Learning and Policy Brief

From Conflict to Stewardship: Lessons, Evidence and Policy Asks from Community-Based Wetland Management in Uganda

UCOBAC · GLTN/UN-Habitat · Makerere University · IIRR · Local Governments · KIT Institute

In Uganda, wetlands are not a peripheral resource — they are the foundation of survival for millions of people. In Butaleja District, they cover nearly 40% of the total land area. For the communities living around the Doho–Namatala wetland system, the wetland is daily life: the source of food, water, income, grazing pasture and fish. Yet for decades, encroachment, unregulated extraction and the absence of community governance degraded this ecosystem — and the livelihoods that depended on it — simultaneously.

What was needed was a tailored approach — one capable of reconciling the government's obligation to protect wetland ecosystems with the economic and livelihood realities of the communities living within and around them. Communities who, far from being deliberate destroyers of the environment, were people without adequate knowledge, without extension services, without government support, and without any secure alternative to cultivating the land they saw before them. Their relationship with the wetland was shaped by necessity and fear — the fear of being expelled from the only resource they had — not by indifference to its value.

The Land at Scale (LAS) Uganda Project, funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, promotes community-based land registration and sustainable land-use planning on customary land. This brief documents the application of this approach to the wetlands of Butaleja District.

The approach was neither purely technical nor enforcement-led. It was community-based and community-driven: placing wetland users at the centre of planning, governance and management of their own resources. It is this approach — participatory, inclusive, grounded in local knowledge and ownership — that produced the results described in this brief, and that offers lessons for wetland governance well beyond Butaleja.

Five years of implementation across six wetlands under the Doho–Namatala system have provided clear evidence that community-based approaches anchored in gender inclusion and local institutional capacity yield more sustainable outcomes than purely technical interventions. This evidence has been gathered through field work, community surveys, reflection processes and, most significantly, a five-day Writeshop held in May 2026 and facilitated by KIT Institute, which brought together community representatives, implementing partners, local authorities and national government agencies to collectively document and capitalise on what this experience has taught. This brief presents those learnings alongside targeted policy recommendations — addressed to government, to peer organisations considering similar approaches, and to donors committed to supporting innovative, people-centred wetland governance.

1 How change happened?

The Problem Worth Solving

Before this project, the wetland at Butaleja was a resource without governance. Communities living around the Doho–Namatala system depended on it almost entirely — for food, water, income, grazing and fish — yet had no recognised right to use it, no structure to manage it collectively, and no security over their continued access. Without adequate knowledge of wetland ecology, without extension services, without climate-smart agricultural alternatives, and without shared agreements about sustainable use, practices that degraded the wetland were simply the practices people knew.

The result was persistent friction between user groups — farmers, herders, fishers, papyrus harvesters — competing in the same unregulated space. With no community-level mechanisms to resolve disputes, conflicts escalated to police and courts, placing an unnecessary burden on already overstretched institutions. Left unresolved, these tensions divided communities and deepened mistrust towards government and any new organisation arriving with questions or proposals. Women had no voice in resource decisions despite bearing the greatest burden of the wetland's decline. Children were pulled from school to work the wetland instead of attending.

Figure 1. A couple showing the Enumerator their wetland user rights during a demarcation process.

The wetland's decline and the community's impoverishment were the same process, feeding each other. Encroachment caused erosion and flooding. Flooding destroyed crops. Natural water reservoirs cleared for rice cultivation left communities exposed to drought. In a district where more than 70% of livelihoods depend directly on wetland resources, there is no environmental solution that does not also address governance and livelihoods — and no governance solution without first addressing trust.

> What would it take to change this — sustainably, and driven by the people who live it?

Figure 2. Community representatives and stakeholders having a discussion during the Wetland Management Writeshop at Fairway Hotel, Kampala are visible working together

WHAT IS CBWMP AND WHERE?

Community-Based Wetland Management Planning (CBWMP) is a participatory approach to wetland governance that ensures gender inclusivity, local institutional capacity and the active participation of all wetland stakeholders — government, wetland users, local leaders and technical agencies. Stakeholders come together to plan, regulate and manage their wetland resources under the guidance and facilitation of district and ministry experts.

The CBWMP process complements technical land management methods, contributing to policy dialogue on integrated land and wetland governance, and consistently producing more sustainable outcomes than purely technical interventions.

The process begins with identifying wetland resources under threat, followed by engagement of relevant ministries, agencies, district, sub-county and community stakeholders. A representative planning team is formed and trained in resource and stakeholder analysis, conflict analysis, legal and regulatory frameworks, visioning and action planning. Transect walks and participatory assessments help communities understand the wetland, identify challenges and agree on management priorities.

The process then involves drafting and reviewing the management plan, mapping and zoning user rights using handheld GPS devices, and establishing a Wetland Executive Committee. The plan is validated and approved through local government structures and adopted by the district council. A Community Wetland Users' Association is then formed and registered to strengthen community ownership, coordination and long-term sustainability.

In Butaleja District, the process was implemented across eight communities in three sub-counties — Naweyo, Kaiti and Busabi — under the Land at Scale Uganda project. Over two phases between 2021 and 2026, communities were supported to plan, demarcate and govern their shared wetland resources under the Doho–Namatala system.

