

The Ugly And Beauty Of Mabira Forest Campaign In Uganda

The Mabira Campaign: What Sparked it Off?

Over the last 15 years, the country has lost about 1.3 million hectares (ha) of forest cover (FAO, 2007). This amounts to a loss of 86,700ha per year. This forest degradation and loss has been aggravated by the recent attempts by government of Uganda to give-away gazetted forest areas to individual private investors for commercial purposes in a bid to spur industrialization and economic development in the country. This has been evident in the following cases:-

In 1997, Government of Uganda (GoU) degazetted 1,006 ha of Namanve Central Forest Reserves for the development of an industrial estate against public protests. Despite the protests, government went ahead and completely cleared the forest. However, 10 years later, the people are asking where are the industries that warranted the degazettement and give-away of Namanve Forest Reserve?

In 2000, Government gave away 3,500 ha of forest reserves on Bugala islands in Lake Victoria to BIDCO, a vegetable oil processing company to establish a Palm Oil Tree estate and Oil Refinery on the islands. In addition to this give-away, BIDCO was vying for more of the gazetted land. This too prompted public protests. Despite the protests, the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) went ahead to approve the project and today a large chunk of the gazetted natural forest estate has been converted into a Palm Oil tree plantation.

In 2001, Government gave away another forest known as Butamira Forest Reserve for the benefit of Kakira Sugar Works (KSW) Ltd. Despite public protests and legal suits stopping the land give-away, Government, went ahead to give-away the land to KSW. Today, the forest has been completely whipped out and is no more.



Save Mabira Crusaders during the demonstration in Kampala, April 2007

Source: NAPE File Photo

In 2007, Government also decided to give-away over a third of Mabira Forest to Sugar Cooperation of Uganda Limited (SCOUL) for sugarcane growing against public protest, technical, professional and expert advice. It is important to note here that earlier in 1997; government forcefully evicted some local residents that had encroached on Mabira Forest in an act of enforcing the law that prohibits encroachment on gazetted forests. Some of the affected residents were arrested and they could still be languishing in government prisons without trial or justice being done. The proposed give-away of Mabira Forest to an individual investor was therefore a climax of forest annihilation in the country, a contradiction and contravention of the Law. This coupled with the great value and attachment Ugandans have on Mabira Forest and the dangers associated with climate change which have become evident in the declining water levels of Lake Victoria and other water bodies; rising temperatures; and alterations in rainfall patterns (seasons), are what sparked off the protests.

The National Association of Professional

Environmentalists (NAPE), in collaboration with other civil society organisations and individuals such as Nature Uganda, ACODE, UCSD, Environmental Alert, AFIEGO, Greenwatch, ECOVIC, Uganda Joint Christian Council, the Muslim Community in Uganda, KACITA, Members of Parliament, local community of Mabira, cultural institutions, political parties, among many others, under the umbrella of "Save Mabira Crusade" organised and held a Peaceful Public Demonstration against the give-away of Mabira Forest on the 12th April 2007 in Kampala.

THE UGLY OF THE MABIRA CAMPAIGN

■ **Property Damage and Loss of Lives:** As result of the demonstration, property was destroyed and 4 Ugandans and an Indian were killed in the scuffles. This was attributed to the Police's failure to provide security and guide the demonstrators as originally planned, but instead resorted to confronting the demonstrators with tear gas, bullets and batons. It is important to note here that the organisers of

the demonstration had earlier sought permission from the Police for the demonstration, which was granted. It therefore took the demonstrators by surprise when the police force started firing tear gas and bullets and dispersing them with batons.



A motorcycle being burnt by demonstrators, April 12, 2007.

Source: NABE File Photo



Leaders of Save Mabira Crusade and others in the Dock of High Court. Standing in the Foreground Left to right are:- Mr. Frank Muramuzi, Mr. Mbidde Mukasa, Hon. Hussein Kyanjo and Hon. Alim Beatrice Anywar.

■ **The Violation of Human Rights:** It is not only a Constitutional right, but also a universal human right for people to demonstrate against an actor or condition that denies them their right to self expression, assembly, survival, safety, health and sanctity of their well-being. It would have been wrong for the Police to deny the Save Mabira Crusade the right to assemble and demonstrate against the unabated annihilation of forest ecosystems in the name of economic development at the expense of the sanity of our environment upon which all mankind entirely depends. Therefore, for people to assemble and demonstrate to express their dissatisfaction about government's planned and continued destruction of forests in the country was constitutionally right. Hence, the action by the Police and other state security agents to deny the people this right by forcefully and violently dispersing them while in a peaceful procession was outrageous, an abuse of the law and an attack on people's rights.

