The Role of Parliament in Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation in Uganda

Hon. Lawrence Songa Biyika, MP has been a Member of Parliament since 2016 for Ora County; Deputy Chairperson, Natural Resources Committee (2018-2019); Chairperson, Parliamentary Forum on Climatic Change; Technical Advisor, Rural Development Agency/PADTEC, South East Asia (2014 - 2015); Sustainable Environment Advisor on CIIR, Horn of Africa/Middle East (2011 - 2014); Programme Director, Green Alternatives and Peace Movements, 2008 -2011; Consultant and Facilitator in Environment sector; Chairperson and Member of various non-governmental organisations and community based organisations.

Uganda’s spectacular natural environment and landscape prompted Sir Winston Churchill to name Uganda the ‘Pearl of Africa’ in 1907. However, the reality of climate change poses arguably the biggest single threat to the spectacular natural endowments that Uganda boasts of.

Whether one is a climate change sceptic or not, the sad reality is that the earth’s climate is not as stable as it was in the pre-industrial times. Evidence shows that the 20th century was the warmest the world has seen in 1,000 years. Average global temperatures are on the rise, corresponding with the increasing levels of greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere. If this trend continues, climate scientists warn that climate change will wreak havoc on both human and natural systems, resulting in extreme weather events, decreasing productivity from farmlands, migrations and conflicts. After years of research, scientists are certain, more than ever before, that the climate is changing.¹

In Uganda, changes in climatic conditions such as in rainfall patterns and temperature, have been mainly occasioned by the nature of socio-economic activity. With over 80% of the population relying on wood fuel for cooking
energy, reckless drainage and backfilling of wetlands, destructive bush burning and some negative cultivation practices, climate change has been exacerbated.

Uganda’s climate is naturally variable and susceptible to floods and drought that have had a negative socio-economic impact in the past. For example, changes in lake levels reducing the waterflow available for power generation; and high energy costs and energy, poverty with knock-on implications for charcoal use, deforestation and land degradation.

There is no doubt that governments and citizens will have to be proactive in tackling climate change. In this regard, the Government of Uganda has made some efforts to tackle mitigation and adaptation, and the Parliament of Uganda has backed these efforts, through its mandate of legislation, oversight and representation.

Uganda has made some policy, legal and institutional reforms aimed at combatting climate change and promoting sustainable development. Major reforms include the formulation of the Uganda National Climate Change Policy 2011; National Forestry Policy 2001; National Forestry and Tree Planting Act, 2003; and the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA). New institutional arrangements include: a climate change department in the Ministry of Water and Environment; the Uganda National Meteorology Authority (UNMA), and the Environmental Protection Police Unit of the Uganda Police.

**Uganda’s Experience**

Uganda has not been immune to the effects of a changing climate; it is among the countries that are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change globally,
despite having low greenhouse gas emissions. Global rankings grade Uganda as the 14th most vulnerable (out of 181 countries) and 48th least prepared to tackle climate change and its effects (out of 191 countries). Yet in terms of per capita emissions, Uganda ranks 176 out of 188 countries, contributing only 0.07% to global greenhouse gas emissions.2 The country’s high vulnerability to climate change is attributed to the low rural income levels, lack of diversity in income sources, high reliance on rain-fed agriculture (over 75% of Ugandans are engaged in agriculture) and increasing poverty levels (from 19.7% in 2013 to 21.4% in 2017).3

Effects of climate change in Uganda are most evident in the rise in average temperatures and change in rainfall amounts and patterns. The erratic rainfall patterns contribute to water scarcity in some instances, thus affecting planting seasons. In fact, Uganda has lost 20ml of rainfall, based on an analysis of average yearly rainfall over the last 16 years. Besides, rains are heavy in subsequent seasons, causing flooding, which impacts on housing, property, transport and social services.

There has also been a marked increase in the frequency of floods in Uganda in the past 15 years. For instance, in 2007, heavy rains and floods cut off many districts in Eastern Uganda as bridges collapsed and roads were submerged. The Bududa District in Eastern Uganda faced devastating landslides triggered by heavy rains. The worst incident happened in 2010, when about 100 people died, scores were injured, and properties destroyed. In Western Uganda, Kasese District suffered floods after rivers burst their banks, notably in 2013 and in 2018.
Then again, there is a noticeable rise in the occurrence of droughts per decade in Uganda, with a significant increase registered between 1991 and 2000. This is consistent with scientists’ prediction on climate change impacts in Uganda. Frequent and prolonged droughts have led to famine, malnutrition and low agricultural productivity. The general level of food insecurity in the country has begun to rise, especially in the pastoral communities of Karamoja in North-Eastern Uganda, which face hunger occasionally.

Scientists state that the country’s outlook is dire: Uganda’s highest mountain, Mountain Rwenzori is losing its ice caps at an alarming rate and they could disappear by as early as 2025 due to warmer temperatures.\textsuperscript{4} This spells doom for the tourism industry but will also have a grim effect on the microclimate in the region, affect water sources and biodiversity in general. Climate change has affected Uganda’s development and is likely to limit achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

\textbf{Parliament’s role in mitigation and adaptation}

The Parliament of Uganda has played a significant role in ensuring that the country is on track to achieve the goal of combating climate change. Besides passing relevant laws on environment, energy and natural resources, Parliament has passed motions on: Mainstreaming climate change and mitigating global warming with effect from 2010; developing irrigation capacity and smallholder water harvesting systems to mitigate the impact of droughts in 2000; promoting agro-forestry as a prerequisite for agricultural practices in 2004; and equipping UNMA with facilities and personnel to monitor and forecast changes in the weather and climate to enable effective utilisation of climate information, in 2006, among others.
Parliament’s oversight role involves scrutinising the work of the Executive, including budgetary scrutiny and appropriate resource allocations every year. This is an opportunity to hold accountable Government agencies with mandates related to climate change.

