ELECTED LEADERS, PRIORITISE ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCIES

A map showing the 405 hectares of Bugoma forest land that had been cultivated by Hoima Sugar Ltd by January 7, 2021. Clearing of Bugoma forest is happening in spite of the cases in the High Court and Court of Appeal to protect the forest.

NEMA’s Executive Director, Dr. Tom Okurut (R), while handing over the EACOP ESIA certificate of approval to the General Manager of the EACOP oil project, Mr. Martin Tiffen (L), in December 2020. NEMA continues to violate relevant laws that are meant to protect nature from oil threats.

Thousands of dead fish that washed up on the shores of Lake Victoria in December 2020. There is fear that such events are impacts of climate change. These events may worsen as Lake Victoria continues to suffer including from oil pollution.

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A country in crisis: that is what this month (January) felt like for many Ugandans. First, on January 14, 2021, the country went to the polls to elect a president and Members of Parliament (MPs) that will represent Ugandans between 2021 and 2026.

The elections were preceded by an Internet shutdown, arrests and detention of opposition politicians in addition to civil society organisation (CSO) leaders. Violence in which over 54 Ugandans lost their lives was also seen.

After the elections, families from Kyotera to Mukono to Kampala began or continued with the search for their relatives who went missing during and after the election campaigns. It can be said that January was tough for the majority of Ugandans.

It was also tough on the environmental front as unfortunate crises emerged. For instance, during the month, the Save Bugoma Forest Campaign (SBFC) that is chaired by AFIEGO accessed images of the section of Bugoma forest that is claimed by Bunyoro Kitara Kingdom (BKK) and Hoima Sugar Ltd. The images showed that Hoima Sugar Ltd had cultivated 405 hectares of Bugoma forest land, including the land meant for eco-tourism purposes. This is a violation of the conditions of the environmental certificate of approval that the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) issued to Hoima Sugar Ltd.

In the same month, the Ministry of Energy reported that it had received four bids for five oil blocks that were put up for oil exploration licensing in May 2019. Among the oil blocks that are up for bidding is Ngaji, which covers the biodiverse and ecosensitive Queen Elizabeth National Park and Lake Edward. Should Ugandans fail to hold their elected leaders accountable, the park and lake could be destroyed.

In addition, this January, populist election campaign promises to allow oil activities including in ecosensitive areas, permitting rice farmers to return to wetlands and others still rung in the ears of conservationists and Ugandans.

The destruction of Uganda’s forests, national parks, lakes, rivers and others spells doom as per information from the World Bank, close to a third of Uganda’s wealth comes from natural resources which support agriculture, fisheries, tourism and other top foreign exchange earners.

In our Word from the Youth Energy Desk therefore, youth clean energy champions take the opportunity to highlight the environmental and other crises that the newly elected leaders must urgently address to save Ugandans from doom. The leaders must not fail the youth, women, children and other vulnerable groups who hurt the most when the environment is degraded.

In our pictorial section, we bring you some of the activities we implemented this month. For instance, we held a staff and partners planning meeting in which our priority actions for 2021 were discussed.

In addition, we held meetings with our partners under the SBFC to plan for the activities that need to be implemented in 2021 to save Bugoma forest from sugarcane growing and oil threats.

Furthermore, with the SBFC, we supported lawyers to file court appeals for cancellation of the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) certificate of approval that was issued to Hoima Sugar Ltd by NEMA in 2020.

In addition, we held planning meetings with our partners with whom we filed the court case to stop the environmental dangers of the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) project. The case was filed in the East African Court of Justice (EACJ) in 2020. We did so much more as you will see in the pictorial section.

In our lobbying section, we bring you letters that we and our partners wrote to NEMA demanding for the certified EACOP ESIA certificate of approval among other documents. We also bring you a letter that we and our partners wrote to the National Forestry Authority (NFA) through which we requested the authority to allow us to join its court cases against Hoima Sugar Ltd and MZ Agencies to protect Bugoma forest.

