

Isingiro residents embark on saving the environment

* Conservation

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When refugees fleeing from internal conflict in Rwanda in 1960 and 1962 entered Uganda, Isingiro County took them up. Little did Uganda know that these people would stay for so long.

They came with cattle, which had to graze, and they also had to cook. Since at the time the refugees came there was no government policy on environment they ended up downgrading the environment. This added to the other settlements in different regions of the country mainly Bushenyi and Kabale Districts looking for virgin land in the 1950's.

To date, Isingiro in Ankole, is among the regions with the most degraded environment followed by Ruhaama County in Ntungamo District. Most of the hills are hardly without vegetation yet these hills have supported the thousands of cattle and provided firewood to the population.

The Millennium villages project director, David Siriri says as a result of clearing forest reserves there is a shortage of wood products like firewood, poles and timber. This has led the children and women to spend many hours searching for firewood mainly from tree stumps.

But not all hope is lost, the intervention of Millennium villages project has brought hope among the communities thanks to former Isingiro south MP Johnson Nkuuhe who is also UNDP resident representative.

"The millennium villages project aims to help poor villages in Sub-Saharan Africa become self sustaining units through invest-

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Paul Mugisha
Tree farmer

ments in health, food production, education, access to clean water and building essential infrastructure, says Siriri.

Ruhiira cluster villages in Isingiro were chosen since they fitted in the challenging situation that needed intervention.

At the time of intervention, the hilly village had a vegetation cover of less than five per cent of the total land area. This had caused excessive soil erosion thereby escalating poverty and hunger.

"The objective of the intervention is therefore to reverse the loss of environmental resources and improve the ecosystem," Siriri says.

This is intended to stabilise the hillsides and increase tree cover needed to restore positive

ecological functions of the landscape and subsequently increase agricultural productivity.

Some interventions

The project has established four nursery trees for fruits, firewood, poles, and timber and soil and water conservation.

Communities have been trained on the importance of sustainable use of environment, resources, tree growing, tree nursery establishment and management. This has led to the establishment of 48 community and 14 individual nurseries that have put emphasis on grevillia, calliandra, eucalyptus and fruit trees.

Public places like schools and churches have benefited and are used as demonstration sites for the communities. The agriculture extension worker, Richard Gumisiriza says farmers are also encouraged to plant grevillia trees along roads and banana plantations since they restore fertility in the soils. Over one million trees have already been raised and planted in homesteads, schools, churches and health centres and along main roads.

Three hundred fifty one farmers have benefited from training on reversing the loss of environment resources and enhance ecosystem through establishment and management of agro forestry trees.

Since Isingiro is water stressed, there are inadequate water sources to establish community and individual nurseries to supplement those of the project.

The area also has a high prevalence of plant pests and diseases. But the intervention will

go a long way to restore the environment not that the communities have embraced the tree planting.

Lessons learnt

As a result of this training, some fruits have been yielded. Paul Mugisha of Nyakamuri village Nyakitunda Sub-county has taken up agro forestry with keen interest both for domestic and commercial purposes.

He has planted 56,000 grevillia trees for both timber and firewood worth Shs5m.

His trees, which are about two years old, are expected to fetch about Shs5bn in eight years time. Grevillia tree provides high quality oak timber and can be harvested at eight years.

"I use the leaves as feed for goats while I use the unwanted branches for firewood, I expect to harvest seeds that are on high demand and get about 200 kg per annum fetching about Shs16m," Mugisha says.

Mugisha says the project has given him some seeds to help in his farming. He is optimistic that neighbours are going to take after him to cover bare hills adjacent to his forest.

Constraints

Gumisiriza says there are not enough grevillia seeds because the tree is not yet popular in Uganda like it is in Kenya yet the demand is high. There is need for at least 5 million tree seedlings now that the residents have embraced tree planting for fruit, poles, firewood and timber. With this intervention in about six years the villages will have enough firewood and be able to cook their food properly and subsequently have a better life.



Paul Mugisha inspects some of his trees. He expects to make about Shs5bn in the field of agro forestry eight years from now. PHOTO BY OTUSHABIRE TIBYANGYE