THEME 1 Governance first, tools second

Governance is not the afterthought — it is the precondition. Sensitisation and community ownership came first; tools and structures followed. Where this sequence held, governance structures stuck. Where it was skipped, they did not.

Evidence and learning

Prior to the project, no functional community-level wetland management structures existed, despite the presence of wetland governance frameworks at national, regional, district and sub-county levels. Resource-use conflicts were common and typically resolved through police intervention or formal court processes — costly, time-consuming, and divisive. Weak local governance also contributed directly to wetland degradation: without clear boundaries, encroachment for agriculture and other unsustainable uses went unchecked.

The CBWMP process brought together diverse wetland users — crop farmers, livestock keepers, fishers, papyrus harvesters and others — to collectively identify challenges and agree on locally appropriate management actions. The process was facilitated by District Environment Officers, Natural Resource Officers and Community Development Officers, ensuring alignment with the government's legal and regulatory framework. Wetland Management Committees were established with specialised sub-committees responsible for grievance handling, flood management, conflict resolution, production and finance, and marketing, creating clear mechanisms for community participation and collective decision-making.

Figure 3. Members of Mahula Wetland Management Planning in Butaleja District displaying a sketch of the visioning Process _ Source UCOBAC.

The success of this governance-first approach rested on several enabling conditions: strong community willingness to engage; skilled facilitators who used local languages throughout; political support from local leaders from the very first meetings; and learning exchange visits that allowed communities to see functioning wetland governance in practice elsewhere. These visits were consistently cited as among the most powerful tools for building confidence and changing what communities believed was possible.

What didn't work — and why it matters

Some committees remained non-functional or only partially active after formation, particularly where leaders lacked commitment or capacity to mobilise members consistently. The legitimacy of committees was undermined in cases where members who had not participated in sensitisation disregarded their authority — the strongest evidence that governance structures without broad community buy-in are fragile. Managing expectations also proved difficult: community members who anticipated direct economic support from the project withdrew when this did not materialise, as it fell outside the project's scope. These challenges confirm that establishing governance structures alone is insufficient — sustained sensitisation, strong leadership and realistic expectation-setting are all prerequisites for durability.

The lesson

Participatory wetland management planning works when governance is built first, not added later. Community institutions provide the leadership, accountability and coordination necessary for sustainable stewardship. Aligning Community-Based Wetland Management Plans with Sub-county and District Development Plans is essential for securing long-term institutional support and public financing beyond the life of any individual project.

> *"When a community takes centre stage in managing their resources, sustainability is assured."*
>
> — Community participant, Writeshop, May 2026

THEME 2 Inclusion has to be designed in — it doesn't happen by itself

In contexts where deeply entrenched patriarchal norms shape decision-making and resource access, meaningful gender transformation requires deliberate, sustained and often counter-cultural effort. Without intentional design, exclusion tends to reproduce itself.

Evidence and learning

The project applied a systemic gender transformation approach that recognised barriers to inclusion as both social and practical — shaped by household workloads, mobility constraints, communication gaps and institutional structures that historically favoured male participation. A set of mutually reinforcing strategies was implemented to embed inclusion at every level of engagement.

Male leaders and husbands were identified and trained as 'Male Champions', playing a critical role in shifting attitudes within households and advocating for women's participation. The 'Securing Your Family's Future' (SYFF) tool enabled families to reflect on restrictive gender norms and negotiate more equitable household arrangements. Project activities were scheduled to align with women's daily routines; women were explicitly invited

while men were encouraged to attend with their spouses. Communication channels — community radio, megaphones and women's savings and loans networks — ensured information reached women directly, rather than filtering through male-dominated household structures.

Inclusion was also embedded within formal governance structures: Uganda's affirmative action policy, which provides a 30% quota for women and youth in wetland management committees, was actively applied and enforced. Women's savings and loans associations (WSLAs) served as an economic entry point into governance spaces — building financial independence, confidence and networks that translated into more effective participation in community leadership. Critically, women's involvement was framed not only as a matter of equity but as a practical necessity: as the primary collectors of firewood, water and wetland resources, women have the strongest material incentive to support restoration.

The results were visible. Women's attendance at community meetings increased significantly, with some communities reporting that women now outnumber men at meetings.

> *"Our voices could remain shut and we die in pain. Now we sit on the committee and our issues are addressed."*
>
> — Women's FGD, Butaleja District, 2026

What didn't work — and why it matters
Shifting deeply entrenched patriarchal norms proved more gradual than the project timeline allowed. While gender-transformative tools and approaches were successfully introduced, their full internalisation within households requires sustained engagement over longer periods. Some women also remained hesitant to attend or take on leadership roles, reflecting norms that require more than one project cycle to shift.

