

Brief

August, 2021

Participatory land use planning in Uganda

Bringing local views together to ensure equitable and sustainable development in areas considered for oil palm expansion



This brief summarizes a participatory planning process that led to the development of six subcounty land use plans in three districts. It outlines the purpose and the process, compares two examples, and offers recommendations that will lead towards more sustainable land use that better reflect the needs and priorities of local communities in those subcounties and provides lessons for other districts to learn from.

The Ugandan government's National Oil Palm Project (NOPP) aim is to improve rural development in and around Lake Victoria through oil palm production, and to contribute to poverty reduction. This began in Kalangala district in 2002, and oil palm now dominates much of the landscape on that island. It is now being expanded to Buvuma where land has been acquired for new plantations, and several mainland districts where this process is just beginning. However, much research has shown that oil palm development has also led to many negative social and environment impacts.¹ And with large areas assigned for oil palm, this will obviously reduce the availability of land for farmers to grow other crops, increase pressures on the environment, and leave local communities with hard choices about how to meet their needs from what land remains. In response, alternative land use plans were developed by community members in areas with oil palm expansion, using fully participatory processes and inclusive decision making.

Recommendations

For consideration by the Ugandan Ministry of Agriculture

1. Ensure that participatory land use and physical planning are always conducted prior to any land acquisition, and enshrine this with the legal requirement for free, prior and informed consent.
2. Support local governments to put local communities at the centre of the design and implementation of land use plans at the outset, to better sustain local livelihoods and environmental protection.
3. Oblige Oil Palm Uganda Limited (OPUL) to apply its corporate social responsibility strategies so that they fund activities in support of the local land use plans, such as restoration of forests and wetlands.
4. Design and implement models with fair distribution of land resources between the oil palm industry and local smallholders, between oil palm and other crops and support diversification of livelihoods to guarantee long-term resilience and prosperity of communities.

For consideration by Buvuma, Buikwe and Mayuge District local governments

1. Use participatory land use plans to build partnerships between development agencies, local organizations and communities, and encourage them to align their activities with the plans.
2. Incorporate activities and components of the land use plans into district annual plans, so that they can better align with the national development priorities, and qualify for funding from central government.
3. Ensure there is adequate external financial support from investors and from national and district governments to fund key aspects of implementation of the land use plans.
4. Encourage investment in communities to implement the land use plans, respect bylaws, and for payment of local taxes so this revenue can be used to fund other components of the plan for community benefits.

¹ This policy brief is the latest publication of a series, produced during five years of intensive research in oil palm landscapes in Uganda by Ecological Trends Alliance, supported by Tropenbos International. For all publications, including research results on the impacts of oil palm development in Kalangala and Buvuma Districts, and full land use plans and summary briefs for the six subcounties, see www.ecotrendsalliance.org/publication.html and www.tropenbos.org/resources/publications?country_output=uganda

Background

Rural development projects can have adverse impacts if changes in land use are not planned appropriately, and the promotion of oil palm cultivation is a case in point. It intensifies the pressure on land and reduces local food production¹. Always, resulting from communities not given adequate and balanced information where oil palm expansion is planned. Improved land use planning is therefore needed to integrate the needs of all local people, guaranteeing food security and protecting the environment. In the face of these challenges, participatory land use plans were developed for six subcounties where oil palm development was programmed. The plans were elaborated at community level, based on the priorities and needs of the local population. Four were in Buvuma District where land had already been acquired for oil palm - Buvuma Town Council, Busamuzi, Buwooya and Nairambi. In addition, in two subcounties on the mainland, Kityerera subcountry in Mayuge District, and Ngogwe subcountry in Buikwe District, where land acquisition had not yet commenced. As such, the land use plans synthesized in this brief provide a great opportunity for learning and improvement between districts at different stages of oil palm development. The land use plans incorporate the concerns and needs of the communities into physical planning, and as such, their implementation is the only way to achieve a truly sustainable and inclusive development.

Community concerns – key challenges

A major output at the start of the planning process was the drawing up of a list of the most pressing issues communities face regarding land use in their subcounty. These were identified through separate discussions in each parish, also looking at their causes and effects. Some were specific, but many highlighted similar economic and environmental problems, and concerns regarding the planned introduction of oil palm cultivation.

- **Poverty.** Low income was identified as a main problem, caused by limited markets for agricultural produce, low prices for products, and low agricultural productivity.
- **Food insecurity.** Inadequate food production was identified as a major concern, due to low crop and livestock productivity, poor farming methods, poor soil fertility, soil erosion and animal and crops diseases. In addition, where land had already been acquired for oil palm, people were forced to open up new land for farming, such as in protected forests or wetlands.
- **Deforestation.** A major issue in every subcounty. Due to decreasing land available for agriculture and need for fuelwood and building materials, many forest reserves already been cleared or heavily encroached.
- **Environmental degradation.** Also due to the need for farmland, lakesides and riversides had been cultivated and wetlands have been drained and converted to agriculture, leading to heavily degraded water sources.
- **Lack of infrastructure and services.** Several communities complained about poor road networks that limited their access to markets, and poor health and education services in their sub counties.

