

Uganda wetlands maps to help boost economy

Uganda's leaders now have access to maps that will allow them to reduce poverty through better management of the country's wetlands. The map from Mapping a Better Future shows that highly impacted wetlands are spread widely across Uganda and are located in areas with both low and high poverty levels.



Such data confirms that there is no straightforward relationship between poverty levels and potential wetland degradation.

Policymakers can use this information to flag certain subcounties where close coordination between wetlands management and poverty-reduction efforts could be beneficial for both wetlands and local populations.

"Wetlands affect the daily lives of every one of Uganda's citizens and provide a powerful wall of protection for Uganda's economic development," said Paul Mafabi, commissioner of the Wetlands Management Department in Uganda's Ministry of Water and Environment, during an event to officially release the maps here today at the Statistics House.

The maps appear as part of a new report, Mapping a Better Future: How Spatial Analysis Can Benefit Wetlands and Reduce Poverty in Uganda, produced by the World Resources Institute (WRI) in collaboration with Uganda's Wetlands Management Department, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, and the International Livestock Research Institute.

Maps included within the report demonstrate that both poor and developed areas in Uganda have experienced wetlands degradation, dispelling the myth that wetlands loss only occurs in poorer areas.

Mafabi, a co-author of the report, added, "These maps and analysis enable us to identify and place an economic value on the nation's wetlands. They show where wetland management can have the greatest impacts on reducing poverty."

Defined as areas where plants and animals have adapted to temporary or permanent flooding, wetlands are found in every county in Uganda. Used primarily for water collection, livestock grazing, and natural resource harvesting, wetlands also filter water pollutants, regulate flooding, and provide medicinal alternatives for poorer citizens.

"Poor people are highly dependent on wetlands for daily subsistence and cash-generating activities, such as selling products made from papyrus," said Norbert Henninger, a WRI expert on East African ecosystems and a co-author of the report. "The short-term financial incentives from converting wetlands for crop use or real-estate development are often not aligned with the long-term benefits provided by managing and conserving these ecosystems for the public good."

The report builds upon efforts undertaken during the last 15 years by the Ugandan government to promote sustainable wetland management. Both Uganda's Poverty Eradication Action Plan and the 10-year Wetlands Sector Strategic Plan, launched in 2001, have emphasized the need to balance poverty reduction and wetlands management.

Between 1995 and 2005, the government spent US\$2 million to develop the National Wetlands Information System as an inventory and tracking system of wetland use in Uganda - the first of its kind in Africa.

Simultaneously, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics produced detailed maps showing poverty levels across the country.

"Uganda has made considerable progress in identifying its wetlands and mapping poverty areas, but analysis of the two sets of data has been kept separate," said Jonathan Lash, WRI president. "This research fills that void and should allow policymakers to promote land-use changes that improve the lives of all Ugandans."

Mafabi added, "The key next steps for Uganda will be to complete and update the national wetlands data system, and to apply economic valuation to all major wetland products and services, particularly their importance in filtering drinking water supplies and regulating hydrological flows.

Recognition of poverty-wetlands linkages will help officials prioritise and plan strategies that reflect the importance of healthy wetlands to the citizens of Uganda and the national economy."

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