

New policy for Rwanda urban forestry

By Athan Tashobya

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Officials say unselective species of trees have been planted across Kigali - the capital of Rwanda - and other towns around the country with no regard to international standards for urban forestry. It is against this background that the government has embarked on formulating a policy, which will complement the Kigali City Master plan and the national green-growth agenda. This is so property developers also get to plan for urban afforestation while putting into consideration specific species of trees to grow in cities and towns.



Antoinetorrens via Wikimedia Commons - Gishwati hills, Rwanda

Vincent Biruta, the Minister for Natural Resources, says that as Rwanda strives to increase Forest Landscape Restoration (FLR) across the country, the government is equally mindful about mitigating carbon emission in urban areas, hence looking at urban forestry as key leverage to meet this target.

Biruta made the remarks during deliberations on policies and opportunities for sustainable economies, at a two-day Africa High-Level Bonn Challenge Roundtable meeting which concluded in Kigali. The meeting brought together more than 50 environment leaders and experts from over 20 African countries that have demonstrated leadership on forest landscape restoration, as well as delegates from international organisations supporting these endeavors.

Streamlining urban forestry

Biruta's comments were echoed by Rwanda Environment Management Authority's (REMA) acting director general Eng. Colleta Ruhamya, who noted that a policy to streamline urban forestry is being worked on, and is expected to come into force in the near future. "The new procedure originates from the study that was conducted which shows what would be planted in urban areas," Ruhamya told The New Times in an interview.

"We have been planting just any kind of trees; everybody plants tree species they are interested in but we need to know the appropriate trees to be planted in urban areas, at which length and, of course, their benefits," Ruhamya added.

Ruhamya said the new campaign to promote specific trees in urban areas, is aimed at producing more oxygen which would meet high carbon emission in urban centres. "When you are in Kimihurura and then move to the Kiyovu area (which has many trees), you will definitely feel the difference. Kiyovu is cool and the air around that area is so fresh... that's the feeling we need to have throughout the City of Kigali," she said.

Urban forestry regulation

So, what would be the fate of the already existing trees which would be deemed inappropriate under the new policy?

Ruhamya said the already planted trees would not be uprooted, but rather new guidelines will not allow further planting of trees considered unfit for urban forestry.

Dr Emmanuel Nkurunziza, director general, Rwanda Natural Resources Authority, said that after coming up with the tree planting guidelines, the proposals would be forwarded it to Cabinet to be considered as an urban forestry regulation. "In urban areas, we have more carbon that needs to be absorbed than in rural areas. We need trees (in urban areas) for environmental purposes and beauty, protection of infrastructure and much more," he said.

"In the past, nobody has been willing to give a small part of their plot of land for tree planting; instead, they want to build on their entire plot. But in the Kigali master plan, there has been an attempt to reserve some areas for afforestation. The challenge has been a lack of expertise to know the right species for urban afforestation."

The trees being considered under the proposed guidelines are those that would not interfere with the city infrastructure, including utility lines, whose roots won't destroy roads and houses, according to Nkurunziza. "We hired a consultant to give us a new plan on the way we can change the urban forestry. Once we get this tool, we will be more systematic in our urban afforestation plan," he said.

Nkurunziza added that some of the proposed trees have recently been planted along all streets in Kigali, with support from the National Reserve Force.

Committed to restoring forests

Rwanda has committed to restoring two million hectares of deforested and degraded land by 2020. The commitment was made as part of the Bonn Challenge – a global aspiration to restore 150 million hectares of the world's deforested and degraded lands by 2020, extended to 350 million by 2030 during the New York Declaration of 2014.

This commitment seeks to improve the quality and resilience of ecosystems, improve livelihoods, secure the country's water and energy supply and support low carbon economic development.

Also, the government recently established one of Africa's newest national parks – the Gishwati-Mukura Forest which is being rehabilitated under the principles of the Bonn Challenge commitment - restoring ecological integrity while also improving human wellbeing.

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