These revealed the poor economic conditions, environmental degradation, and lack of arable land that all communities face. So, if other sustainable land uses are not included in the development plans, oil palm development could only intensify these problems.



The participatory planning process– from aims to action

The aims were to achieve inclusive, acceptable and equitable physical planning that incorporates the will and the needs of local people. The specific objectives for six subcounty plans were agreed after close consultation with communities and other local stakeholders in each parish, where they reflected on their priorities, and agreed how to respond to their most pressing land use issues that they face. But the process also took into consideration national level guidance in a systematic way.

The process

1. **Pre-planning** - The area was first defined, and district officials were provided training in land use planning and with the necessary resources. In parallel, relevant biophysical and social data was collected and analysed to inform the process. Maps were prepared using ArcGIS software, based on administrative plans, and land use cover base-maps obtained from satellite imagery.
2. **Developing a vision** - Communities met and developed a vision and goal to guide future management of land and the copying strategies to address the different challenges identified for each land-use category. An action plan was developed, which brought together the copying strategies and specified the relevant actions, responsibilities, resources required and the time for the commencement of each action.
3. **Brainstorming** - Community members outlined the problems they were facing, and together they analysed each regarding causes, coping strategies, opportunities, and possible solutions. They discussed what they would want their parish to be like in the future regarding agricultural and infrastructural development, especially in light of the introduction of oil palm.
4. **Resource mapping** - Communities could then draw current and future land use maps for their parishes, utilizing community knowledge and experience which proved essential for the elaboration of the plans.



5. **Undertaking transect walks** - Community groups visited sites of concern and potential sites for agricultural development. During walks, groups stopped to observe and discuss issues and problems. At each stop, a GPS reading, relevant field notes and photographs were taken, to inform the planning process.
6. **Collecting secondary data** - Data was obtained from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, the National Forest Authority, Google Earth and District surveyors, validated by community members, to guide land use assessments and further define the land use maps. These included administrative boundary maps, land use maps, location of settlements and protected areas, and land acquired or required for oil palm.
7. **Elaborating subcounty plans** - Each initial map was generated at parish level, before they were then merged into single land use maps for each subcounty.

Taking action – once the land use plans are finalized, communities and their leaders then developed joint action plans to guide them on the interventions to take, to overcome the problems they identified and to reach their commonly agreed goals. Action plans also include the resources required to do so, the responsibilities of each stakeholder, and the specific actions needed for their implementation.