However, Parliament also complements the Executive’s efforts through its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes and has participated in activities geared towards combating climate change, such as tree planting on Mount Moroto in North-Eastern Uganda. This particular project was spearheaded by the Speaker of the Uganda Parliament, Rt Hon. Rebecca Kadaga to promote afforestation in the semi-arid region. Other CSR campaigns include provision of relief items to victims of landslides in Bududa and famine in Karamoja, among others.

The Parliament of Uganda, in its Strategic Plan for the period 2016/2017 to 2019/2020, established strategic priorities to promote a sustainable work environment through interventions such as the ‘Green Parliament’ project. Parliament procured iPads for all legislators, to reduce wastage of paper and costs of printing, which potentially reduces the pressure to cut down trees for paper production. There are also plans to use solar energy and energy efficient lighting systems in the parliamentary buildings to reduce the environmental impact.

Members of Parliament are able to cooperate across the all-party divide on particular areas of interest. In this regard, the Parliamentary Forum on Climate
Change has been instrumental in creating awareness among legislators and the general public on climate change issues.

Legislators are also well placed to catalyse action and influence policy around climate change in their individual capacities. A case in point was in April 2007, when Hon. Beatrice Anywar, Woman Representative for Kitgum District, provided political leadership to protestors against the Government’s plan to give part of the country’s largest rainforest (Mabira Forest) to a sugar manufacturer. Ecologists caution against the degazettement of this forest as it would cause environmental calamity in Uganda. Due to this activism, Hon. Anywar earned herself the title, ‘Mama Mabira’ and her efforts certainly helped safeguard it from destruction.

**Obstacles remain**

Despite the above efforts, the level of deforestation in the country is alarming. Uganda loses its forest cover at an alarming rate of about 200,000 hectares per year, mainly due to population pressures given the population growth rate of 3.2% annually. This means there is an insatiable demand for timber and wood fuel, putting pressure on the available forest resources. This, coupled with illegal commercial logging, is now a major problem. In fact, the forestry sector regulator – the National Forestry Authority - recently admitted to its failure to adequately protect the country’s forest reserves. If these trends continue, Uganda will be bare in the next 83 years. Hence, the need for concerted efforts to curb deforestation. It is important to note though that, Uganda’s capacity to mitigate climate change via alterations in energy use is very inadequate. However, the country can contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions through maintaining forest reserves and re-afforestation.
The quality and effectiveness of parliamentary oversight depends a lot on Parliament’s ability to participate in the budget-making process. However, the Executive now and again tends to regard Parliament as simply an advisory body whose recommendations can be ignored. Severally, Parliament has recommended giving penalties to illegal loggers, but the status quo has not changed.

Similarly, wetland encroachment has continued unabated, further exacerbating the country’s vulnerability to the effects of climate change. Wetlands surrounding Lake Victoria in Kampala City and Wakiso District have been the most affected. This is attributed to increased settlements in wetlands, agricultural activities, as well as sand mining. Unfortunately, Parliament has not been effective in making the Executive accountable for the rampant environmental degradation in the country.

A major challenge that Parliamentarians face is insufficient technical skills to effectively participate in the budget process, including examining budget documents. Further, information for appropriate analysis of policy issues surrounding the budget process is also insufficient. Time is another limiting factor, as Parliamentarians are often flooded with information at the eleventh hour, with little time to digest important policy matters including those on climate change.

Responses by the Legislature
In a bid to scale-up scrutiny and follow-up of matters of climate change with the relevant Government Ministries, departments and agencies, the Parliament of Uganda has established a dedicated Standing Committee on Climate Change.

Parliamentarians passionate about climate change adaptation have also established the Parliamentary Forum on Climate Change as a collaborative platform for lobbying, capacity building, information sharing and coordination on matters of climate change. A key strategy of climate change mitigation and adaptation is widespread and effective communication. Information can help shape people’s response to climate change.

Furthermore, Parliamentarians either acting individually or through Committees and the Parliament have variedly mobilised the masses and engineered the formulation of policies for alternative and affordable sources of energy, in addition to other adaptation methods, such as promoting irrigation and water harvesting; developing drought-resistant crop varieties, maintaining soil fertility, and diversification of agricultural practices.

**Conclusion**

Uganda, like most developing countries, faces challenges in balancing the three pillars of sustainable development and, therefore, adding climate change to this burden only weakens the country’s readiness to combat climate change. To improve its resilience to climate change in part requires strong political support at the national level. Parliament is in position to hold the Executive accountable for its actions regarding climate change, as well as making sure that relevant policies are enforced according to the existing laws and budgets passed by the Legislature. Parliament’s independence is a crucial factor in performing its
oversight role. Further, its institutional framework ought to support Parliamentarians to make effective use of their powers of oversight. Only when the Legislature is able to independently perform its oversight role can the relevant Government agencies be held accountable for their actions. This is a critical factor in ensuring that efforts and interventions geared towards combating climate change can be achieved.

ENDS

[2,012 words]

---


