
Uganda: Carbon sink plantation - where trees are more important than people

The UK-based New Forests Company is establishing tree plantations in Uganda, Mozambique and Tanzania. The company states that “Whilst based on commercial forestry economics, our projects are underwritten by carbon credits ... in compliance with the Clean Development Mechanism. This means that its profits from the sale of wood will be increased by selling “carbon credits” to polluting industries in the North. It also means that companies buying these carbon credits should be also held responsible for the impacts of these plantations on local peoples and the environment.

Given that New Forests “has already established itself as the biggest tree planter and the dominant player in Uganda” and “is set to begin operations in other countries”, it is important to let people know about what is actually happening in its 54,000 acres of land in this country.

The company defines its activities as “Sustainable and socially responsible forestry”. The meaning of this is shown clearly in the pictures and short text in its own web site at http://www.newforestscompany.com/project_area/uganda. The “responsible” process begins with the destruction of local biodiversity in two steps: 1) manual “bush clearing” 2) “chemical spraying”. Once the local vegetation has been totally eliminated -and the environment polluted with chemical herbicides- it is substituted by two fast-growing alien tree species (Eucalyptus and Pine) planted as monocultures over large areas of land. These green deserts are the “New Forests” from where this company takes its name.

Evidence about how “socially responsible” the company can be is also provided in the above mentioned pictures. Two of them show a few women working in very uncomfortable conditions in a makeshift tree nursery. Another photo shows a 16-strong “clearing team” without appropriate clothing for the task. Finally, the 12 workers of the “chemical spraying” team are shown from too far away to assess if they have been provided with the necessary protective gear and clothing. Given that the company does not provide any information on the figure of 1800 workers that are “expected” to work in the plantation, one can only guess that most of them will be employed in tree planting and dismissed once that activity is completed.

But even in the impossible case that all the 1800 workers were to be employed on a permanent basis, the company fails to mention that over 10,000 residents of Kitumbi sub-county in Mubende district are facing eviction to make way to its plantations. Which means that –on balance- 8,200 people will be in a far worse condition than before the company’s arrival. And “far worse” is in fact an understatement of what they are being subjected to.

The following quotes from an article published on 20 July in the Ugandan web site New Vision, provides more than ample evidence about the “significant social benefits” that the company has been providing local people with.

According to the article, residents in the villages of Kyamukasa, Kyato, Kicucula, Kisiita, Mpologoma, and Kanaamire denounced that armed groups were beating people, abducting them and destroying

their crops and houses. Such actions were meant “to subdue them to leave their land, which they have occupied for decades”, so that the New Forests Company could plant its trees.

“My banana plantation on three acres has been destroyed by the people who are trying to evict us. They even took 10 bags of maize from me,” Jessica Nyinamatama, a 56-year-old widow, who is taking care of nine orphans, said.

The local land committee chairman, William Mpamira stated that “Two of our neighbours were abducted by armed people who are trying to evict us.”, adding that “Richard Twahirwa was arrested on June 26 and Cyprian Munyagaju was arrested on July 13. Up to now, we don’t know their whereabouts.”

According to Mpamira, the population is suffering night attacks and as a result most residents have resorted to sleeping in the bushes. He also added that “we doubt whether the intention of the company is to plant trees and protect the environment,” because “since 2005, they have been cutting down trees which we had preserved for commercial timber.”

As a result of the situation they were suffering, the villagers decided to go to Kampala, where they petitioned the lands minister, Omara Atubo, to stop the evictions. In response, the minister vowed to stop the investor from evicting the residents and said:

“As a ministry in charge of land, we are saddened by what has happened to you. It is important to respect your rights irrespective of whether you occupy the land legally or not. There is no need for your colleagues to disappear, your property to be stolen or crops to be destroyed,” Atubo said as the villagers applauded.

The minister said he would summon the resident district commissioner and the company officials to respond to the reports. Atubo also promised to lead a team of investigators to Kitumbi on a fact-finding mission.

“This is an urgent case because it is about life and death. These acts against our citizens should stop immediately. Investment is only good if the residents benefit from it. Human beings are more important than trees,” he stated.

New Forests Company officials should repeat after him: Human beings are more important than trees!

Based on article sent by Timothy Byakola (acs@starcom.co.ug), “Uganda: Mubende Residents Petition Lands Minister Over Eviction, Harassment”, by Moses Mulondo, 20 July 2009 <http://allafrica.com/stories/200907210016.html> and on information from the company’s web site: http://www.newforestscompany.com/index.php/project_area/7/
<http://www.newforestscompany.com/>
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