

## Press statement:

### Uganda Coalition for Sustainable Development

#### **The proposed Mabira forest degazettement is a symptom of wider barriers to sustainable development in Uganda**

The Uganda Coalition for Sustainable Development (UCSD) is a network of more than 30 active NGOs dedicated to coordinate advocacy and lobby work around issues and commitments made by world governments towards sustainable development, inspired by the Civil Society Project for preparation of the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, **attended by 104 Heads of State (including Uganda). Uganda is therefore a signatory to the Summit outcomes - the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI), and the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development.**

UCSD wishes to register its appreciation for the Save Mabira Campaign against the proposed degazettement for sugar cane growing, **which would work against Section 44 of the JPOI that targets to achieve, by 2010, a significant reduction in the current loss of biological diversity,** bearing in mind that for Uganda, **the cost of natural resource damage is as high as 17% of gross national income per year (PEAP, 2007/8). In addition areas around Lake Victoria are already contributing to nutrient enrichment and water pollution problems because of watershed degradation (UNDP, 2005).** However, we would also like to openly express our dissatisfaction with the violent actions that occurred on April 12, which swayed away an otherwise noble cause and portrayed it as a negative force to investor security and economic development

Since 2005, UCSD has been part of the *Sustainability Watch* (SusWatch) partnership with participating NGOs/CSO alliances in the 15 countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. As part of the SusWatch partnership UCSD produced the first Uganda National Sustainability Watch Report that focused on implementation barriers to sustainable development.

The Uganda SusWatch report (2005) identified five main barriers to sustainable development: **inadequate financing of environmental/natural resource management, limited political/government will** (including the high levels of corruption in government), **inadequate institutional and legal development, low levels of social-economic development and the limitations for Civil Society Organization (CSO) engagement in sustainable development**

(More information: <http://www.suswatch.org/uganda>)

Amongst the identified barriers to sustainable development from the Uganda Sustainability Watch Report, **the lack of political will, institutional and legal barriers have more visibly manifested themselves in the proposed degazettement of Mabira forest reserve for sugar cane growing.** Based on these 2 barriers, UCSD calls on Government to avoid a slump in Uganda's progress towards meeting the MDG 1 (poverty eradication) and environmental sustainability (MDG 7) targets within the Lake Victoria basin by reversing the decision to degazette the proposed Mabira forest degazettement

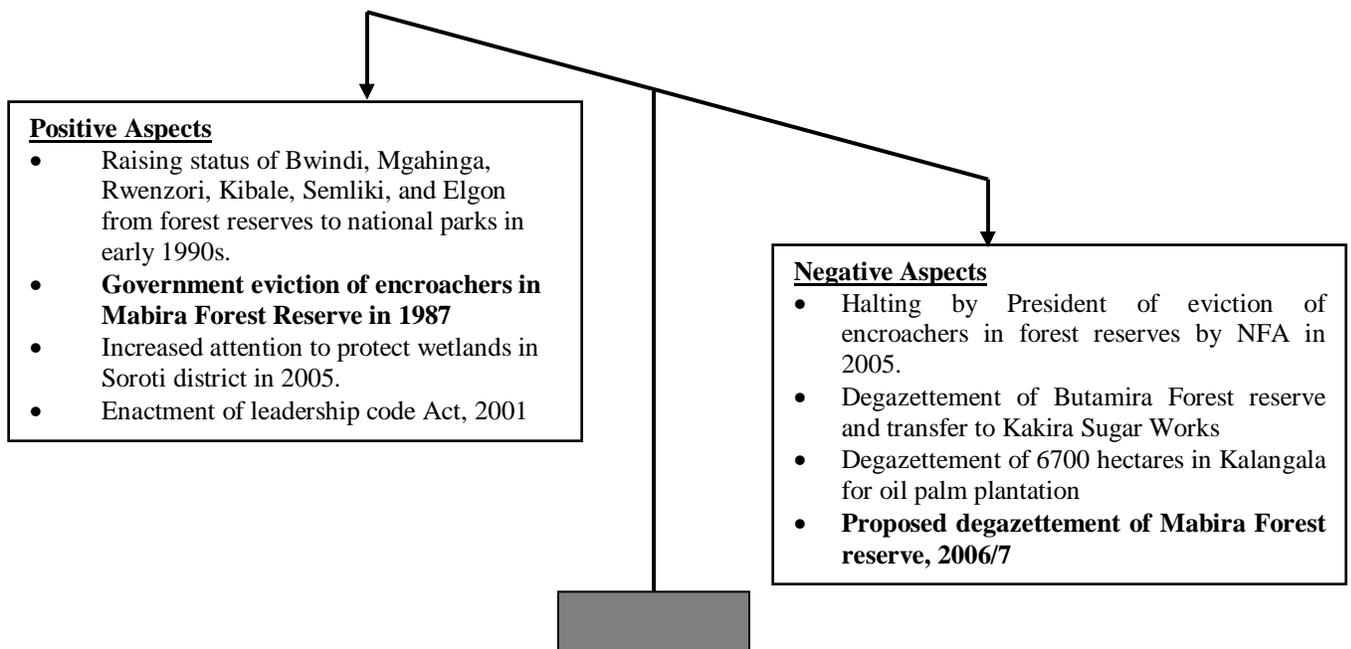
## Predictable and consistent political will for sustainable development commitments is needed

