



How Women Forced a Dying Swamp Back Into the Conversation

GLOFORD Uganda



For a long time, Okole Swamp was being treated like the place a city forgets when it is busy congratulating itself elsewhere. Waste went in. Pollution settled in. Illegal brewing spread. The stench became familiar enough to seem normal, which is one of the rudest things environmental destructions does: it teaches people to live beside a crisis until they stop calling it one. By the time GLOFORD and partners undertook a baseline assessment with NEMA, the findings were brutal. Air pollution was 36 times above WHO limits. Water contamination exceeded legal limits by 3,514 times. Between 2 and 3 hectares of the wetland had been turned into illegal brewing zones with open molasses lagoons. The swamp was carrying ecological damage, public health risk, and the everyday weariness of communities forced to live close to contamination.

And yet this story did not begin with heroic speeches. It began with evidence. Cold, inconvenient, impossible-to-ignore evidence. That mattered, because once the damage had numbers, denial had fewer places to hide. A 35-person stakeholder reflection meeting followed, bringing together leaders, FEAG members, CSOs, and city officials to adopt the Okole Environmental Protection Action Plan. That sounds administrative on paper. In practice, it was the moment concern grew a spine. It was the moment restoration stopped being a polite wish and became a shared civic task with names, roles, and pressure attached.

One of the project's most significant shifts came through the relocation of brewers from the wetland to a gazetted area with controlled waste lagoons. That was never going to be a simple clean-up exercise, because brewing supported over 60 households through school fees and medical expenses. So this was not a story about sweeping people aside in the name of the environment. It was a story about confronting a messy truth: survival and sustainability had collided in the same space. GLOFORD's response, through dialogue, controlled zoning, and collaboration with city authorities, helped reduce dumping, toxic fumes, and conflict with regulators while easing tension between residents and authorities. That is the kind of progress that rarely looks glamorous in a photograph and yet changes everything in a community's daily rhythm.

The heart of the story, though, sits with women. Four trained environmental activists carried out regular monitoring

from April to September 2025, reporting monthly to the City Environment Office and helping trigger timely interventions such as waste removal and prevention of new encroachments. Thirty women and girls were trained to turn molasses waste into organic fertilizer and eco-products, and 90 percent demonstrated practical mastery after training. That detail matters. This was not awareness for awareness's sake. This was women taking material once associated with environmental harm and converting it into something restorative, useful, and locally owned. The project also established two tree nurseries and one indigenous seed bank, trained 30 participants in seed selection and propagation, revived crops such as millet, cowpeas, and beans, and launched a five-member seed bank committee. In other words, the project was not simply stopping damage. It was rebuilding ecological memory.



Public narrative shifted too. Two radio talk shows, ongoing spot messages, and a city-level climate justice dialogue involving over 40 stakeholders widened the circle of accountability. People called in, pledged to plant trees, and reported illegal dumping. A direct reporting hotline for environmental violations was shared. Fencing and signage were installed along exposed swamp edges. Over 50 indigenous trees were planted during International Forest Day. The Mayor publicly recognized the effort as a long-term investment in urban ecological integrity. Bit by bit, the swamp stopped being treated as a sacrifice zone and started being spoken about as shared inheritance. That is a powerful psychological turn. Communities protect differently when they believe something still belongs to them.

By the close of the reporting period, physical recovery was visible in cleaner water flows, reduced stench, reduced open waste discharge, and vegetation regrowth. Social recovery was visible in improved trust between residents, NEMA, and city authorities, stronger accountability partnerships, and the public recognition of women as environmental leaders. That last part deserves to linger. In many communities, women are expected to endure environmental damage, carry its burdens, stretch household survival around it, and say thank you for the inconvenience.

GLOFORD's work disrupted that script. In Okole, women did not simply bear the consequences of degradation. They became the ones rewriting the future of the swamp, and they did it with evidence, organizing, green skills, and the kind of steady civic pressure that makes broken systems flinch and then, finally, move.

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