We further bring you a letter that we and our partners wrote to the Ministry of Lands in addition to the Ministry of Water and Environment to request that the SBFC members and other stakeholders are allowed to participate in the planned boundary opening of Bugoma forest to protect the forest.

In in the media section, we bring you some of the newspaper articles that were published by the media from our activities. We hope you enjoy the newsletter.

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ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION IN CRISIS: CHECKLIST OF EMERGENCIES THAT MUST BE ADDRESSED BY ELECTED LEADERS

Dear elected leaders,

Allow us to begin this open letter to you by telling you two important stories. The first one is an unfortunate tale that you are likely familiar with or have lived through, if you belong to the opposition camp.

On September 15 and 16, 2020, nine campaigners, civil society leaders and members of the media who were engaged in efforts to protect Bugoma forest from land grabbing, oil and sugarcane threats were arrested. They were detained at police in Hoima district. Seven of the detained were released in the evening on the day of their arrest –September 16, 2020. Two others, who were arrested on September 15, 2020, were released two days after their arrest –on September 17, 2020.

The campaigners who were released on the latter date were accused of inciting violence to cause an unlawful demonstration. They were released on police bond and are required to report to the police station as part of their bond conditions.

For opposition politicians, the above ordeal of limiting the civic space in which environmental and human rights defenders (EHRDs) operate is all too familiar as the politicians have lived through similar, and even worse experiences. This is why this open letter is very important, as will later be seen.

Another story that we would want to relay to you has to do with our close cousins, the baboons. In 2019, we watched footage that portrayed how so-called development projects were hurting our aforementioned close cousins, not to mention other biodiversity.

In the footage that was shot in Murchison Falls National Park (MFNP), a baboon could be seen by a murrum road that was being upgraded for tarmacking to support oil activities in MFNP. As the baboon went about its business, a huge red Sinotruck carrying murrum to further compact the road under construction drove past it.

The truck raised such a cloud of dust that the baboon, which was covered in the invasive agent, put its hands to its face to protect itself. It was a sore and symbolic sight.

Symbolic of an environment and biodiversity in crisis. On one hand, government says that it must pursue development projects ostensibly for the benefit of Ugandans. However, this ‘development’ is coming at the expense of environmental and biodiversity conservation.

This is unacceptable. As you our elected leaders are aware, nearly one third of Uganda’s wealth comes from its natural resources which support tourism, agriculture, fisheries and other activities. This means that Uganda’s forests, national parks, lakes, rivers, wetlands and other resources must be jealously conserved.

And, we believe that as our elected leaders, all of you, from local to district to national level, are duty bound to protect Uganda’s natural resources. Through this open letter therefore, we the youth and women who suffer the most consequences when the environment is destroyed, are requesting you to act on the following urgent environmental crises.

Nearly a third of Uganda’s wealth comes from its natural resources, which must be protected
CONCERNS

a) Destruction of Bugoma Central Forest Reserve (CFR): The demise of Bugoma CFR has been in the public domain for nearly three years now. In 2016, Uganda’s Ministry of Lands issued freehold and leasehold land titles to Bunyoro Kingdom and Hoima Sugar Ltd respectively for 8,000 hectares covering Bugoma forest land.

The National Forestry Authority (NFA) contested the giveaway of the forest land through courts of law. However, due to evidence submitted by government officials against NFA among others, courts ruled in favour of Bunyoro Kingdom and Hoima Sugar Ltd, so that they maintain hold of Bugoma forest land to date. In August 2020, NEMA issued Hoima Sugar Ltd with an ESIA certificate of approval, allowing the company to destroy the forest. By January 7, 2021, the company had cultivated 405 hectares of the Bugoma forest land. The company had cultivated even in those areas that NEMA forbade it from using for sugarcane growing. This crisis must be stopped.

b) Impending destruction of Queen Elizabeth National Park (QENP): Another crisis that needs urgent addressing is the planned licensing of Ngaji oil block. The oil block, which covers QENP and Lake Edward, was reopened for bidding by the Ministry of Energy in May 2019. This followed failure by government to attract bidders for the oil block in 2017 following national and international CSO campaigns to stop licensing of the oil block. Despite widespread protestations, government reopened the oil block for licensing in 2019.

