

UGANDA'S FORESTS ARE PROVING THAT CLIMATE FINANCE CAN WORK, IF THE WORLD IS PAYING ATTENTION

Loss has dominated conversations about tropical forests for many years. Declining tree cover, rising emissions, and the pressure on governments struggling to balance development with conservation have shaped the narrative. Uganda knows these challenges well. But the global discussion often omits how countries are responding and the progress being made.

Uganda's forests currently cover an estimated 2.4-2.7 million hectares, equivalent to roughly 12-13% of the country's land area, down from about 24% (approximately 4.9 million hectares) in 1990, with most of this long-term decline driven by agricultural expansion, charcoal production, and biomass extraction.

However, focusing only on historical loss obscures an important shift. Over the past several years, Uganda has moved from fragmented, project-based forest protection toward a coordinated national approach grounded in policy reform, robust monitoring, and accountability. That shift matters, particularly as the international community debates new mechanisms such as the Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF), which aims to reward countries that maintain forests through predictable, long-term finance.

Since 2022, Uganda has sustained and protected approximately 2.5 million hectares of forest and other natural landscapes through a nationwide, jurisdictional approach led by the Ministry of Water and Environment. This progress shows an ongoing national effort aligned with Uganda's National REDD+ Strategy and its Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement and forms part of a longer-term commitment to continue protecting forest landscapes.

Central to this effort has been the strengthening of forest governance and monitoring systems. Uganda's National Forest Monitoring System, operated by the Department of Forest Management under the Ministry of Water and Environment, draws on long-running forest inventories, biomass assessments, and satellite data to track land-use change and emissions. The results are independently verified and publicly reported, reflecting international standards for measurement, reporting, and verification. These systems were originally developed through engagement with the UN-REDD Programme and have continued to evolve in response to growing expectations around transparency and integrity.

Policy action has also targeted the underlying drivers of deforestation. Protection and enforcement measures have been combined with demand-side interventions, including alternative livelihood programmes and efforts to reduce reliance on charcoal and fuelwood. In 2023, a presidential executive order addressed the environmental damage linked to the charcoal trade, while climate-smart agriculture, agroforestry, and land-use planning initiatives were expanded to improve productivity without further encroachment on forests.

None of this suggests that the challenge has been solved. Uganda continues to lose forest cover each year, and pressures from population growth, urbanisation, and energy demand remain real. According to satellite-derived monitoring by Global Forest Watch, Uganda continues to experience annual natural forest loss at a level of tens of thousands of hectares, an estimated 27,000 hectares in 2024 alone. But climate outcomes are shaped by trajectories, not snapshots. The direction of travel, and the capacity to measure and manage it, is what matters.

This is where emerging mechanisms such as the Tropical Forest Forever Facility deserve serious attention. TFFF proposes a shift away from short-term, fragmented funding toward long-term, performance-based finance linked to verified forest outcomes. Eligibility is expected to depend on demonstrated forest cover, declining deforestation trends, and credible national monitoring systems. These are demanding criteria, but they are precisely the areas where Uganda has invested institutional effort over the past decade.

Equally important is the question of trust. Forest finance only works when communities see tangible benefits and governance systems ensure accountability. Uganda's safeguards framework, hosted within the Ministry of Water and Environment, addresses land tenure, access to information, consultation, grievance mechanisms, and anti-corruption measures. Any revenues generated through forest-based climate finance are intended to be reinvested into continued protection, enforcement, and livelihood support, reducing the risk of reversal and ensuring long-term impact.

Uganda's experience shows that forest conservation at scale is not a theoretical ambition. It is a practical exercise in governance, data, and political will. The country's forests regulate water systems, support biodiversity, underpin rural livelihoods, and contribute to national economic resilience. They are also part of a global climate system that depends on standing forests far beyond national borders.

If the world is serious about building a credible next generation of forest finance, it must look beyond rhetoric and recognise countries that are putting durable systems in place. Uganda's progress does not claim perfection, but it does demonstrate readiness. Facilities like TFFF will ultimately succeed or fail based on whether they reward that kind of sustained national effort; not promises, but proof.

MINISTRY OF WATER AND ENVIRONMENT