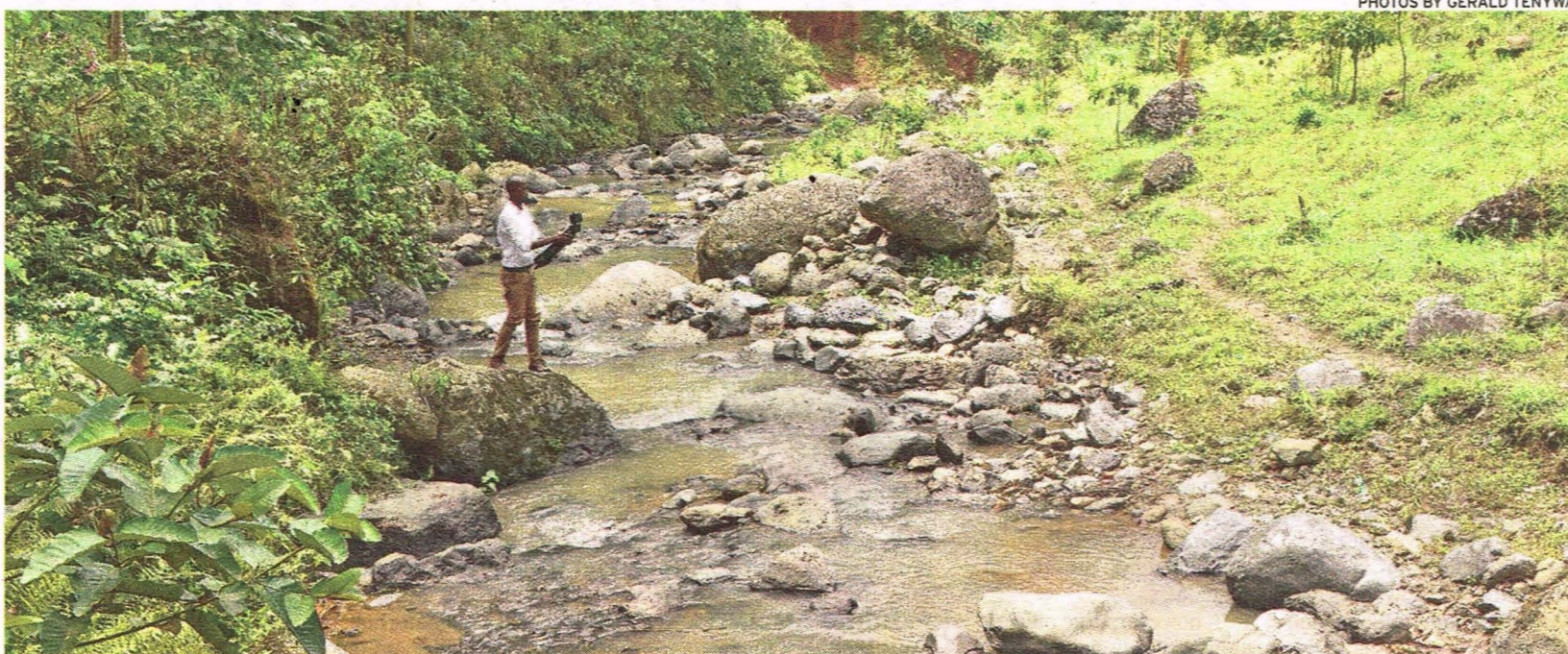


For decades, Mountain Elgon has been synonymous with landslides. This is about to change as restoration of the ecological interactions take root. Alongside this, food security and better incomes are gaining ground. If scaled up, these initiatives could spark off sustainability, writes **Gerald Tenywa**.

MT. ELGON: FROM LANDSLIDES TO

PHOTOS BY GERALD TENYWA



Restoration of the banks of River Sume in Bududa is underway. Residents are planting indigenous trees to protect the riverbanks from erosion

Sam Kochi is a lucky farmer. Unlike most farmers living on the landslide-prone Mountain Elgon in Bududa district, eastern Uganda, he is the proud owner of an ever-green garden of coffee and bananas plantations. His plantations sit on one of the steep slopes of Elgon.

"I have been digging trenches to trap soil and water in my garden and I have got some handsome rewards," he says, adding that he gets bountiful harvests and he has built a sturdy house out of his earnings from coffee and bananas.

"My garden is green even when the sun becomes hostile in the dry season. The water run off on the slopes comes with a lot of fertile soils, which I remove after the rains and use to fertilise my coffee and banana plantations," Kochi says.

