

A PROCEEDINGS REPORT OF A COMMUNITY MEETING ON SAVING BUGOMA FOREST FROM DESTRUCTION



Participants in a group photo. A local community taskforce was formed to defend Bugoma forest from destruction following the meeting.

FEBURARY 9, 2021

RWEMBAHO VILLAGE, KIKUUBE DISTRICT

1. Introduction and Background

On February 9, 2021, Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO) and our partners under the Save Bugoma Forest Campaign (SBFC) organised a meeting in which communities living around Bugoma forest and their leaders participated.

During the meeting, ways in which the Bugoma forest host communities could participate in efforts to protect Bugoma forest from oil, land grabbing and sugarcane threats were discussed.

Bugoma forest is a 41,144-hectares central forest reserve that is found in the Albertine Graben. It is one of the few remaining tropical rainforests in Uganda.

The forest plays climate stabilisation, regulatory, provisioning and other roles that both the forest host communities and Ugandans enjoy.

Unfortunately, Bunyoro Kitara Kingdom (BKK) claimed 8,000 hectares of the forest. In 2016, Uganda's Ministry of Lands issued BKK with a freehold land title for the land. The kingdom subsequently leased the same land to Hoima Sugar Ltd (HSL) to grow sugarcane.

The grabbing of Bugoma forest land happened because oil activities in the Albertine Graben have created pressure on land.

The destruction of Bugoma forest due to oil, sugarcane and other threats will not only negatively affect the forest host communities but Ugandans and the international community at large. Since 2016 therefore, AFIEGO and our SBFC partners have been working to protect Bugoma forest.

To ensure that communities are involved in efforts to protect the forest, a meeting with the host communities was organised. Below is what transpired in the meeting.

2. Meeting proceedings

2.1. Welcome remarks

Mr. Benon Tusingwire, the Executive Director of Navigators for Development Association (NAVODA) and a member of the SBFC, welcomed the participants to the meeting. He noted that the SBFC team has been conducting several campaigns at a national level with different stakeholders to protect Bugoma forest.

Mr. Tusingwirwe also noted that some community engagements had been conducted. He reminded the participants of meetings that had been held with communities in Kabwoya in 2020 and noted that this particular meeting was a continuation of last year's meetings.

Mr. Tusingwire also informed the meeting that he had stealthily entered Bugoma forest and found out that the forest is almost finished because they were cutting all the trees for timber and charcoal.

He added that the forest must be conserved at all costs because it is a habitat for chimpanzees. Because the forest was being destroyed, the chimpanzees are harassing communities and eating their crops, Mr. Tusingwirwe said.

He added that recently when President Museveni was in Masindi, he stated that Bugoma is not going to be destroyed. Unfortunately, it is being destroyed. He further called upon the communities to stand up and raise their voices against the destruction.

Mr. Tusingwire then called on Mr. Bashir Twesigye of the SBFC to inform the participants about the objectives of the meeting.

2.2. Submission by Mr. Bashir Twesigye, member of the SBFC

Mr. Bashir Twesigye also welcomed the local leaders and community members to the meeting. He thanked them for their interest in saving Bugoma forest.

Mr. Twesigye informed the meeting that the objectives of the meeting were:

1. Discuss what communities can do to save Bugoma forest.
2. Discuss what can be done to protect the rights of the Bugoma forest communities.
3. Form a community taskforce to help in the campaign to save Bugoma forest and others.



Mr. Bashir Twesigye stating the objectives of the community engagement including that on forming a community taskforce to protect Bugoma forest

2.3. Submission by Mr. Dickens Kamugisha, chairperson-SBFC

Mr. Dickens Kamugisha, the chairperson of the SBFC, thanked the communities for their commitment to saving Bugoma forest.

He informed the meeting that the SBFC had been engaging different stakeholders at the national level like the Ministry of Lands, National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), National Forestry Authority (NFA) and others to save Bugoma forest from destruction.

Mr. Kamugisha noted that the above efforts were not enough if the directly-affected communities are not actively involved and also engaging different stakeholders.

He encouraged them to form the “Bunyoro Save Bugoma Forest Campaign” to engage different stakeholders at different levels.



Mr. Dickens Kamugisha encouraging communities to form a local SBFC taskforce

Mr. Kamugisha comforted the communities about the challenges they are facing in their struggles to save the forest and stated that the SBFC had come on the ground to get ideas on how they can combine energies to save the forest.

He informed the meeting that the SBFC had engaged Bunyoro Kingdom on several occasions.

He further informed the participants that the Ministry of Lands gave a land title for the contested part of Bugoma forest to Bunyoro Kingdom which leased the same to Hoima Sugar Ltd. Hoima Sugar thereafter conducted an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) study and submitted it to NEMA to approve their sugar project. The sugarcane project was approved.

