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Shaking the tree

Challenging gender, tenure and leadership norms through collaborative reforestation in Central Uganda

Background

In the districts of Mpigi, Rakai and Masaka in central Uganda, once-forested landscapes have been degraded by farming and illegal logging. As the economic and environmental impacts of denuding land have become apparent, stakeholders have started replanting. But until recently, over half of the local population – its women – have been only minimally involved in the process.

“It’s such a patriarchal society that women traditionally don’t own land, and even their access to land is limited,” says Concepta Mukasa of the Association of Uganda Professional Women in Agriculture and Environment (AUPWAE). “So they might be able to plant a couple of trees for their own subsistence use, but that’s all – and even if they’re involved in planting, they’re not benefitting, especially economically.”

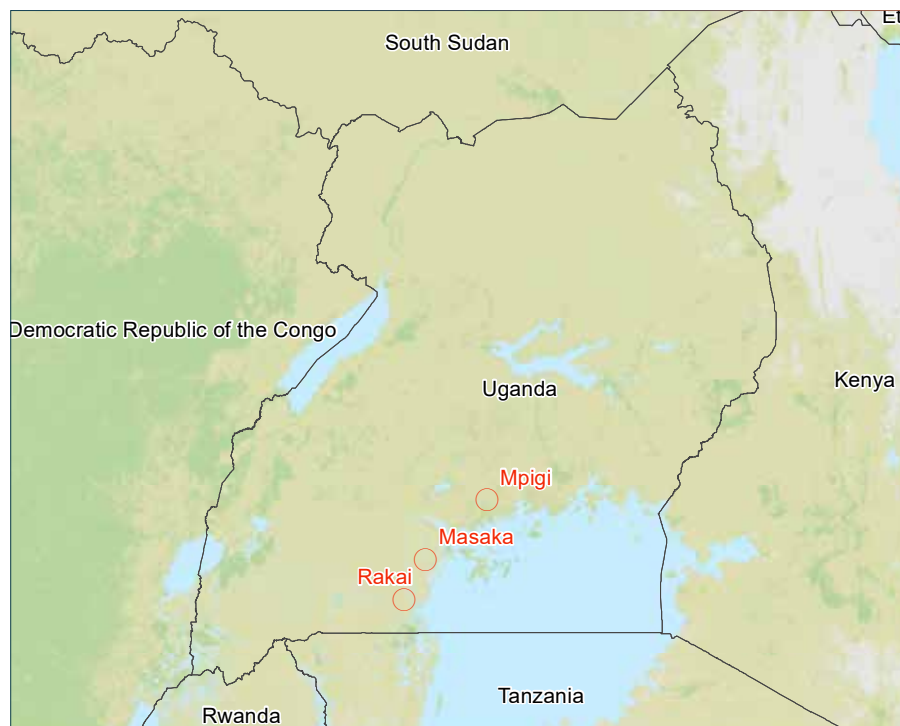


Figure 1. Location of districts in Central Uganda where AUPWAE conducted ACM work.

Taking action

So in 2011 the AUPWAE, in partnership with the Centre for International Forest Research (CIFOR) and Makerere University, began a project called “Gender, Tenure and Community Forestry”, with the aim of enhancing women’s involvement in forest management and promoting equitable benefit-sharing.

The partners worked with six communities in the area, using a process called Adaptive Collaborative Management (ACM), in which stakeholders who share an interest in a common natural resource come together to develop shared visions, plan and implement them, and then collectively reflect on the impacts of the work and plan the next iteration. A conscious effort is made by participants to communicate, collaborate, resolve conflicts, and learn from their actions.

Local government, domestic and international NGOs, and private-sector forest owners were all involved in the process, alongside community members. Villagers were trained to facilitate the ACM processes, with a particular eye to making space for women to contribute, be heard, and take part in decision-making.

Following the ACM processes, action plans were developed for income-generating projects such as beekeeping, tree nurseries, fish farming and restoring degraded forest in order to harvest timber and fuelwood sustainably.

Having become effectively engaged in the process, non-community actors provided resources and support to help with implementation, such as training in tree nursery management and apiculture. They also supplied development funds, which were invested in income-generating projects outside of the forest, so as to help conserve the resource.

So far, says Mukasa, around 75% of the visions have been fulfilled. “And now, seven years down the road, the forest is flourishing, and the bare dirt that was covering the degraded areas can no longer be seen,” she describes.

