

UGANDA

Angelika Klein

Although the impact of climate change is evident and the general public are more aware of changing weather phenomena, the subject of climate change only plays a small role in Uganda's public discourse.

In spite of that, Ugandan politicians are quick to point to large industrialised nations and their carbon emissions when it comes to the impact of climate change. Yet people are increasingly coming to the conclusion that many problems have their roots within the country. A growing number of civil society organizations with greater awareness are becoming more effective at informing the people about undesirable internal trends and mobilising them to resist them. In one example from 2007, large protests took place in Kampala to oppose a government plan to sell about a third of the Mabira rainforest, Uganda's largest remaining tropical rainforest, to a private investor who planned to turn it into a sugar cane plantation. The "Save Mabira" movement was born, and the protests became a political issue that led to a massive boycott of sugar products made by the company behind the plan (Sugar Corporation of Uganda Ltd., SCOUL). It was a success at the beginning, but President Museveni did not give up on the plan. He put it back on the agenda four years later, and now sugar cane is growing on what was once wooded terrain.

This awareness of the topic has been accompanied by the creation of political institutions intended to focus on the issue of climate change and related phenomena. The Climate Change Unit (CCU) was founded in response to the insight that not only has Uganda been and will be greatly affected by weather phenomena, but also that as one of the world's least developed countries it is limited in how it can respond to them. The environment ministry set up the CCU in 2008 with the primary task of implementing the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol. The CCU also has the job of developing a Climate Change Policy that defines which measures can and must be taken in Uganda to slow climate change and prevent avoidable consequences. Another political institution working on the issue of climate change is the Parliamentary Forum on Climate Change (PFCC), which was also founded in 2008 as one of the first of its kind in Africa.

ENERGY POLICY – THE NILE IS KEY

Uganda is attempting to achieve energy security mainly by making greater use of hydropower along the Nile. It hopes to do this by means of three hydropower plants – Owen Falls Dam, Nalubaale Dam and Bujagali Dam, the last of which was funded with German development aid. Support from China will help Uganda build a fourth dam in the northern town of Karuma. However, for the hydropower plants to be used effectively, one basic requirement must be met: they must receive a regular, adequate supply of water from the Nile, and ultimately from Lake Victoria, which feeds into the Nile. But this is by no means guaranteed. Unreliable rainfall has caused water levels to rise or fall unpredictably, which in turn influences the productivity of the hydropower plants. Recurring droughts in particular have caused water levels to fall low enough to no longer be able to drive the power plants and generate adequate energy. Combined with steadily rising demand for electricity, this commonly results in severe energy shortages and power failures. This situation has motivated the government to diversify the national energy supply. Its Vision 2040 strategy relies primarily on nuclear power to achieve this. In addition, Uganda passed an energy policy in 2002 that aims to secure the energy needed for the country's economic and social development in an environmentally sustainable manner. A strategy paper on renewable energies in which Uganda's government commits itself to developing and using renewables underscores the environmentally conscious goals of the energy policy.

At the international level, the energy security issue has often created tension between Uganda (where the White Nile has its source) and other countries that share the Nile, especially Egypt. When the water level in Lake Victoria fell significantly in 2002, Egypt stepped up its efforts to monitor water use and intruded on Ugandan territory.

Debates of the kind that take place in Europe, which combine energy security issues and geopolitical considerations, only take place on the periphery in Uganda if they take place there at all. The country has discovered oil, and although no decisions have been made about funding or the distribution of profits, simply the presence of this and other resources is perceived as a hedge, and this stops both the people and the government from worrying about potential dependence on other countries.

MULTILATERAL CLIMATE POLICY

Uganda became a party to the UNFCCC and signed the Kyoto Protocol. It is also a member of the Conference of Parties, which is committed to the CDM. The agency in Uganda that is responsible for these matters is the Climate Change Unit mentioned earlier. Its job it is to ensure compliance with the agreements to which the country is a party. Uganda also uses various international climate protection instruments, such as REDD+. However, the bulk of climate measures are funded by bilateral partners – particularly the UK, Norway, Denmark and Belgium – without whose support they would be disregarded.

At the COP19 in Warsaw, Uganda joined other African states in demanding a new and legally binding climate protection treaty to take effect after 2015. They were acting on the assumption that African countries are not the main sources of climate change and yet appear to be most affected by it. In the same vein, African countries have requested compensation as well as additional financial and technical support from industrialised countries in return for efforts to mitigate climate change. Uganda is among those suing for an African Climate Change Fund to be set up for this purpose. By contrast, most of its attempts have stopped at rhetoric and only take shape with the help of foreign aid anyway, if they take shape at all.

In summary, although Uganda has repeatedly emphasised its commitment to protecting the environment and mitigating the effects of climate change and has signed treaties to show its commitment, for the most part it has done nothing to back up its words. Again and again, ecologically sensitive areas fall to ambitious investment projects. Meanwhile, the Climate Change Unit is still funded exclusively by foreign donors while national and local money has little or no stake in it. Furthermore, the focus of the government as well as the people is on rapid industrialisation at the lowest possible cost – regardless of the danger of long-term negative impacts on the environment.