential feature of forestry development globally, let alone in developing nations. The struggle for enhanced livelihoods is a global reality, just like the need to preserve and conserve natural resources, including forests resources. Improvement in agricultural production has a direct link to the improvement of the well-being of farmers. Equally, forests are essential resources for the conservation of biodiversity, soil restoration, and climate change mitigation, all of which farmers benefit from.

Whereas initiatives including agroforestry are being promoted globally, the reality in refugee-hosting areas, many of which are recovering from decades of war, is different since the majority are impoverished, rely on rudimentary tools which perpetuate unsustainable agricultural practices, lack skills, knowledge and tools of modern farming practices, hardly document and record their proceeds, struggle with limited land sizes, and yet grapple with rapid population increase.

With ever reducing food ration, refugees are pushed to supplement relief items through subsistence agriculture. As they struggle with limited land sizes, they are left with few other choices than to revert to the use of forest-related resources. One wonders, therefore, how

⁷ <https://www.acode-u.org/uploadedFiles/PBP47.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/lamwo-residents-demand-agreements-for-refugee-land-1761712>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1veoEyykaQ>

¹⁰ <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/senior-opm-official-arrested-over-land-grabbing-1744936>

¹¹ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Lamwo-policy-paper-FINAL.pdf>

¹² <https://softpower.ug/govt-disappointed-that-pledges-from-refugee-summit-were-channeled-through-ngos/>

we can strike a sustainable balance in promoting agriculture while nurturing farmer-based natural regeneration alongside conventional tree planting/growing activities.

Tackle uncontrolled and unlawful burning and wildfires. Globally, wildfires destroy millions of acres of natural and artificial forests, and in the process millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide are released back into the atmosphere. Such fires pose severe threats to the environment, lead to financial loss in the forestry sector, and hamper human and ecosystem health. Recurring incidences of uncontrolled and unlawful burning and wildfires have profound negative impacts on the environment, and ultimately represent set-backs in the relative successes realised in forestry in Uganda and elsewhere. Addressing bush burning, including in refugee hosting areas, requires that community awareness be heightened, laws on arson and destruction of forests (including by-laws) be strengthened and proactively enforced, stakeholder synergies be strengthened, farmers be trained on managing wildfires, and tree growers be equipped with the necessary technologies and skills for firefighting.

Promote the uptake of the Water and Environment Sector Refugee Response Plan (WESRRP)¹³ for Refugees and Host Communities in Uganda. In November 2019, and with the support of UNHCR, the Government of Uganda, through The Office of the Prime Minister, released the above-integrated response plan in the quest for sustainable use of water, environment and natural resources. The response plan complements the Water Supply and Sanitation Infrastructure Development Plan.¹⁴ Whereas Uganda is known for having a ‘forest of laws and policies, community engagements on those laws and policies are wanting, many of those documents remain in languages bought from schools and therefore not refugees and host community-friendly, and many of the documents are never evaluated, or the reports not available to the public.

Reverse the impact of COVID-19 on the Forest and Forest Sector. The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated massive challenges in advancing government and private individuals’ goals in afforestation and reforestation. Besides the turmoil in household livelihoods due to loss of livelihoods associated with a series of lockdowns, vulnerable communities, including refugees, have had few other options than to turn to the environment, especially forest resources, to boost their livelihoods and economic functionality. Their activities in this area rapidly undid the relative conservation measures put in place before COVID-19. As economies slowly re-open and many nations look for a ‘quick fix’ to their financial crisis, poor people have equally turned to above ground biomass for fuelwood and alternative sources of income.

In the refugee field, COVID-19 hampered the implementation of the Water and Environment Sector Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities in Uganda¹⁵ Where initial commitment under outcome #2A under Environment and Natural Resources projected i)

¹³ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/75623.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://npa.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Water-and-Environment-Sector-Development-Plan-2020new.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/75623.pdf>

raising and growing 18 million tree seedlings in 11 districts, ii) Land acquisition (off-site) under the private-public partnership, iii) Providing refugees with cooking fuel to reduce on encroachment of neighbouring resources, and iv) restoring four degraded wetlands in three years. None of the above could be implemented due to the 'work from home' mantra associated with COVID-19 lockdowns, as NFA could hardly fulfil its assigned roles and responsibilities in providing technical support to districts.