As officials from Bududa district and the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) toured his garden, he couldn't hold his excitement.

"I have been earning good money from my coffee, and it has helped me to construct my house up there," Kochi says.

He is one of the local residents in Bududa who have defied landslide odds. Kochi also embraced the Global Environment Facility and the United Nations Environment initiative that promotes "think

globally and act locally."

This particular visit turned into a memorable experience on the steep mountain, where NEMA trustees observed an inspiring initiative by farmers actively working to restore the environment.

"It is essential to care for the soil because it sustains you," says Hajjati Aphwa Kawaase Sebyala, a NEMA board member affectionately known as "Maama Green".

As the world grapples with the changing climate and loss of biodiversity, local action is needed to accelerate sustainability on the mountains, including Elgon. This is because they are facing unique challenges.

After two decades of devastating landslides claiming many lives on Elgon and flooding in its low-lying areas, the need for a lasting solution became urgent.

With most streams and rivers from Elgon carrying more silt than water, the wetlands and Lake Kyoga are increasingly at risk. This highlights how the growing mountain population is relying on unsustainable

practices that strain the environment.

Experts say this also highlights that many of the large populations settled on the mountains are relying on unsustainable practices that harm the natural environment.

Also, experts argue, local communities need to look at Mt. Elgon National Park as an opportunity rather than a barrier. This is because it holds a lot of tourism prospects that can benefit the local people, the districts and the country. Elgon is also one of the water towers of the Nile.

In the past three decades, the local people have been locked in ongoing conflicts

AS THE WORLD GRAPPLES WITH THE CHANGING CLIMATE AND LOSS OF BIODIVERSITY, LOCAL ACTION IS NEEDED TO ACCELERATE SUSTAINABILITY ON THE MOUNTAINS, INCLUDING ELGON.

with the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) over encroachment on Mt. Elgon National Park.

Arabica coffee, the chief export from mountainous regions including Elgon, is valued significantly higher than Robusta coffee, which thrives in the low-lying areas, particularly in central Uganda. The economic impact is becoming evident as farmers in areas like Bududa are starting to build new homes, reflecting their growing prosperity.

RESTORATION

Soil fertility and the prosperity on Elgon are deeply interconnected. As the local people look at prosperity, they also need to keep their eyes on the ball:

Replenishing soil fertility. A lot of water has gone under the bridge regarding the restoration efforts on the mountains.

The most recent initiative began in May 2024, when NEMA launched the Mt. Elgon project during the International Biodiversity Day commemoration, as reported in the State of Environment Report 2024. This project aims to strengthen national policies on integrated landscape management, sustainable land management and climate-smart agriculture.

Additionally, NEMA's initiative aims to enhance the capacity of authorities to restore degraded farmlands, conserve biodiversity and promote climate resilience among vulnerable groups, especially women and children. It also seeks to raise awareness within local communities about the critical importance of integrating environmental conservation with economic

activities.

To achieve these goals, NEMA is collaborating with partners, including the Ministry of Water and Environment, Uganda Wildlife Authority, National Forestry Authority, local governments, civil society organisations and the private sector.

As leaders of the initiative, NEMA guided the team from Mbale city to Bududa, stopping briefly at the district headquarters before visiting Bushika Integrated Area Co-operative Enterprise, one of their local partners.

Bushika has trained farmers such as Kochi to cultivate organic coffee, emphasising not only income-generation, but also environmental stewardship.

The co-operative highlighted that farmers are planting indigenous trees such as albizia, which enrich the soil by dropping litter that decomposes and restores nutrients. These trees also improve water infiltration into the soil and provide shade, protecting the coffee crops.

In the lower areas of Bududa, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) is collaborating with local communities to plant indigenous trees, such as Prunus Africana and Cordia along the degraded banks of the River Sume. Prunus Africana is an

LIFELINES

Population boom

Bududa has a land size of 250.8 square kilometres and three quarters of Bududa is covered by the national park. It also has a population of 268,970 people.

This is Uganda's highest rural population densities in the country, according to Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS).

"The district has a high population density of over 450-1,000 people per square kilometre on the slopes of Mount Elgon, far exceeding the national average," states UBOS report.

Experts say Bududa is also unique because it depends on rainfall.

"People are engaged in subsistence agricultural activities. There is a lot of pressure exacerbated on the land. You hardly see a district with conserved land banks. People cultivate on the banks and do not leave any breathing space," Yonasani Bululu, the Bududa town clerk, says.

