



BRIEF COMMEMORATING THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 2024

AGRICULTURE REFORM HUB UGANDA (AGROREF)

Introduction

Agriculture Reform Hub Uganda (AGROREF) in partnership with Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) and other partners prepared and organised for the commemoration of the International Human Rights Day 2024 in a series of meetings. The commemorations started with a press conference that took place on the 4th Dec.2024 held at the head office of UHRC and climaxed with a high-level dialogue held at Golf Course Hotel on 10th December 2024.

As an organisation that works with farmers and agricultural cooperatives in particular, we are cognisant of the fact that human rights can never be separated from the agriculture sector. For a country whose 68% of its population is employed in the agriculture sector, Uganda must do whatever it takes to promote and protect the rights of people engaged in this sector especially rights of smallholder farmers organised in cooperatives, women, youth, Persons with Disabilities, Refugees and other marginalised groups employed within the sector.

Environmental rights are a fundamental aspect of human rights discourse, especially in countries like Uganda, where agriculture plays a essential role in the economy and livelihoods. As we commemorate the International Human Rights Day in Uganda under the theme ***“Reducing Inequalities in the Enforcement of Environmental Rights and in the Mitigation of Environmental Degradation”***, is particularly relevant in the context of smallholder farmers. Farmers, while contributing significantly to food production and economic development, are also central to the environmental challenges Uganda faces.

Environmental rights in Uganda, especially in the context of agriculture, have become a focal point of discussion in recent years due to the increasing challenges posed by climate change, land degradation, and unsustainable farming practices. The enforcement of these rights, however, remains a significant challenge despite several legal and policy frameworks in place. The connection between smallholder farmers and the environment is complex, as these farmers play dual roles as both contributors to environmental degradation and as key agents in environmental protection; their farming practices can be a source of environmental harm, but on the other, they are also essential stewards in preserving and regenerating the land.

Environmental Rights Issues in the Agricultural Sector

Environmental rights within the agricultural sector are integral to ensuring sustainable livelihoods. These rights include access to clean air, water, and soil, as well as the right to a healthy environment. In Uganda, agricultural practices such as deforestation, land degradation,

and poor waste management directly impact these rights. The agricultural sector, particularly smallholder farming, contributes to these environmental challenges, often exacerbated by limited access to sustainable agricultural practices, inadequate knowledge of environmental rights, and insufficient enforcement of environmental regulations.

1. Deforestation and Land Degradation

A significant environmental issue linked to smallholder agriculture in Uganda is deforestation and land degradation. The expansion of agriculture, especially in forested areas, contributes to a reduction in forest cover, which in turn affects biodiversity. Uganda's forest cover declined by 1.5% per year between 2010 and 2020, largely due to agricultural expansion. Smallholder farmers, who often rely on shifting cultivation, slash-and-burn techniques, and unsustainable land-use practices, have been major contributors to this trend.

According to the Uganda National Forestry Authority (2020), Uganda loses about 91,000 hectares of forest cover annually. A significant portion of this deforestation is driven by smallholder farmers clearing land for crops such as maize, sugarcane, and tea.

According to the Uganda National Forestry Authority (2022), about 2.5 million hectares of forest have been lost in Uganda over the past decade, with 70% of this loss attributed to agricultural expansion (Uganda National Forestry Authority, 2022). In 2020 alone, Uganda's forest cover declined by 3.2%, driven largely by unsustainable agricultural practices (Uganda Forestry Authority, 2020).

2. Water Pollution and Poor Waste Management

Agricultural runoff, often laden with pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers, contributes to water pollution in Uganda's lakes and rivers, including Lake Victoria, one of the largest freshwater bodies in Africa. The use of chemical inputs, although essential for boosting yields, has led to the contamination of water sources, affecting both the environment and local communities (NEMA, 2021). Smallholder farmers, particularly those without the resources for effective waste management systems, have difficulty mitigating this pollution. Inadequate irrigation systems and over-extraction of water for agricultural use further contribute to the degradation of freshwater ecosystems (World Bank, 2021). A report by the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) in 2022 noted a 40% increase in chemical pesticide use over the past five years (NEMA, 2022), raising concerns about both environmental and human health impacts.

STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE FARMERS IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Despite their role in contributing to environmental degradation, smallholder farmers also have the potential to be part of the solution. Smallholder farming can be an avenue for promoting sustainable agricultural practices that protect the environment.

Engaging agricultural cooperatives in promoting environmental sustainability

Agricultural cooperatives represent an underutilized avenue for addressing environmental degradation and promoting sustainable practices among smallholder farmers. Using their collective power, cooperatives have the potential to educate smallholder farmers on

environmentally sustainable practices, such as agroforestry, organic farming, and conservation tillage

Encouraging Agroforestry and Soil Conservation (2019–2024)

Over the years, there has been a noticeable shift towards more sustainable practices among smallholder farmers, particularly through the adoption of agroforestry systems and soil conservation methods. Agroforestry, which involves integrating trees with crops, has been shown to improve soil fertility, reduce water runoff, and enhance biodiversity. The *Uganda National Agriculture Research Organisation* (NARO) reported in 2023 that adoption of agroforestry among smallholder farmers increased by 20% in the last five years, with many farmers recognizing the long-term benefits of tree planting and sustainable land management (NARO, 2023).

Promote farmer sustainable water management

There has been an increase in smallholder farmers' awareness of water conservation practices, driven by government initiatives and NGO programs. Between 2019 and 2024, the Uganda Ministry of Water and Environment (2024) reported a 12% increase in the use of water-efficient irrigation systems, such as drip irrigation, among smallholder farmers. These water-saving technologies not only improve crop yields but also reduce the impact of agricultural runoff on local water bodies (Uganda Ministry of Water and Environment, 2024).

Encourage small-holder farmers participation in National Environmental Policies

The role of smallholder farmers in advocating for and implementing environmental policies has also grown. Through partnerships with local governments, NGOs, and international organizations, smallholder farmers have been engaged in community-level environmental protection efforts. The *Uganda National Environmental Management Authority* (NEMA) has reported increased participation of farmers in training and implementation of sustainable agricultural policies since 2020 (NEMA, 2022). These farmers are now at the forefront of advocating for policies that reduce deforestation and improve land management practices.

To further enhance the role of smallholder farmers in environmental protection, the following recommendations are crucial:

- **Policy Support and Capacity Building:** The government should prioritize policies that support smallholder farmers in transitioning to sustainable agricultural practices. This could include financial incentives for adopting agroecological practices and providing technical support for implementing conservation agriculture and agroforestry.
- **Education and Awareness:** Promoting education and awareness about the environmental impacts of agricultural practices and the benefits of sustainable alternatives will help empower smallholder farmers to make more informed decisions.
- **Access to Climate Financing:** Increased access to climate finance for smallholder farmers will be vital in supporting the adoption of climate-resilient farming techniques and renewable energy technologies.

Conclusion

Smallholder farmers in Uganda play a critical role in both environmental degradation and environmental protection. While unsustainable practices have led to significant environmental challenges, there is a growing trend of smallholders adopting sustainable farming techniques, contributing to the mitigation of environmental degradation. The trend towards agroecology, agroforestry, conservation agriculture, and renewable energy indicates that with the right policies and support, smallholder farmers can be key actors in Uganda's efforts to reduce inequalities in the enforcement of environmental rights and mitigate environmental degradation.