Therefore, as the global economy slowly re-opens, there is a need for concerted efforts in supporting the implementation of Government programmes in promoting afforestation and reforestation.

Inform and educate communities on relevant forestry laws and policies. Whereas it's argued that 'ignorance of the law is no defence', it equally does no good to imprison an ill-informed refugee woman for having 'innocently' cut down a shrub to prepare meals for her children. As often pointed out, Uganda is not short of laws and policies on issues of concern. According to the National Tree Planting Act (2003), "*No person shall, in a forest reserve, cut, disturb, damage, burn or destroy any forest produce, or remove or receive any forest produce except -....*"¹⁶ The Uganda Forest Policy (2001)¹⁷ encourages the active participation of 'local' communities, including farmers, in the management of forests in Uganda.

However, one wonders, how much of the laws do people living in Uganda understand? How much do refugees, many of whom are from non-English speaking countries, understand existing laws and policies? Addressing such questions requires critical reflections on the nature of engagement of the rule of law actors with refugees and host communities concerning existing laws and policies governing forestry and forest management in Uganda, including the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act (2003).

Promote participatory forestry. Although several initiatives have been adopted by agencies, parastatals, and government authorities, including National Forestry Authority (NFA), promoting public-private partnerships in forestry, community members' participation in forestry still requires more actions. In refugee settlements across the country, commendable successes have been garnered in community forestry. Both refugees and host communities are engaged as key stakeholders in tree growing, processing of forest products, and other activities of forest-dwelling communities. However, there are critical questions worth answering; To what extent do refugees engage in participatory forestry? How are refugees involved in decision making in all aspects of forest management, formulating and implementing existing institutional frameworks, and utilising natural forests and woodlands state-owned or formerly state-owned?

Promote intersectionality in forestry and climate change debate. Studies have shown that forestry in and by itself isn't the panacea to the contemporary climate change challenges. However 'small' they are, related activities that promote carbon sequestration must be

¹⁶ <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/uga87770.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.nfa.go.ug/images/UgandaForestryPolicy2001.pdf>

encouraged. With the world wrestling unprecedented existential threats, we cannot afford to ignore the contribution of refugee smallholder farmers and foresters. As we pursue strict measures of gradual decarbonisation of production as an essential contributor to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, Uganda could benefit more if the contribution of refugees in maize production in districts including Kiryandongo are acknowledged, supported, and evaluated.

Elsewhere, studies on corn (commonly known as maize in Uganda) have shown promising results on 'carbon sink' - meaning they are among the plants that absorb more carbon from the atmosphere than they release. It is estimated that an acre of maize can absorb up to 8 tons of carbon dioxide and is therefore good for the environment.¹⁸

Is Our future one of hope - or doom?

Indubitably, the contemporary world is wrestling extraordinary existential threats. Forests are not only enablers to sustained existence on planet earth but also intrinsically linked to nutrition, health, shelter, and human existence in general. Ironically, every second, a forest is cut down the size of a football field. If the rate of deforestation remains the same, the world might only have 10 per cent of its' rainforest left by 2030, and if nothing is further done, all rainforests will be gone in 77 years. However, countries including Ethiopia have inspired other nations that it's possible to plan over 300 million trees in a single day. It is possible. May this encourage Uganda too!

We should not need a reminder that 31 per cent of modern diseases are a result of deforestation, nor another reminder from Franklin D. Roosevelt that *"A nation that destroys its soils destroys itself. Forest are the lungs of our land, purifying the air and giving fresh strength to our people"*. Instead, the world needs global citizens' concerted efforts to revolutionise tree growing and forest conversation. Through tree growing, the fight against the impact of catastrophic climate change can be tackled alongside storing carbon dioxide and addressing the rise in global temperature.

We are at a crucial time to check our consumption of forest products and re-write the history in making bold efforts to grow trees and protect all forest-related resources. It is estimated that forests have the potential of lifting one billion vulnerable people out of poverty and can create 8 million green jobs. If you believe that your children and future generation deserve a much better future, then may this day propel you to make deliberate efforts to do what you can, from where you are, and with what you have! Therefore, investment in forests is an investment in people. Every little action counts!

#PlayYourPart

#ProtectForestResources

#GrowMoreTrees

Nice Commemorations!

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¹⁸ https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/corn_fields_help_clean_up_and_protect_the_environment

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