

Some children who were affected by floods navigate their way to school. PHOTOS/COURTESY



How children are fighting against climate change

Talia Birungi Kandole has since April 2024 planted 251,000 fruit and indigenous trees in schools, hospitals, national parks, and refugee settlements. Through the One Million Trees Campaign, a movement, led by children, Kandole and friends plan to plant more than one million trees; writes **David Walugembe**.

As Uganda addresses the effects of climate change, as stipulated in the National Development Plan (NDP) III, it is worth noting that these are not just distant threats. They are the harsh realities that are shaping the lives of millions of children.

Extreme weather conditions such as prolonged droughts, landslides, and severe flash floods have become more frequent, affecting children's right to education, shelter, safety, and play. These conditions have been brought about by extensive deforestation, heavy reliance on biomass energy, and encroachment on wetlands and other protected areas.

The One Million Trees Campaign is now a beacon of hope.

The movement, led by children, is driven by resilience and determination to reclaim the environment.

In April 2024, Talia Birungi Kandole woke up to silence, where once birds had chirped in the vibrant green vegetation near her home in Kabarole District.

"I was really hurt. I wanted to write a letter to President Yoweri Museveni asking him to restore our forest, but my mother stopped me. Then, I got an

idea to plant one million trees across Uganda to save the environment," she says.

With sheer determination and a heart full of hope, Kandole, who was a Primary Six pupil, got to work.

Today, she has planted 251,000 fruit and indigenous trees in schools, hospitals, national parks, and refugee settlements. She has also distributed tree seedlings during festivals, marathons, and church gatherings.

"While planting trees in the refugee settlements, I observed that several children lack the money to buy food. At least now, they can eat the nutritious fruits from the trees we planted," she notes.

The 11-year-old calls on Ugandans to embrace plastic recycling to combat pollution and flooding, and calls on the government to enact strict laws against littering.

"I urge schools and communities to embrace tree planting. The policy makers should continue to make room for children's voices when making decisions to combat climate change because the children are the ones who will live in the future," she says.

Kandole's passion for the



Talia Birungi Kandole, the proprietor of the One Million Tree Planting Campaign urges schools and communities to embrace tree planting.

environment has seen her attend a number of conferences, such as the All Pension Africa Summit 2025 in Kampala, where she delivered a keynote address on green investments that impact the future of

children, the Africa Climate Summit 2025 in Addis Ababa, the Pearl of Africa Tourism Expo, and the Annual Green Festival 2025, among others.

Law enforcement



Teddy Anita Nabukenya, a Senior Two student at Saidina Abubaker Secondary School, Butambala District, urges the government to provide alternative energy solutions, like a steady electricity supply to rural areas and biogas, to replace charcoal and firewood. This would curb deforestation, air pollution, and charcoal burning.

"There must be strict enforcement of the law to stop charcoal burning. Deforestation means that there will be little rain, and as a result, the food supply will trickle down. Changes in the weather affect children's right to education, since they are unable to get food at school and at home. This affects their concentration levels in class."