**Political will**, as an **invisible asset** for sustainable development. In Uganda, the political will to “eradicate” poverty has been strong and consistent since mid 1990s. That is commendable. However, put on our weighing scale, the **benefits from the political will are outweighed by the costs because of inconsistencies, unpredictability and sometimes contradictions in Government policies and programmes** (see figure below).

For example, in mid-1980s and early 1990s government strongly supported evictions of encroachers in Mabira Forest Reserve but the proposal to degazette Mabira forest seems to show a turn-around that leaves citizens confused and helpless. Furthermore, this development raises doubt about government’s consistency in political will, and for upholding the public trust doctrine that is fully enshrined in the Constitution of Uganda 1995 under objective XIII, where:

*“The State shall protect important natural resources, including land, water, wetlands, minerals, oil, fauna and flora on behalf of the people of Uganda”.*

Figure: Weighing Scale for political will



### A call for action to usher in more political will for sustainable development

- **Government of Uganda should expeditiously and clearly state its position on Mabira forest so as not to keep Ugandans guessing of what the next action will be.** This is in view of the fact that many Ugandans (and concerned development partners) remain concerned about the plight of Mabira forest as evidenced during and after the April 12, 2007 demonstration and sign-ups -- see for example the diverse 11,233 signatories to the Save Mabira petition as at June 25, 2007: <http://www.petitiontime.com/ViewPetition.aspx?key=savemabira>

- **Government of Uganda should be consistent in its development policies in relation to environmental conservation in line with regional and global sustainable development commitments.** For example proposed investments in the Lake Victoria region should take into account relevant provisions in the Protocol on Sustainable Development of Lake Victoria basin, the Ramsar Wetlands Convention, and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation among others, to which Uganda is party.
- UCSD further recommends that Government of Uganda should remember that it is constitutional that **power belongs to the people. Hence, people’s aspirations should not be ignored by upheld, as is the case with the need for continued existence of Mabira Forest reserve due to its benefits.** But this calls for deliberate mechanisms that facilitate participation of affected citizens on contentious issues. This will not only ease undue tension and anxiety amongst the citizens, but provide a strong accountability basis in decision making regarding the diminishing natural forest resources like Mabira. We believe that deliberate mechanisms like citizen mobilization and education, public access to information, independent citizen opinions and public hearings and or / expert testimonies should be useful in this regard.
- UCSD strongly **recommend that CSO capacities to undertake litigation processes need to be built, to counter future attempts by government to violate its own mandate.** We make this recommendation based on evidence that some CSOs like ACODE, Green Watch, and TEAN that have dared government to the courts of law to challenge the proposed Mabira degazettement and other environmental issues.

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UCSD is a membership CSO network with a mission to *contribute to sustainable development through follow up of the Johannesburg summit outcomes and subsequent global declarations in Uganda.*

The Executive Committee of UCSD is made up of **Climate and Development Initiatives (CDI), National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE), Uganda Environment Education Foundation (UEEF), Rural Development and Media Communications (RUDMEC), Uganda Biodiversity Network (UBN), Students Partnership Worldwide (SPW-Uganda), Junior Chamber International (JCI-Uganda), East African Communities’ Organization for Management of Lake Victoria Resources (ECOVIC-Uganda), MS Uganda, Uganda Gender Resource Center (UGRC), Uganda Fish Development Association (UFDA), and Uganda Environment Protection Forum (UEPF)**