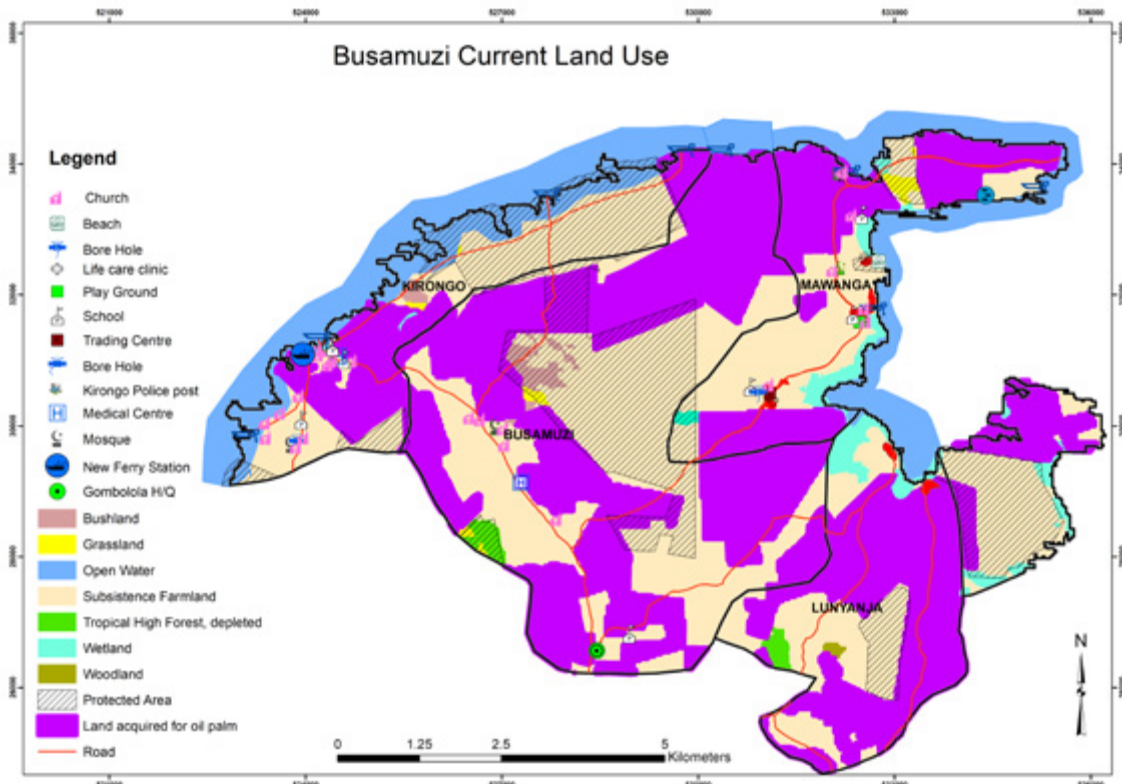
Comparison of two land use plans

Two of the six subcountry land use plans are presented here as examples, with their current land use maps. The first is from **Busamuzi** (Buvuma District) where land has already been acquired for oil palm plantations (in purple) and is representative of all other subcounties in Buvuma island. The second is from **Ngogwe** (Buikwe District) where land acquisition has yet to commence, and is representative of elsewhere on the mainland.

Busamuzi subcounty

The problem of planning only *after* land acquisition

The land use planning process in Busamuzi was carried out after OPUL had acquired the land it needed for oil palm cultivation. This was one of the largest challenges, as there was very limited remaining land available, with farmers forced to enter forests and wetlands. As a result, the plan for Busamuzi and other subcounties in Buvuma district focused on finding ways to accommodate all the other many requirements on the little remaining land, hampering a rational and orderly development of land in an environmentally sound manner.



There is little land now available for food production - Almost half of all land (44%) has been allocated to Oil Palm Uganda Ltd. (OPUL) for establishing oil palm plantations. Another 23% is protected forest, though much is highly degraded. Thus, only 33% remains available for community use to support local livelihoods. This is a general trend common in other subcounties in Buvuma, as the Buvuma Island project will establish 7500 hectares of oil palm, 5000 hectares of nucleus estate and 2500 hectares assigned to smallholder farmers.

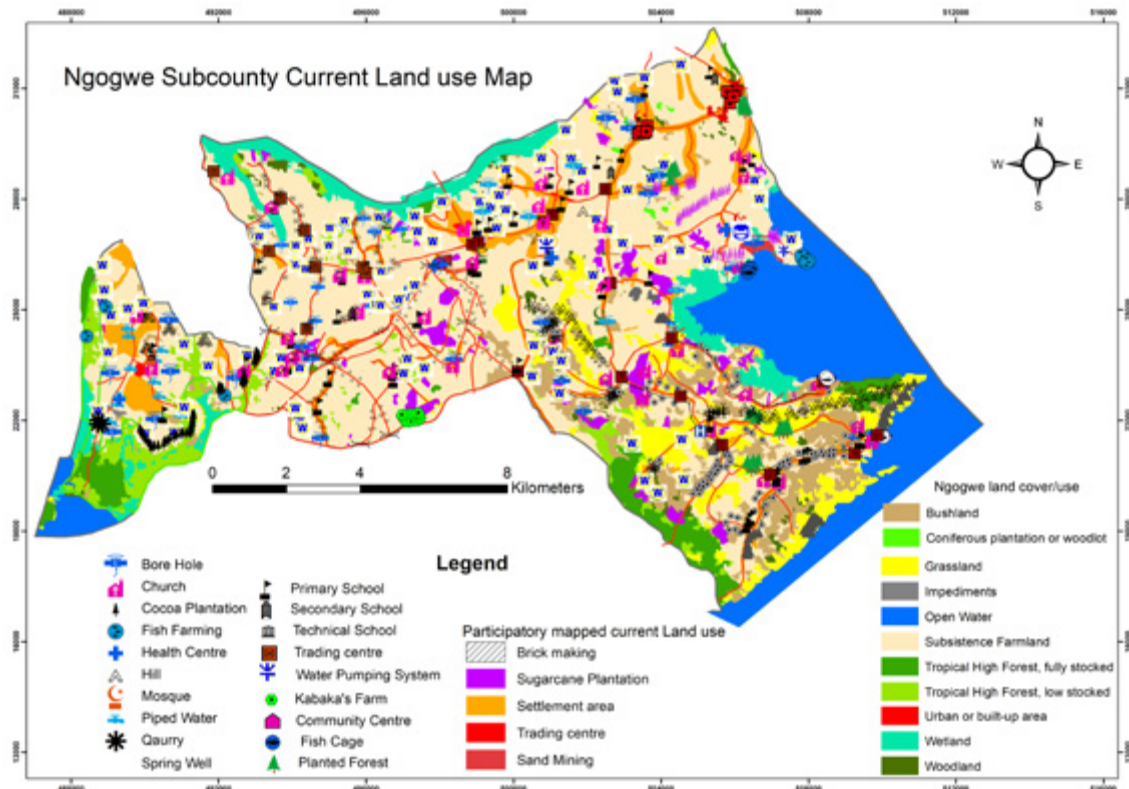
Protected (forest and wetland) areas are highly encroached and degraded - In most of the forest reserves land is being cultivated, except for small patches of depleted forest in the southwest, farmers are cultivating in wetlands and this is common in Buvuma District. After cutting trees for charcoal and building material, farmers clear the rest of the vegetation so they can grow food crops. Unequal distribution of land tenure and inability of the government to effectively protect forests are partly to blame. However, clearance will clearly be increased by the expansion of oil palm and smallholders have nowhere else to turn, and it is feared that communities will not respect the forest reserves boundaries, wetlands and lakeshores if nothing is done to support their vulnerability.