■ **The arrest of demonstrators:** Many demonstrators were arrested, but only 32 were charged. These included members of Parliament, Members of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the business community, students and members of faith based organisations. The arrested people were later released on bail after being charged with "murder and participating in unlawful demonstration". It should be noted here that the demonstration was actually authorised (given permission) by the Police. But, government has continuously criminalised the demonstrators calling them thugs, anti-government, anti development, charlatans, etc. with the intention of intimidating the Save Mabira Crusaders.

■ **Political Lies:** When government failed to explain and address the causes of the public demonstration, it resorted to telling lies. For instance, Government claimed that:

- The section of Mabira that was going to be given-away was already degraded by the communities. Whether it was degraded or not, it is part of a gazetted area that must be preserved and allowed to regenerate, if at all it was degraded.

- Peoples' incomes and livelihoods would drastically improve with the expansion of the sugarcane estate into Mabira Forest, thus making them richer. This is a lie. The fact is that over the last 100 years, SCOU's sugarcane estate has existed and yet the incomes and livelihoods of people working on the plantation or living in its vicinity have not improved or made them richer. Instead, they have become more impoverished. For example, the workers are paid only shs 30,000 per month as a wage. This money can not sustain a family of 3 people for a week in an urban or even a rural setting.

- Investment in sugarcane was more important than having Mabira Forest. Government said that the value of sugarcane plantations superceded the social, economic and environmental benefits of Mabira Forest. "Mabira is only good for its timber and firewood and nothing else". However, the fact is that the value of Mabira is more than what government portrays it to be. It is a store of biodiversity (gene pool) of native species, a catchment for Lake Victoria and River Nile, important in stabilising climate, a tourist attraction, a laboratory for students and researchers, source of herbal (precursors of modern) medicines, a global resource, etc.

- The demonstration was illegal and unauthorised, yet it was authorised and cleared in writing by the Police, which is an arm of government.

- The demonstration was unpopular and that the leaders were self seekers. The fact is that the demonstration was very popular, timely and inevitable. The leaders are not self seekers, but were fighting for a noble cause and the interests of Ugandans. This is a reason why the demon-

stration attracted over 100,000 people in Kampala alone. A similar demonstration was concurrently held in the Mabira Forest area in Mukono district. The impasse was sustained for over a week.

■ **Intimidation:** Government intimidated its technocrats who held deviant views regarding forest use and management. This is evident in the resignation of members of the National Forest Authority Board. This intimidation did not stop with the technocrats; but it spilled over to the demonstrators and the general public.

■ **Investor Arrogance:** Prior to the Mabira demonstration, civil society met with the management of SCOU with the intention of discussing alternative to Mabira forest for sugarcane. Despite the civil society plea, SCOU management insisted that they were determined to take Mabira whether it was right or wrong to do so and with or without alternative.

■ **Racial animosity and threats to international relations:** The death of people including an Asian during the demonstration created a negative impression that could have been avoided if there was enough protection by police. The impression created after the death of an Asian was that Ugandans (the demonstrators) had specific vendetta against other races of non Ugandan origin, which was not the case. Asians have been living in Uganda for more than 100 years and their relationship with native Ugandans has been good.

■ **Tear gas:** The frequent use of tear gas by government (Police) to quell demonstration is a health hazard as well as environmental abuse.

■ **Contradictions:** Immediately after the demonstration on 12th April 2007, government came-out and made conflicting and contradictory statements regarding its intentions on Mabira Forests. For instance:

- The Minister of Finance, Planning and Economic Development while in Guyana in 2007 said that Government was no longer going to give-away Mabira Forest to SCOU. This was also confirmed by the Minister of Water and Environment.

- The National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), the government body responsible for management of the environment in Uganda, also informed the public that Mabira give-away was no more.

Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Kampala, the President informed the public that the issue of Mabira Forest give-away was not yet resolved. What a contradiction!!!