“**At the beginning of the project, my husband thought it was a waste of time, but now after seeing the results– my woodlot , the solar system i bought from my savings, and the water tank I got from one of our partners – he is the one who reminds not to be late for the group meetings!**”

– Ms Eyaliakumanyi
Mbazzi Farmers’ Association, Mpigi District, Central Uganda



Photo 1. Members of Mbazzi Farmers Group members carry out a monitoring visit in their newly allocated area planted with trees.

Confronting challenges, defining success –

According to many community members, the project has successfully ‘shaken up’ local notions of gender, leadership and tenure – an impressive feat in a place where tradition runs strong. What has made this possible? Challenging gender norms requires men as well as women to shift their understandings of roles, rights and responsibilities, says Mukasa. Given men own most land in this part of Uganda, “the women realized that without men’s support, the project would be doomed.”

Thus, it was crucial that the project engaged men in making space for greater gender equality. As such, women were given leadership roles and strong support within mixed-gender ACM project groups, so that their capabilities were made visible and apparent. They led planting projects in the Central Forest Reserve that lies adjacent to the villages, which they co-manage with the National Forest Authority (NFA) and to which they hold harvesting rights.

Through the project, more than 50,000 trees have been planted on 33 hectares of degraded forest reserve – over 8,500 of these by women. Seedling survival rates are high, at around 80%. “So the men saw this, and came to believe that women can ably lead, as they saw the positive results in and outside the forest,” says Mukasa. “And the husbands who were not group members heard testimonies from their fellow men.”

Married women were also trained to negotiate with their husbands for areas of farmland “where they can plant on their own, and where they can make decisions about what to plant, and benefit equitably,” says Mukasa. In order to do so, they needed to show their husbands the benefits to the household that would ensue if they (the wives) planted and owned trees.

The ACM projects served to demonstrate these benefits. For example, Ms Eyaliakumanyi describes how her husband was not a member of the ACM group, and initially thought her involvement was a waste of time, “but now after seeing the results from the project – my woodlot, the solar system I bought from my savings, and the water tank I got from one of our partners – he is the one who reminds not to be late for the group meetings!”

Another participant, Paulina Mukwaya, successfully negotiated to plant trees in one part of her husband’s farm. Bravely, she planted fig trees (*Ficus natalensis*), a species usually forbidden for women to plant, as it traditionally represents a claim on the land. Mukwaya subsequently sold bark cloth, a byproduct of this tree, and for the first time has money of her own.

Since the intervention began, 70 out of the 173 women involved have planted fig trees. In total, women planted 5,896 trees on farms within the project, and the number of women owning woodlots has leapt from five to 32. Five of these women have already sold trees. Mukasa acknowledges that owning trees is not the same as owning the ground they grow in (which in most cases still belongs to men), but it’s a step in the right direction: unequivocal land rights for women are, unfortunately, still further down the road in this region.

Following on from their leadership experiences in the project, women have begun to lead in other spheres, too. For the first time ever in the region, they have stood for and been elected into leadership roles at group and local government level, and in executive committees. One woman, Ms Nalule, was voted one of the chiefs in the Buganda kingdom, a local cultural institution. Another woman, Ms Mbatudde, attributed her decision to stand for local government to the leadership experience she gained in the ACM project.

The gender balance in community meetings has changed, too. Women’s attendance has remained steady, while men’s has dropped, and now on average more women than men attend. They also participate more in meeting discussions than previously, creating a forum that is more gender-balanced than ever before.



Photo 2. Tree nursery.

Scaling up?

One obstacle for communities in bringing this work to scale is the scarcity of land. “People want to plant trees, they want to continue, but they also have to have places to farm and grow crops for food security,” explains Mukasa. This issue has been addressed to some extent through the collaborative forest management agreements in the national forestry reserves. But, says Mukasa, the NFA’s priorities tend toward private investors, rather than communities, because of the money they bring in. “So getting land to plant what they want, and to manage what is already there – that is still a challenge,” she states.

The project officially ended in 2016, but many of the activities and practices it set up continue to occur, because stakeholders are now aware of the benefits of planting trees and involving women. Mukasa says the project has confirmed that women are an asset in forest management in Uganda. “They’ve shown that they can manage, all the way from the seedling stage, right through to harvesting the trees,” she says.

Story was developed by Esther Mwangi (CIFOR) and Monica Evans
Photos by AUPWAE

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