Mr. Kamugisha added that the certificate of approval that was issued by NEMA was in contravention of the law and is being challenged by a team of lawyers from the SBFC in court.

Mr. Kamugisha stated that Bunyoro Kingdom informed the SBFC that NEMA did not consult them before approving the ESIA report.

He further informed the communities that they tried to engage Hoima Sugar in their campaign to save the forest but Hoima Sugar refused to meet the SBFC.

He added that the SBFC team wants the communities to form taskforces to save Bugoma in their different villages. Each village with a team should write to different stakeholders.

He also encouraged the communities to engage district officials and different religious leaders on how to move forward.

He finally informed the participants that there is a possibility of displacement if the 22 square miles given to Hoima Sugar included the land housing communities.

3. Reactions

3.1. Submission by Mr. Lawrence Bariho, resident of Kabengaramire

Mr. Lawrence Bariho informed the meeting that some leaders are trying to divert their efforts on saving Bugoma forest. The leaders tell them not to continue fighting to save the forest by promising them land titles at UGX 700,000/=.

He added that they were living in fear due to intimidation and threats.

He also pointed out how the forest was being cut down for timber and charcoal.



Mr. Lawrence Bariho, a resident of Kabengaramire village, informing the SBFC about the challenges faced during the campaign to save Bugoma forest

3.2. Submission by Pastor Ponsiano Mubangizi

Mr. Ponsiano Mubangizi informed the meeting that they were suffering because government was not fighting to protect the forest.

He promised to continue fighting to save the forest; however, he also decried harassment by security operatives.

He noted that Bugoma forest was the only hope for communities because of the negative effects that would come along with the oil pipeline that will pass through their area. He added that the forest would help mitigate the effects of the oil pipeline.

He finally called upon President Museveni to save the forest.



Mr. Ponsiano Mubangizi addressing the meeting on the challenges faced by the community

3.3. Submission by Anatoli Bagyenda, chairperson of Rwembaho village

Mr. Anatoli Bagyenda cautioned the communities to be careful when forming taskforces because there are spies that will intimidate them.

He also wondered why the government would borrow US\$78,000 to facilitate the planting of trees in the Albertine region while they are cutting down the available trees.

He concluded by encouraging the government to protect what they already have and maybe add more instead of destroying what is already in existence.



Mr. Anatoli Bagyenda, resident of Rwembaho, giving a way forward on how to protect and conserve Bugoma forest

3.4. Submission by Ms. Lamura Asasira, a resident of Rwembaho

Ms. Lamura Asasira encouraged the meeting to keep fighting to save Bugoma because the forest is a tourism attraction and is used for education purposes for the young generation.

She said that Bugoma forest is a source for medicine for children, pregnant women and other sick people suffering from different diseases such as allergies.

She also added that Hoima Sugar is engaging in child labour and that there is no way the sugarcane project would benefit their community.

She called on communities to write to the President of Uganda because he is not being given the right information on Bugoma forest.



Ms. Lamura Asasira narrates how she got medicine for her sick child from Bugoma after failing to get help from hospitals

3.5. Submission by Ms. Addah Mbabazi, LCII chairperson for Kaseeta

Ms. Addah Mbabazi welcomed the SBFC team and the community members. She thanked them for their participation in the struggle to save Bugoma forest.

She pointed out how Bugoma forest is a source of medicine for pregnant mothers and children who were now suffering because they are not allowed to access the forest.

Mbabazi stated that the forest would help the community to mitigate oil effects because the crude oil pipeline is going to pass through their area.

She clearly noted that the forest has collective benefits for the community, unlike the so-called job opportunities that Hoima Sugar said they would create.



Ms. Addah Mbabazi, the LCII chairperson for Kaseeta, updating the SBFC on the status of the campaign in the area

4. Way forward and conclusion

Mr. Kamugisha, the chairperson of the SBFC, guided the participants on the roles of the SBFC local taskforces that were created at the meeting. These included:

1. Coordinate the save Bugoma campaign activities in the community.
2. Solicit signatures on save Bugoma campaign documents like a petition to save Bugoma to different stakeholders
3. Give the SBFC necessary information.

Some of the SBFC local taskforce members that were identified at the meeting include:

1. Mr. Charles Twongirwe (Chairperson, Rwembaho village)
2. Mr. Anatoli Bagyenda (Chairman, Kabegaramire village)
3. Mr. Ponsiano Mubangizi (Rwenkobe village)
4. Mr. Hassan Mugenyi (Vice chairperson, Nyiarongo village)
5. Ms. Lamura Asasiira (Omukarere)

5. List of participants