Government has frequently argued that its intention of giving-away gazetted (protected) lands to investors is because most of the land in private ownership is too expensive for the investors to afford. Therefore, in a bid to spur industrialisation, economic development, employment and promote foreign direct investments in the country, there is need for government to avail investors with cheap land for extensive commercial ventures, which can only be found in gazetted lands. However, this raises a lot of ethical, legal and professional questions regarding sustainable natural resources allocation and management. People frequently ask that, is the destruction of the remaining natural forests and gazetted estates in the country the best way to go in development and industrialisation? If indeed the intention is to cause development, create jobs/employment and alleviate poverty, why don't the investors buy land on the open market, since this would benefit and improve the wealth of the landowners and

have trickle-down effects.

□ **Inconveniences:** On the part of the demonstrators, the leaders of the demonstration were arrested, jailed and charged on trumped-up charges and were therefore subject to prolonged legal proceedings and unplanned costs. Up to now the accused are still required to report to the High Court for hearing and defence of their case. On the part of government, a lot of resources were wasted in attempting to disperse and quell the riots. Similarly, government is also incurring legal costs, in addition to the loss of popularity among the citizens, strained international relations, loss of lives, property, etc.



The Beauty of the Mabira Campaign

Despite the ugly that were experienced during the Save Mabira campaign, not all was bad. The following are considered the beauty of the campaign:

■ **Unity in Diversity for a Common Cause:** People from all walks of life came together in unison and opposed the planned give-away of Mabira Forest to SCOUTS for sugarcane growing. As mentioned earlier in this publication, the demonstration brought together politicians (both of the ruling NRM party and the opposition parties), government technocrats, civil society, religious organizations, the academia, the private sector and the business community.

■ **Government Seeks Solutions:** Immediately after the

■ **Intervention of the International Community:** As soon as the Mabira demonstration hit the news headlines, it became an international issue, which brought in the intervention of regional and international peoples and states urging government of Uganda to abandon the idea of giving away Mabira for sugarcane growing.

■ **Asian Condemnation of the Mabira Give-away:** Despite the death of an Indian in the demonstration, majority of the Indian community in Uganda condemned the action by government to give-away Mabira forest and the desire by SCOU to continue vying for Mabira Forest to grow sugarcane. Also the Indian community demonstrated empathy upon the families of the 4 dead Ugandans, which was a good gesture of brotherhood, togetherness and unity in diversity.

■ **The Mabira Forest Presumed Saved:** As a result of the demonstration and intervention of the international community Mabira Forest was pronounced saved from annihilation by various government officials at different forums local and international.

■ **Wider Public Awareness of the Importance of Mabira and other forests in Uganda:**

Due to the demonstration, there was increased public awareness and understanding of the importance of Mabira Forest and other forests in the country. It also exposed the politics and controversies surrounding the Mabira Forest give-away and other natural resources use and management in the country and those behind the moves to give away the forest and exploit the country's natural resources for selfish purposes. The demonstration also spurred further research and studies in assessing the value and contribution of Mabira Forest in Uganda. Independent studies have revealed the importance (significance) of Mabira forests to Uganda and the globe in general

(Nature Uganda 2007). The studies found that preserving Mabira forest in its natural state had greater social, economic and environmental benefits to the country compared to growing sugarcane in the area. Although a wider public now appreciates the role of Mabira and other forests in Uganda, a lot still needs to be done to ensure that all Ugandans understand the roles of forests and how to preserve and utilize them for their benefit.

■ **Voices of the People Prevail:** Despite arrests, intimidation, political lies and contempt on the part of government, the voices of the people have prevailed and will continue to prevail. It is no longer doubtful that people of diverse backgrounds can come together and assemble

strengthened these bi- and multi-lateral agreements.

■ **Issues of Climate Change now in the Limelight:** The demonstration also brought to the fore issues of climate change and brought the realities of climate change to the doorstep of many Ugandans.

STATUS OF MABIRA

By the time of publishing this booklet, the issue of Mabira had not yet been finally resolved. The issue was still controversial with government whether or not to give-away the Forest for sugarcane growing. On the other hand, civil society and the general public were still determined to defend the sanctity of Mabira Forest for posterity.



Members of Save Mabira Crusade in a Consultative meeting.

in unison against an abuse of human rights in Uganda.

■ **Strengthened the Bilateral and Multi-lateral Agreements:** Uganda is a signatory and a party to several bi- and multi-lateral agreements to preserve and sustainably utilize nature and the resources therein e.g. the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Ramsar Convention, etc. Uganda has also committed itself to preserving Mabira Forest for the benefit of the proposed Bujagali Hydropower dam project 8km downstream of the existing Nalubaale and Kiira power complex. Therefore, the Save Mabira campaign