This month, the media reported that European banks such as BNP Paribas, Credit Suisse Group and ING Groep had ended financing of the Ecuadorian Amazon oil trade. This and other actions to end fossil fuel financing roles such as supporting tourism, fisheries and other industries which benefit the youth and women. The parks should not become the playground for polluting oil activities.

c) Murchison Falls National Park, Lake Victoria at risk due to EACOP project: On December 3, 2020, NEMA issued an ESIA certificate of approval to Total, the lead developer of the EACOP oil project. The EACOP, a planned 1,445km crude oil pipeline whose Final Investment Decision (FID) is expected to be made by March 2021, is a big threat to the environment. Combined with the Tilenga and Kingfisher oil projects, the projects will affect over 30 ecosensitive areas such as national parks, game reserves, forests, rivers and lakes among others that extend to Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and others.

Among the key areas that will be directly and indirectly affected by the EACOP are MFNP, Uganda’s oldest, largest and one of the most visited national parks, in addition to Lake Victoria. The lake is the second largest freshwater lake in the world and over 40 million people rely on it. Yet one third of the EACOP will pass through the Lake Victoria basin. This is alarming.

d) Oil roads through ecosensitive areas: This article started off with the tale of the baboon and the invasion it and other biodiversity in MFNP are faced with due to oil activities such as development of oil roads in the park. This month, the media reported that European banks such as BNP Paribas, Credit Suisse Group and ING Groep had ended financing of the Ecuadorian Amazon oil trade. Uganda’s national parks and lakes play immense ecological, economic and social roles such as supporting tourism, fisheries and other industries which benefit the youth and women. This crisis must be stopped.

Tourism, one of Uganda’s top foreign exchange earners, is at risk because of the environmental crises.
including for projects in ecosensitive areas are indicative of the fact that oil exploitation and environmental conservation are incompatible. Yet in Uganda, government has allowed oil exploitation activities in MFNP and Lake Albert to go on under the Tilenga and Kingfisher oil projects.

A feasibility study to develop a hydropower dam at Murchison Falls to likely support oil projects is planned. What losses do Ugandans stand to suffer when the environment is destroyed for oil and hydropower dams, leaders must ask themselves?

This must be avoided through acting on the following recommendations:

(i) Before the General Elections, parliament was investigating the land grabbing and other challenges faced by Bugoma and Zoka forests. As a matter of urgency, the newly elected MPs must ensure that the report of these investigations is completed and is tabled before parliament for debate and action to stop the challenges to Bugoma forest.

(ii) Further, before the elections, the SBFC that is chaired by AFIEGO had engaged parliament’s Natural Resources Committee to investigate the Ministry of Lands officials who issued land titles for Bugoma forest and testified against NFA in court. The SBFC recommended that if found culpable, these officials are penalized. The SBFC also recommended that if all other means fail, government should compulsorily acquire the Bugoma forest land in private hands. Parliament and the executive should act on these recommendations respectively.

(iii) In addition, the elected leaders including those from Kasese, Kanungu, Rukungiri and other districts that border QENP should engage the Ministry of Energy to stop the licensing of Ngaji oil block. Oil companies must avoid bidding for the oil block as well.

(iv) Finally, the leaders especially the local council and district leaders in addition to MPs from the districts affected by the Tilenga, Kingfisher, EACOP and oil roads projects should engage the executive with the view of ending the development of oil projects in ecosensitive areas.

Thank you for reading our letter and we hope that you will take action to end the environmental crises Uganda is faced with.

**Youth leaders for clean energy**
January 4, 2021

AFIEGO opens its offices. In January, a staff and partners’ meeting is held to plan for 2021.

