What are the facts?

- In early 1990s, the Government of Uganda took an important step of evicting encroachers in Mabira forest due to irregularities and impurities on the forest ecosystem. Lives and property were lost in this process. The government had legitimate reasons to preserve a forest of national priority. The same Government cannot propose degazettement of the same part of forest for sugarcane plantation in less than 15 years. This would have far reaching implication on the trust of communities and people of Uganda in the government and erode the trust off the international community.
- There is no encroachment in Mabira Forest Reserve, all encroachers were evicted in 1990s.
- The forest is steadily but surely recovering from the encroachment of 1970s - 80s contrary to false information that the forest is heavily encroached.
- There are enclosures in the forest but occupants are bona fide owners of the land NOT encroachers.
- The argument that the proposed area has no valuable timber is poor! We need young trees to have timber tomorrow. However economic value of trees is NOT only in timber alone. The non-consumptive values of trees such as habitat for species and tourism are accrued from the whole life of a tree.
- Mabira Forest Reserve receives more than 62% of all tourists visiting forest reserves in the country and this number keeps increasing.
- The revenues and the eco-based investments, the revenue-sharing by visitors within the forest, the pride of the intact forest in central Uganda, cannot be sacrificed for any amount of sugar.
- The forest is one of the few major forests that form a map of protection for Lake Victoria and big water catchment for Lake Kyoga and the River Nile through Muko and the Ssese Islands. Cutting down the forest will cause environmental disaster.
- Mabira Forest Reserve is categorized as a protected area of Core Conservation value by government and one of the critical biodiversity hotspots in Uganda.
- Mabira is an Important Bird Area (IBA) containing 30% (over 300 species) of total birds found in Uganda.
- Mabira Forest Reserve is one of the few major forests that form a ring of protection for Lake Victoria and big water catchment for Lake Kyoga and the River Nile through Muko and the Ssese Islands.
- The forest contains globally threatened species such as Mabira Forest Colobus, Lophocebus and the Short-tailed Fruit Bat.
- The forest contains other 9 species found nowhere else in Uganda including the newly discovered species of Mangabey species (Lophocebus albigena johnstoni) and the Short-tailed Fruit Bat.
- Mabira is a benchmark laboratory for all secondary and tertiary institutions in central Uganda.
- When a quarter of Mabira is chopped down the effect will be far reaching on the remaining section of the forest by reducing the range of species, encroachment, erosion and silting.
- The forest is a source of livelihoods for over 200,000 forest adjacent communities for non-timber forest products, medicinal plants, energy, etc.
- The forest already provides employment to many families in form of tourism activities, researchers, forest officers and rangers and many communities involved in collaborative forest management.
- Buganda Kingdom and other institutions have offered alternative land for the investor and there should be no reason to insist on the Mabira Forest give away.
- Degazettement Mabira would set precedence and set target for other forests and national parks for more degazettement or degradation by local people or new investment proposals.
- The sugar companies could improve or increase their sugar production without any forest give away by employing better technology and more efficiency. Uganda has the lowest yield per hectare at 12.6 compared to other countries in Africa. The price to pay for rewarding inefficiency can be avoided by only increasing efficiency on existing land under sugar plantation.
- The sugar producers have the opportunity to work with outcome producers’ schemes which would give more families and households reliable income and support government strategy of poverty alleviation or “boma bagaggawale”.
- The sugar market indicates that it is cheaper to import sugar (at $400 per tone) than grow sugar in Uganda produced at US$ 550 per tone. Whereas it is recognized that sugar industry provides some employment and raises taxes, the employers are poorly paid and mistreated that we do not need to degazette our top-rich forests to make more Ugandans suffer in sugar plantations.
- At the minimum, Mabira Forest sinks over 17,600,000 tons of carbon, hence reducing the effect of green house gases and reducing impact of global warming.
- Using the current conservative carbon price of US$12 in Uganda, the carbon sink in Mabira Forest is worth US$ 212 million. We can therefore reap more from the carbon markets than decimate our forests and turn our country into a “breakfast republic” – sugar from sugarcane and butter from palm oil.
- As a country we must join the rest of the world in realizing the impact of global warming, which is probably the biggest threat to humanity today and Uganda is agency to United Nations framework Convention on Climate Change (UNCCD).
- Economically, the conservation value ($200m) of the forest is much more superior to the sugarcane growing ($12m).
- Data shows that SCDFL is the largest exporter of all the sugar companies in Uganda. Why then would government reward an inefficient company with additional land especially in a conservation area?
- Information from Agriculture sector indicates that Uganda is utilizing only 48% of its arable land and the rest of 52% is either idle or underutilized.
- The investors should be encouraged to utilise the idle land before any thoughts of degrading natural forest reserves or national parks can be entertained.
- Degazettement of the forest will be a breach of the Constitution of Uganda and complete disregard of the public trust doctrine to preserve and protect our natural resources as enshrined in art. 27(2)(b) of the constitution. There is no compelling reason that has been put forth by the investor or government that the proposed degazettement is in public trust or interest.
- Degazettement of Mabira forest Reserve will breach many international conventions that Uganda has ratified and other multilateral frameworks such as CBD, UNCCD, Kyoto Protocol and United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, etc. Uganda must live to its commitments to the international community on environmental protection.
- The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) requires that all countries should make an effort to reduce biodiversity loss by 2010 as a step towards achieving sustainable development and poverty reduction. Uganda must not engage in revenue gain on this commitment.
- The degazettement shall also be a breach of contract with other investors in Mabira Forest area such as the multi-million eco-lodge. All investors must be given equal opportunity.
- The proposed degazettement shall be a breach of contract with World Bank on the construction of Bujagali Dam where “The Government of Uganda undertakes to conserve through sustainable management programme/budget, the present ecosystem of the Mabira Forest Reserve and those portions of the Mabira Forest Reserve...”
- There has been public dissatisfaction of the proposed sugarcane project by all sectors of our society consuming the proposed Mabira give away. Protests have come from politicians, local people, churches, cultural institutions, technocrats and the international community. All the above indicate that there is no political or economic gain out of the proposed Mabira give away.
- A 1994 government report states that, in addition to the carbon emissions, Sugarcane releases effluents such as cane wash, cellulose matter, cane juice molasses waste, alcohol and sulfur into the nearby rivers and as a result River Nkka and River Ssuna are heavily polluted. In addition to destroying the ecological functions of the river, it is dangerous to communities who depend on those rivers for water.
- The proposed degazettement of Mabira is further confirmation of a trend by private investors, with the support of government, to acquire free land at the expense of the people and Uganda. Government has never shown any intent to go back and evaluate whether the conditions and the stated benefits for degazettement are ever achieved. They never are! For example, the giveaway of Bitumana Forest to Kikira Sugar Co.
- It is very important to note the cultural value of Mabira Forest Reserve. A statement prepared by Buganda Kingdom states “the people of Buganda need and hereby the rest of Ugandans ask any culture and tradition states that the love for conservation and protection of our natural environment is the foundation stone on which our rich cultures are erected”. Mabira forest is a cultural heritage for Uganda.
- Finally there is no economic sense in Mabira give away, there is no political gain and the proposal will cause environmental disaster; the forest is a biodiversity haven, the water catchment, ecosystem destination and source of forest products for communities, the education and ecology classroom, the 17.6 million carbon sink. No way, No how, No Mabira give away.