

Apart from a total of 24,464 trees that have been planted, buffer zones have been restored in Obongi's Palorinya area, with 26 households voluntarily relocating.

BY MIKE SEBALU

A total of over 22,100 residents from across four West Nile districts of Adjumani, Obongi, Zombo and Madi-Okollo, and two others of Amudat and Nakapiripirit in Karamoja, have so far benefitted from a four-year climate change project geared towards restoring river banks and promoting smart agriculture.

In the forests of Zombo and the dry lands of Karamoja, communities who once depended on charcoal burning and encroachment are now planting trees, protecting riverbanks and earning from climate-smart farming.

The West Nile-based project has so far seen 24,464 trees planted, over 200 people trained as climate action champions, and over 26 households relocated from river buffer zones in Obongi. A total of 58.6 percent of the beneficiaries is women.

About the project

The project - Strengthening Environmental Action in West Nile & Karamoja (SEA-WNK) - running way back from August 2024 to December 2027 under the Programme for Accountability, Civic Engagement and Rights (PACER), aims to reverse environmental degradation caused by low awareness and rising population pressure on natural resources.

The project is being funded by a consortium of four embassies led by the Embassy of Denmark, with Ireland, Sweden and the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and is being implemented by RICE WESTNILE as lead partner, alongside Sustainable Plan and Action for Community Empowerment (SPACE), Friends of Zoka, and the Africa Centre for Energy and Mineral Policy.

Mr Rolex Aleku, the monitoring evaluation, accountability and learning coordinator for SEA-WNK project, says: "We have reached out to 22,102 people so far, 58.6 percent of them women, against a target of 78,800. They are adopting new methods because they now understand the link between conservation and survival."

The over 200 climate action champions have been trained to monitor compliance, advocate for policy change, and link communities to government programmes such as the Parish Development Model. RICE WESTNILE is also part-

Climate initiative restores West Nile residents' hope



The Environmental Police Unit conducts an operation in Paloro Sub-county, Gulu against illegal logging and commercial charcoal dealers. The project in West Nile is meant to improve forest cover. PHOTO/FILE

nering with Muni University on research into ecosystems like LecoPeta in Karamoja. In Adjumani District, particularly in Jihwa parish, communities have been trained in environmental conservation through a one stove a time mode. With one stove a time, communities often prepare meals in a single pot or single-burner setting.

Mr Peter Iya, a community member trained by Friends of Zoka under the SEA-WNK project, says communities are sensitised on the importance of one stove a time to reduce bush burning and cut firewood consumption through energy-saving stoves.

"The stove's use little firewood because the fire is built on one side and spreads quickly, unlike the traditional three-stone fire. This helps conserve the environment," he says.

Mr Iya builds the stoves using locally available materials like anthill soil, banana stems, sap, spear grass and water, and he has constructed at least one stove in each of Jihwa's four villages.

He says the impact is immediate, with women who once walked long distances for firewood now spending less time and energy collecting fuel.

VISIBLE IMPACT.

Mr Rolex Aleku, the monitoring evaluation, accountability and learning coordinator for SEA-WNK project, says: "We have reached out to 22,102 people so far, 58.6 percent of them women, against a target of 78,800. They are adopting new methods because they now understand the link between conservation and survival."

Through mobilisation by LC chairpersons, Mr Iya has trained over 50 residents in stove construction and use. His sensitisation has also contributed to a noticeable drop in bush burning in the parish.

The intervention is part of SEA-WNK's broader approach in Adjumani implemented by Friends of Zoka, to pair awareness with practical, low-cost solutions that reduce pressure on forests and improve household livelihoods.

Achievements

Apart from a total of 24,464 trees that have been planted in West Nile through partnerships with the National Forestry Authority and the Lutheran World Federation Uganda, buffer zones have been restored in Obongi's Palorinya area, with 26 households voluntarily relocating.

Additionally, fish stocks have improved and drowning incidents have reduced.

There is also reduced deforestation after regular compliance monitoring and confiscation of tools from offenders, according to Henry Onzimai Look, the Obongi district natural resources officer.

Policy change in Madi-Okollo, where the district leadership passed an environmental ordinance is now being rolled out. The ordinance introduces licensing and quarterly monitoring of waste, plastic disposal and disease rates.

Uleppi Sub-county outgoing chairperson John Adaku says with support from RICE WESTNILE, they were able to establish a garbage site.

"People have moved from the river buffer zones, fish production has increased and this is a big milestone," he says.

Other beneficiaries under this project are the youth who have been sensitised

and moved away from charcoal burning to climate-smart income.

In Waka parish, Obongi, 10 young people formed Ngoma Saving Group after the climate action champions training. According to the group chairperson, Mr Mwamba Kassim, in February, they embraced irrigating on a two-acre tomato farm to divert youth from charcoal burning.

"We harvested seven boxes and earned Shs2.45m. We repaid our loans and opened eight acres of maize to help refugees after the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees cut rations," he says.

The group also built a local bridge to prevent flooding and linked two members to the government industrial hub for skilling.

Mr Abdul Rahman, another group member, testifies to have abandoned charcoal burning.

"I bought three goats, planted maize and now rear chickens. I am financially stable," he says.

In Zombo, Mr Abeditho Adrogy, a farmer, has planted 1,200 coffee trees and 130 pine and eucalyptus trees after training with SPACE.

"We teach farmers to stop bush burning, use mulching and dig trenches. Now duty bearers are asking us to do more sensitisation in schools and communities," he says.

Despite all the achievements, the project faces a number of challenges along the way, among which is leaders lacking sufficient resources.

Youth groups need maize hullers, irrigation equipment and better roads to get their produce to the market, which are beyond their budget.

Waste management remains a challenge and some wetland users remain stuck and are seeking compensation for relocation amid low budget allocations.

Ms Veronica Weirimu, the communications officer at RICE WESTNILE, says now the focus is on linking communities to duty bearers and the private sector.

"We have trained over 200 champions and created platforms for women and persons with disabilities to advocate for accountability," she says.

As SEA-WNK enters its third year, stakeholders say the model is working through pairing awareness with livelihoods, backed with policy, for communities to protect what they once exploited.