Staff, our partners and the board adopt a workplan that prioritises activities such as saving Bugoma forest from oil and sugarcane threats, engaging government, using court and campaigning to stop the EACOP project dangers, promoting clean energy and others.

January 8, 2021

AFIEGO and our partners under the Save Bugoma Forest Campaign (SBFC) file court appeals for the cancellation of the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) certificate of approval that was issued to Hoima Sugar Ltd by NEMA.

Court commits to make a ruling on the case by February 10, 2021.

January 8 and 11, 2021

AFIEGO and our SBFC partners agree with NFA to join hands in NFA’s court cases against Hoima Sugar Ltd and MZ Agencies.

The SBFC also completes the constitutional case filing process to protect Bugoma forest.

Further, with the SBFC, AFIEGO writes to the Ministry of Lands and Ministry of Environment to request to join the planned boundary opening of Bugoma forest.

January 18 and 25, 2021

AFIEGO and our SBFC partners hold meetings to plan the strategic actions needed to save Bugoma forest in 2021.

Activities that are agreed on include re-mobilising local community support to protect the forest, pursuing court cases to their conclusion, following up on commitments made by various stakeholders to protect the forest and others.
January 20, 2021

AFIEGO and eight CSO partners including those from the community write to NEMA requesting for the EACOP ESIA certificate of approval, the presiding officer’s report from the EACOP ESIA public hearings and the final EACOP ESIA report on which NEMA based to approve the EACOP project.

January 29, 2021

AFIEGO supports the oil refinery-affected people to write to the Principal Judge protesting the judge’s decision to shift their case against government over delayed and unfair compensation to the Masindi High Court. This will further delay the case, which has been in the court system since March 2014.

Some courtesy or file photos have been used.
This month, AFIEGO and eight CSOs wrote to NEMA requesting for the certified copies of the EACOP ESIA certificate of approval, the ESIA report on which NEMA based to make a decision on the EACOP ESIA and the presiding officer’s report from the EACOP ESIA public hearings.

In addition, AFIEGO in partnership with the SBFC wrote a letter to the Ministry of Lands in addition to the Ministry of Water and Environment requesting for a meeting to discuss the SBFC and other stakeholders’ participation in the planned boundary opening of Bugoma forest.

Further, AFIEGO and our SBFC partners wrote a letter to NFA requesting to support NFA’s legal efforts against Holima Sugar Ltd and MZ Agencies to protect Bugoma forest.

AFIEGO also supported the oil refinery-affected people to write a protest letter to the Principal Judge over his decision to shift the people’s case to the Masindi High Court.
This month, staff and research associates wrote newspaper articles which were published in the leading newspapers including the New Vision, Daily Monitor and Earthfinds. Some of the published articles are captured below.
Upcoming events

February 1, 2021; Online: Meeting with BothEnds to discuss environmental governance lobby and advocacy

February 5, 2021; Kasese: Community empowerment meeting on oil impacts and citizens’ roles in promoting clean energy

February 8, 2021; Kampala: Third planning meeting on saving Bugoma forest

February 11, 2021; Kikuube: Community empowerment meeting on oil impacts and citizens’ roles in promoting clean energy

February 16-24 2021; Hoima, Kikuube and Kakumiro: Community engagements on implementation of the Resettlement Action Plans (RAPs) for the EACOP oil project

February 26-March 5, 2021; Kasese, Hoima, Kikuube, Buliisa: Youth and women leaders’ reflection meetings on economic alternatives for the Albertine Graben

About Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO)

Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO) is a public policy research and advocacy organisation dedicated to influencing energy policies to benefit the poor and vulnerable. Based in Kampala, Uganda, the organisation was born out of the need to contribute to efforts to turn Africa’s energy potential into reality and to ensure that the common man and woman benefits from this energy boom. Through lobbying, research and community education, AFIEGO works with communities and leaders to ensure that energy resources are utilised in a way that promotes equitable development, environmental conservation and respect for human rights.

Our Vision
A society that equitably uses energy resources for socio-economic development

Our Mission
To promote energy policies that benefit poor and vulnerable communities