“Participatory land use planning involves direct engagement with communities at parish level, and must be undertaken BEFORE land acquisition for oil palm plantations”

Ngogwe subcounty

Lessons from Buvuma must be rolled out in the mainland

The development of the land use plan in Ngogwe prior to oil palm introduction should help protect vulnerable areas, and will promote better use and conservation of natural resources along the Lake Victoria shoreline. It also helped local communities to consider what they want in the future in the light of anticipated changes, including becoming a new hub, and to begin to present their priorities with oil palm investors. Mistakes were made in Kalangala and Buvuma regarding land use planning.¹ It is therefore essential that such planning comes ahead of any further developments on the mainland, to ensure that natural resources and biodiversity are protected, restored, and for community needs to be identified and evaluated before land allocation.



Oil palm could diminish food security - The subcounty is suitable for oil palm and is being considered as a new 'hub'. The decision is yet to be confirmed, but if so, 3000 hectares would be required for plantations within a 30 km radius. However, farmland is critical to provide food for rural communities, fishing villages and growing urban centres, and the introduction of oil palm over large areas would mean many households may struggle to grow sufficient food for their needs.

Environmental and social risks - The subcounty lies along the shore of Lake Victoria, and so has special environmental significance. But as was seen in Kalangala, the legal requirement to respect a 200 metre buffer zone along the shore was rarely respected, leading to increased pollution of the water and other impacts.¹ If these delicate land resources are not managed well, changes in the agroecological balance could also lead to more natural resource-based conflicts in the future.

Implementing the plans

Putting plans into practice requires commitment and collaboration from every stakeholder, and financial resources. In each subcounty, everyone agreed to be assigned roles and responsibilities - from growers to government staff - while they also agreed to a regular monitoring plan using indicators that they themselves set. Regarding financial resources, funding should be provided in part from OPUL as they will gain most from increased oil palm production, but also from the national government as they gain from increased tax revenues, and from donors, complemented by district governments from increased local taxes that would be expected. Ensuring a solid and long term financial backing is of course crucial for the future of such groups.

Conclusions and lessons learned

1. Elaborating the six subcounty land use plans shows that placing local communities at the centre of the planning process revealed valuable insights, that allowed the achievement of an optimal and equitable use of land within the selected subcounties in Buvuma, Mayuge and Buikwe districts. This process can now pave the way for a more inclusive, sustainable development of rural areas in Uganda under the lens of oil palm expansion.
2. The participatory process proved to be very popular amongst communities and local stakeholders, giving them a 'voice' and a feeling of ownership. They were very actively involved, and the systematic stepwise process outlined in this brief was effective in capturing local views while also complementing them with external data sources such as administrative, land use and satellite maps. And the examples shown here of the resulting land use maps clearly show the level of detail that is possible.
3. If implemented successfully, land use plans will bring increased prosperity to local communities through more sustainable and equitable management of natural resources, increased land and livestock productivity and food availability, leading to improved household livelihoods and income. Environmental protection will also be improved. The process has improved inclusive decision making and local governance, with expected benefits to health and education services
4. However, what become absolutely clear is that it is essential to conduct such an exercise prior to land acquisition taking place. Examples from the four subcounties in Buvuma exemplify this, with land use planning was severely hampered where up to half the land had already been allocated to oil palm plantations. Thus, this planning process must either precede or coincide with the application of obtaining true free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) which must also be improved, as previous research indicated that in Buvuma this was at best inadequate, at worse, entirely absent.¹
5. Many negative issues were highlighted regarding the establishment of oil palm in Kalangala, and these are well documented, with a number of the same mistakes were then repeated in Buvuma.¹ Now, the government must ensure that they and OPUL do not repeat these again when establishing new hubs on the mainland. The evidence exists,¹ and the authors truly hope that the recommendations will be adopted in full.

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