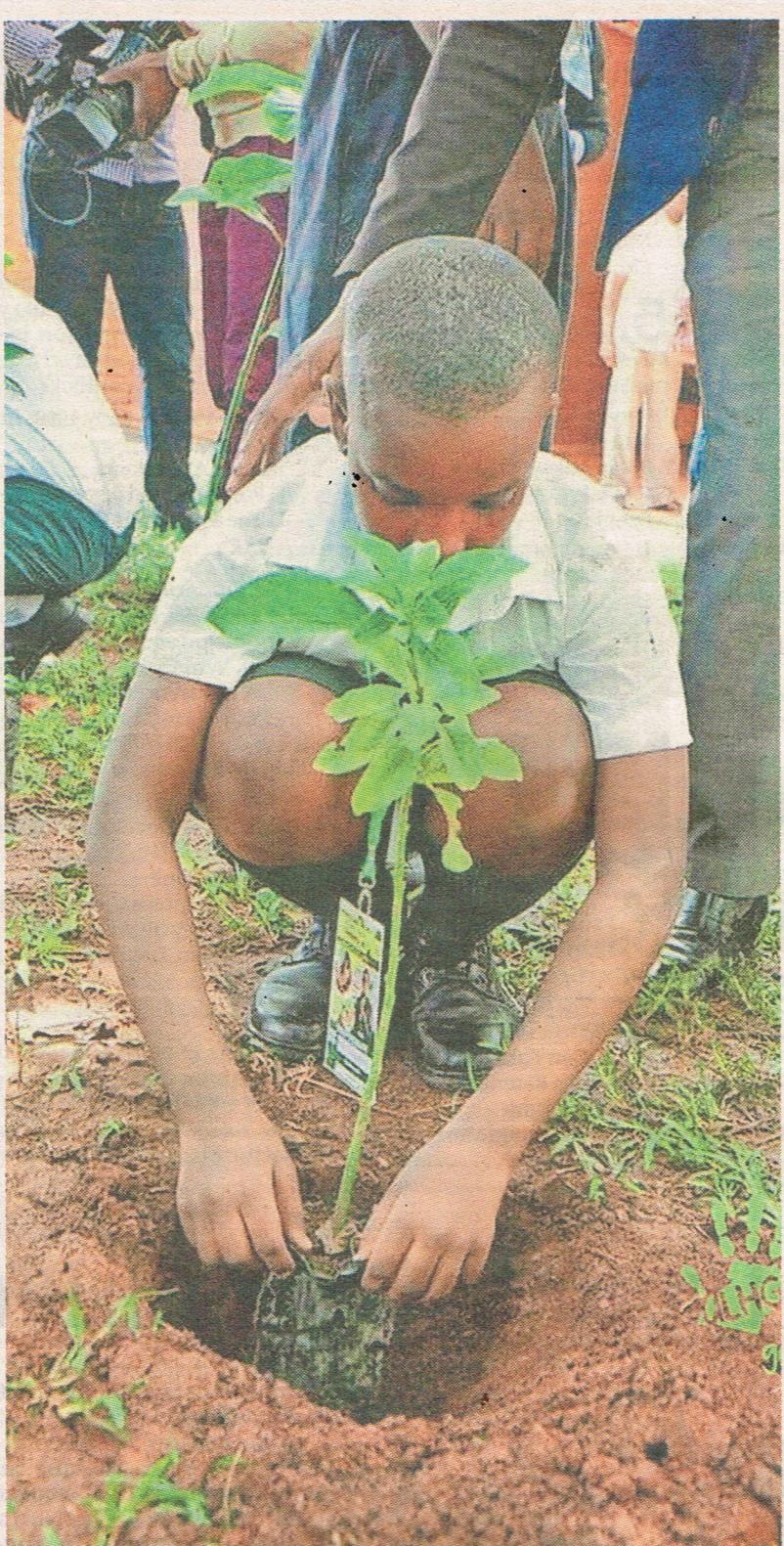
Nabukenya calls on the government to champion afforestation and reforestation to increase green cover and to protect the environment.

Alexandrian Nabunya, a 10-year-old Primary Four pupil at Kyengera Primary School, reported the effects of deforestation in Kataki Town Council, Nsangi, and Bunga, noting that it leads to windy rains that affect her school attendance.

John Kazibwe, a Primary One pupil at Kyengera Parents Primary School, urged all schools to prioritise planting trees to enable the students to get fresh air and shade during the rainy and sunny seasons.

Call for intervention

Luke Siduda, from World Vision, explained that harsh climatic conditions in to forced displacement,



A pupil plants a tree during a 'Little Hands Go Green' campaign.

child marriages, school dropouts, food insecurity, and deteriorating health systems, hence affecting children.