"Even when the government allocates funds to Bududa, many environmental concerns remain unresolved. We need committed implementing partners like NEMA to help conserve these areas," he adds.

Bululu pointed out that Bugisu has unique features and needs a lot more attention than the low-lying areas.

According to Milton Kamoti Wasunguyi, the Bududa district chairman, for a district that has lost over 500 people to landslides, a new approach to conservation must be crafted.

"We know that nature can exist without us, but we cannot exist without nature. We need to ensure that the generations to come inherit a precious environment. But we have degraded some of it. Bududa is a hard-to-reach area, and we have lost 500 people in landslide disasters since 2010," Wasunguyi says.

indigenous tree species valued for its medicinal properties, particularly in the treatment of prostate cancer, a condition commonly affecting older men. Cordia's timber is preferred for making strong boats.

The communities are also planting Napier grass, which helps stabilise the soil and serves as fodder for their livestock. As the Napier grass is harvested, its roots regenerate, making it a sustainable source of feed and soil protection.

ENTER UWA

Olivia Biira, a conservation and education officer at Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), explains that convincing farmers who once cultivated land right up to the riverbanks to give up portions of their farmland has been a slow, negotiated process.

"This progress has come through time, understanding and mutual appreciation,"

Biira says, adding that they have agreed with some of its neighbours on a 50-metre buffer zone along River Sume that must remain intact to protect the ecosystem.

Apart from Bududa, NEMA's team also moved to Kapchorwa and Sironko, where they encountered community groups and government officials.

In Kapchorwa, the teams encountered what were referred to as fodder banks. "The local people have been grazing their animals in the park," says Sam Chemonges, a local resident in Kapchorwa, adding that this is expensive because they have to pay sh100,000 in a month.

WAY FORWARD

Marion Namono, the district environment officer, says distribution of tree seedlings to enhance restoration of the degraded areas is the way to go.

Yet for Barirega



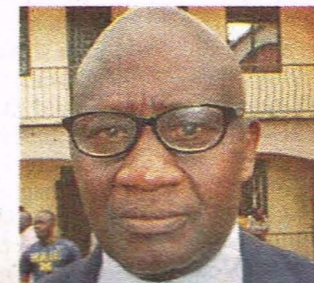
Hajat Kawaase Sebyala, a NEMA board member, standing beside a trench in farmer Sam Kochi's garden in Bududa. These trenches play a big role in controlling soil erosion and improving soil fertility



Ogwal and his team inspecting Napier grass planted by local communities on the slopes of Mt. Elgon in Kapchorwa. This grass helps protect the soil from erosion and prevents the silting of nearby rivers

"We want to create alternative livelihood," says Francis Ogwal, the senior manager for environment planning at NEMA, adding that they are working to enhance food security and protect ecological systems.

In an interview with *The Weekend Vision*, James Ateker, the head of the Mt. Elgon project at NEMA, says: "We want to improve the value chains of beans, maize, bananas and Irish potatoes to become resilient to the changing climate. We need to link the producers to the markets so that they get more money."



Bududa district chairperson Wasunguyi



Bududa RDC Namara

Okumu, the chairperson of the NEMA board of trustees, says: "What we also need is to change the mind-set of the local people. The project is

relevant because you have many people on a piece of land. People need to survive, you need a lot of skills to get the best from what you have."

"We need to improve coffee for sustainable agriculture production. This is not the end of the initiative, but we are going to work so hard to ensure that there is continuity. The communities should own these initiatives," he adds.

Tapping into Bududa's rich and fertile soil, Julief Namara says, will be a timely turnaround for the area.

"Government wants to see people develop economically and that is why it has come up with the Parish Development Model (PDM)," she says.

The restoration activities on Mt Elgon, experts say, shows that sustainability is interconnected as spelt out in the 17 goals of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). This is about poverty, prosperity, planet, peace and partnerships.

BUT WILL THIS WORK?

Patrick Byakagaba, a lecturer in the department of environmental management at Makerere University, says NEMA may not have enough resources to target everyone staying on the Elgon landscape.

"If we appreciate that resources are scarce, I would go for areas that are critically sensitive," he says, adding that this should be areas where there is community support.

In addition, Byakagaba says, civil society organisations can work with district officials to propel sustainability.

"I would advise that networking is embedded in the initiative. The results should be shared with other areas beyond where the initiative is being implemented. This is going to promote continuity even after the initiative has ended," he says, rallying farmers to emulate Kochi's model to sustain climate-smart agriculture on Mt. Elgon.

NEMA executive director Barirega Akankwasah

