FACING LAND CONFLICT
An FSC™ story from Uganda
FARMERS SUPPORTING THEMSELVES

Forestry company global-woods faces Uganda’s major challenge of land tenure by understanding exactly why farmers encroach on reserves: they do it to make a living for themselves and their families.

This is why the company has honed its corporate social responsibility (CSR) approach around building livelihoods, and it acknowledges its FSC certification as pivotal in its approach. And it’s why global-woods has managed to plant almost two-thirds of its concession area.

In 2002, the Ugandan state gave global-woods, founded in Germany, a 50-year tree farming licence for the 12,186-hectare Kikonda Central Forest Reserve near the town of Holma. But murky land ownership, a national problem, has seen licence-holders grappling with encroachment of forest reserves.

GETTING REAL

"Encroachment is real. We can’t wish it away," global-woods Sustainability Manager John Mary Kisombo says simply. "We know some of our neighbours have been making a living in the forest. We help them make a living elsewhere, one that is often better.

“We’ve had to adapt ourselves to this environment. It’s through our CSR and management processes – structured around FSC Principles and Criteria – that we are able to deal with the land challenge and operate. If we’d waited for others to resolve land issues, we would not have this forest today.”

If it had waited, the area would also lack its biggest job and income creator – its major hub of economic activity. Today, global-woods employs 600 people, with most salaries spent locally.

My family is living a settled life now, and I am at peace... I don’t have to feel guilty that I am doing something illegal.

Godfrey Kumaana (Cattle Keeper)
INVESTING IN PEOPLE

The company designed its CSR around building sustainable livelihoods for cattle keepers and cultivators, who have made up most of Kikonde reserve encroachers. Crop growers are supported in improving their own land fertility, production and post-harvest management. Cattle keepers are helped with improved breeding, feeding, output and animal health. So far, global-woods has supported 1,012 crop growers and 367 cattle keepers.

Global-woods has invested in extension workers to engage directly with communities, Training and Monitoring Officer Rose Kaahwa says. “They help people with aspects like financial literacy and record-keeping. They hear the concerns of communities, using internal grievance resolution mechanisms when needed. People know we will follow up on their complaints.

“This is directly related to FSC Principle 4,” Rose adds. “This has to do with community relations: contributing to maintaining or enhancing communities’ social and economic wellbeing.”

FSC CERTIFICATION

Indeed, FSC certification is central to the company’s approach. “It is a reference point that informs our forest management and CSR, helping us focus on the community as part of our business strategy. Just working through the P&Cs improved the picture, calming things and putting them into perspective,” JohnMary says.

“It has brought sustainability through the three legs: benefits to the community while being economically viable and protecting corridors for biodiversity. This has been the benchmark in developing standard reporting procedures for every aspect in the entire company.”

A COMPLEX ISSUE

“What global-woods is doing is good,” Dr Rose Nakayi, land governance specialist and law lecturer at Makerere University in Kampala, says. “One would have expected a licence holder to get land that is free of claims ... The truth is that we have a very good legal framework – on paper – and the conflict resolution institutions are there.” But there is little on the ground.

As she talks, you get just an inkling of the complexity of Uganda’s land issue. “There are multiple tenant systems, overlapping claims, and conflicting layers of claims on land that has been licenced.” Land could be freehold (brought by the British), customary (hard to prove or disprove) or mails (based on owning a square mile).

I learned that my own soil could be as fertile as the forest if I cleared the weeds, mulched and used manure.

Fred Muwalampya (Cultivator)
CONTESTED

Forest reserves, however, are owned by the state and administered by Uganda’s National Forestry Association (NFA). Global-woods has asked the NFA to stipulate where the Kikonda reserve starts and stops, and to resolve claims.

Meanwhile, it does not plant on contested land within its concession. Around 2,000 hectares is contested in one way or the other. There is also no planting in set-aside areas — thick ribbons of land that flow through the forest to allow for protection of wildlife and native trees. The only intervention here is removal of invasive species.

WORKING TOGETHER

When new areas do open for tree planting, community engagement comes first. “Together, we work out timelines to harvest crops and vacate forest land ... we never stop talking,” JohnMary says. “People have seen that we are willing to listen to them and take the time to resolve matters.”

He is not exaggerating. When company staffers visit neighbouring villages, they are greeted with genuine warmth, laughter and friendly banter.

Some villagers here openly tell you they were once forest encroachers. Then they tell you they are happy to no longer do this illegal thing, to earn a living outside the reserve. “I think we have reversed the stigma around encroachment,” JohnMary says. “People have heard us say, we know why you encroached and we want you to do things smarter.”

EUCALYPTUS PLANTATION, GLOBAL-WOODS, HOIMA

Photo: James Bennett

GLOBAL-WOODS SUSTAINABILITY MANAGER JOHNMARY KISEMBO MAKES A POINT

Photo: James Bennett

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JohnMary KISEMBO (Global-woods Sustainability Manager)