

## **Refugee Communities Damage Wetlands**

**Author:** [Caroline Ayugi](#)

Internal refugees farming in and around northern swamps are blamed for the disappearance of these protected areas.

Carla Lamunu survives on the living she ekes out from toiling in the gardens of her neighbour, knowing that if she doesn't work, she probably won't eat that day.

She longs for the life she had a decade ago, when she operated a lively business selling papyrus sleeping mats, which were used by everyone in the area at the time.

Making mats was a low-cost enterprise that only required the purchase of sisal threads to sew the mats together, said Lamunu. For just 100 Ugandan schillings, the equivalent of about five US cents, she could stitch together three mats.

Like other mat makers, Lamunu used to get up early in the morning and walk a half kilometre to a nearby swamp to find the papyrus reeds she needed.

A family's wealth could be guessed by the piles of papyrus neatly stacked by the verandas, and the amount spread out to dry.

But that's no longer the case, said Lamunu.

In recent years, the nearby wetlands where she used to pick papyrus have been all but destroyed, leaving her with no reeds with which to make her mats.

Her Kolo Quarters neighbourhood in the Gulu district, once known as the best place to buy quality sleeping mats, is now crowded with mud and thatch huts, home to people displaced by the war between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

The loss of her livelihood began years ago as people streamed into Gulu and the camps that surrounded it, fleeing the ravages of the conflict.

Many of the newcomers began to make and sell the popular mats, creating competition and causing the papyrus supply to become depleted.

Lamunu said that some of the internal refugees also began to farm at the edges of the swamp, and soon many started to cut down the papyrus to make way for crops.

Nothing was done to stop what was happening, she said, because the swamp lands were unclaimed and also because it gave families a means of survival.

Lamunu was not the only one affected.

George Okello, who is also a former dealer in papyrus mats, is frail and suffers from tuberculosis. He's no longer able to make the money he needs to buy food, because the papyrus which used to grow in the area is gone.

"My wife now looks for odd jobs where she is paid after work, but the money is very little," said Okello. "She tills people's land where she gets enough money for food, but not many people have money to give to people like her to clear their land."

Okello mourned the loss of his business, which once was a highly dependable source of income. The only way to lose was through laziness or carelessness, he said.

Now vast areas of the swamps have been destroyed, he said, and only the able-bodied can trek the long distances one must travel to find fresh reeds.

Christine Auma, a divorced mother of two, is among those who dug a garden for herself in a swamp that was originally a forest of papyrus used only for mats.

With her one-year-old baby tied behind her back, she slowly pulled up the papyrus roots, leaving behind a clear field.

Auma and her mother, who escaped abduction by the LRA in 2000, said she developed the swamp because it was land for the taking.

"Everyone else is doing it," she said. "No leader has told me that it's bad to farm in a wetland." The extent of the farming around her is obvious as large areas of the former papyrus swamp are now covered with sugar cane and yam plantations.

According to the 1995 constitution of Uganda, private ownership of wetlands is prohibited. Anyone operating in a wetland is legally required to have a permit, which is granted by the National Environmental Management Authority, NEMA, after an assessment is done to determine whether the proposed activity would damage the environment.

Permitted activities in and around wetlands must take place 30 metres away from them and not release toxic pollutants.

However, while these laws exist in theory, they are not enforced in practice in the north of the country.

The government's environmental officer for the Gulu district, Samuel Okello, said that when internally displaced people like Auma came to the area, officials sympathised with their plight.

So many people were displaced during the 20-year rebel war in the north that they often had nowhere else to farm, other than on the swamps.

Local leaders therefore failed to enforce existing land laws, which opened the door to extensive exploitation of the wetlands.

“We couldn't chase the few who had nowhere else to plant their crops,” said Okello.

“But many other people who were not displaced also took advantage of the situation, which led to massive invasion of our wetlands.”

Okello said that some local leaders also turned a blind eye to the use of the wetlands because there was money to be made.

Many of the swamp lands have become home to car-washing bays, which are taxed by local authorities.

“The...authorities in town have seen this as an opportunity to generate more revenue, and with this, washing bays are being opened in swamps to provide employment and revenue,” said Okello.

He accused local authorities of working with local business leaders to develop the wetlands around the town, making the illegal practice even harder to fight.

Moses Abonga, an official with NEMA, acknowledged that the local government receives income by taxing the proprietors of the car-washing bays.

He said that the car washers appeared to have contracts with those “landowners” – or people laying claim to those particular parts of land – to carry out their business.

Abonga blamed the district land boards for allowing people to take over the land.

He questioned why titles to land encompassing parts of the wetlands were being granted by district authorities without the knowledge of environmental officials, such as himself.

But Gulu surveyor Connie Ouma denied that the authorities were issuing land titles to wetlands.

“After the environmental law [of 1995] came into existence...no wetlands have been allocated to developers knowingly,” said Ouma.

Instead, Ouma blamed NEMA for lax enforcement of the environmental statute since it came into place more than a decade ago.

We cannot have a situation where there are redundant laws, and those responsible for enforcing the laws just sit, watching the massive encroachment of the wetlands, he said.

Meanwhile, observers warn that long-term damage is being inflicted on the landscape.

For example, in one Gulu neighbourhood, a nearby wetland is used as a dumping ground for all sorts of waste, including human effluent.

Okello pointed out that fish populations are disappearing as a result of the wetlands being drained, depleting a source of food for locals.

Environmentalists also say that the reclamation of the swamp land was affecting the area's water supply.

Environment minister Maria Mutagamba said that at the rate the wetlands were being destroyed, the government's plans to provide safe and clean water for all by 2015 were also being undermined.

Caroline Ayugi is an IWPR-trained reporter. James Eriku from Gulu also contributed to this report.

**Location:** Uganda

**Topic:** Uganda

**Focus:** ICC - International Criminal Court

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/refugee-communities-damage-wetlands>