"The effects of climate change, such as floods, landslides, and storms, mostly affect children from refugee communities and disaster-prone communities. Children who live in places like Bwaise in Kampala City are forced to live in unsafe conditions, spend resources on rebuilding, or depend on aid, which adds to their already existing vulnerability," he says.

Siduda adds that climate change has led to the reduction of crop yields as floods wash away gardens, hence financial instability and poverty.

"Children are the ultimate victims of all this. I urge the government to support the child-led environmental justice initiatives to ensure that children's voices shape policy, not as afterthoughts, but as co-creators of

THE RANKINGS

Uganda ranks 13th in climate change vulnerability globally and 160th in preparedness.

Globally, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Children's Climate Risk Index (CCRI) report 2021, about one billion children live in extremely high-risk countries of vulnerability, and almost every child on earth is exposed to at least one major climate and environmental hazard.

According to the UNICEF Learning Interrupted report, 2024, at least 242 million children from pre-primary to upper secondary education experienced school disruptions due to climate events; at least one in seven students had their schooling disrupted due to climate hazards in 2024.

Africa's sustainable future. We believe that by placing environmental justice within the child rights framework, we are reframing the climate crisis as a legal and moral obligation of governments, corporations, and global leaders," he explains.

He calls for children to be recognised as leaders of climate resilience.

Joseph Masembe, the founder of Little Hands Go Green, a civil society organisation that nurtures and empowers children as the main drivers of environmental conservation education, says the devastating climatic effects lead to health risks such as cholera, typhoid, dysentery, and malnutrition.

"Uganda's children face a myriad of challenges resulting from the climate crisis. To mitigate the problem, we have so far planted 1.3 million fruit trees in 55 districts and distributed 500 litter bins to homes, schools and communities in Yumbe, Nakasongola, Kampala, Wakiso, Mukono and Mityana Districts, with proper garbage disposal and better waste management," he notes.

Masembe tasked the government to establish a National Children's Climate Resilience Strategy, linking the ministries of Water and Environment, Health, and Agriculture into the planning process to hold sensitive climate budgeting and policies.

"I urge the Ministry of Education and Sports to integrate climate education into the extracurricular activities of all schools to give early exposure to the pupils on how to protect the environment, hence nurturing an environmentally conscious generation. It is incumbent on policymakers, global governments, global institutions, and civil society to ensure that the climate crisis does not sweep away children's rights to a healthy and conducive environment," he emphasises.

Uganda and global children-climate status

According to Save the Children Uganda's Climate Landscape Study 2024, climatic changes have affected the education of children more in Eastern (90.6 percent), Western (86.2 percent), and Northern (84.5 percent) compared to Central (76.8 percent) and West Nile (67 percent).

The report further indicates that the children who experienced climate

change impacts are 2.3 times more likely to observe adverse effects on their education than those who did not face climate shocks.

According to the National Forestry Authority (NFA), Uganda's forest cover has declined drastically over the past three decades, shrinking from 24 percent (approximately 4,898,335 hectares) in 1990 to the current 12.7 percent, hence a risk to the climate.

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Of the 242 children interrupted, 74 percent of the affected students are in low- and lower middle-income countries, with an average CCRI score of seven out of ten.

Uganda faces various climate disasters, with specific hazards prevalent in different regions. Landslides (on the slopes of Mount Elgon in districts like Bududa and Sironko), flash floods, and riverbank bursts are common in the eastern part of the country.

Northern Uganda experiences both flooding and droughts. The Karamoja sub-region, for instance, faces prolonged dry seasons (December to April), leading to water scarcity and food shortages.

Western Uganda is characterised by flooding and landslides, particularly in the Rwenzori Sub-region (Kasese and Kisoro districts) due to glacier melting and heavy rainfall around the mountains.

Urban areas like Kampala City are prone to flash floods, largely due to poor drainage and high urbanisation, as well as occasional droughts.

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