The lesson
Inclusion does not occur automatically — it must be deliberately designed into every stage of implementation. The increase in women's participation was not incidental; it was the product of intentional strategies applied consistently across the full project cycle. Policy frameworks such as affirmative action quotas are necessary but not sufficient: real inclusion depends on practical measures that address structural inequalities and ensure women can attend, speak and influence decisions. Economic empowerment through savings and loans associations emerged as a critical entry point — governance inclusion and economic empowerment are mutually reinforcing. A key project strategy was engaging men as allies in challenging harmful social norms: addressing the underlying inequalities that limit women's participation proved essential for achieving sustainable, community-owned results.

THEME 3 The wetland and the livelihood are the same thing — but the gap is real

The framing of conservation versus livelihoods is a false choice. But the livelihood problem is not yet solved. This section names both the progress and the gap honestly.

Evidence and learning
In Butaleja, where wetlands cover 40% of the total land area and more than 70% of livelihoods depend directly on wetland resources, conservation that ignores livelihood realities will not hold. The project demonstrated that when restoration is designed with livelihoods in mind, the two reinforce each other.

A 100-metre buffer zone established along River Namatala converted previously cultivated land into a communal grazing zone, immediately expanding access to pasture and improving livestock livelihoods. The zoning of natural water storage areas allowed papyrus to regenerate, which in turn restored fish populations and the fishing livelihoods that depend on them. Communities that had been willing to sell user rights for UGX 100,000 revised their position as economic returns from improved fish harvests outweighed what those rights had once been worth.

"I acquired my first cow after the establishment of the community wetland conservation zone. Through access to the communal grazing zone, I grew my herd to five animals and now generate 40 litres of milk daily — this has allowed me to meet my children's school fees."

— Dwalo Michael, Butaleja, community interviews, May 2026

Beyond individual livelihoods, vegetation regeneration stabilised soils and reduced erosion, directly improving agricultural yields. The restoration of natural water reservoirs — which had been cleared for rice cultivation, creating cycles of destructive flooding followed by acute dry-season water scarcity — reduced seasonal extremes and stabilised the farming and livestock livelihoods that communities depended on. Savings and Credit Cooperative Organisations (SACCOs) and Community Wetland Users' Associations were established to provide alternative income sources, credit access and financial resilience, reducing pressure on the wetland while strengthening community ownership of its restoration.

"We now get fish where we used to dig."

— Community focus group, Butaleja, May 2026

Figure 4. Lungfish 'emonye" (in Nyole (Lunyole) Bantu language) caught in Butaleja wetlands

What didn't work — and why it matters

Alternative livelihoods were identified as a priority during wetland management planning but fell outside the defined scope of the Land at Scale project. While some linkages were made through other interventions, these were limited in scale. A significant number of community members continue to depend heavily on the wetland for daily survival, and without viable alternatives the incentive to reduce that dependency remains weak. Persistent encroachment — driven by limited monitoring capacity and some non-functional committees — risks eroding conservation gains if left unaddressed. Agricultural yields, despite improvements in soil fertility, remain below what communities need: low agronomic knowledge and limited access to inputs mean that pressure on wetland soils continues.

Budget constraints prevented the construction of community water reservoirs — identified by communities themselves as critical for managing seasonal flooding — so this priority went unaddressed within the project period. Flood management has improved but remains insufficient, particularly as climate change intensifies the scale and frequency of events beyond what restored natural reservoirs alone can absorb.

The lesson

Sustainable wetland management is secured not by conservation obligation but by livelihood interest. When communities experience that a healthy wetland means food security, reliable income and household resilience, stewardship becomes self-sustaining. Future wetland management programmes should integrate livelihood diversification from the design stage — adequately resourced and implemented in parallel with conservation zoning, not as an afterthought. Wetland protection and agricultural productivity are directly linked: equipping communities to produce more from existing farmland removes the productivity pressure that drives encroachment.

THEME 4 Mindset change is the slow work — and the most durable outcome

Every group, every exercise, every exit interview named mindset change as the single most important outcome of this project. It is not a soft result — it is the foundation on which all other outcomes rest.

Evidence and learning

Before the project began, there was deep scepticism among communities regarding their continued use of wetlands. Government extension workers found it difficult even to raise the subject of wetland restoration, because wetland users equated 'restoration' with eviction — a fear rooted in the very real prospect of losing their main source of livelihood without compensation or any alternative. That fear made communities defensive, and defensiveness routinely turned into conflict between government workers and wetland users. With no community-level structures to manage the wetland or resolve disputes, tension between different user groups — crop farmers against cattle grazers, papyrus harvesters against fisherfolk — went unmanaged, since no zones defined who could use what, and unresolved conflicts fell to police and courts. In Dumbu (Busabi sub-county), this played out as encroachment into intact wetland for farming; in Nasinyi (Naweyo sub-county), as intensifying encroachment along the banks of the River Namatala, worsening both degradation and flood exposure.

Working through this mistrust and changing the mindset of communities before any technical activity could begin was the prerequisite for everything that followed. The project addressed this directly. Sensitisation was delivered by trusted, local-language-speaking facilitators, and its first task was not to introduce tools but to correct the eviction narrative: communities needed to hear, repeatedly and from trusted sources, that CBWMP was about wise, continued use of the wetland — not removal from it — before they would engage with anything else.

Transect walks then took communities and government staff into the wetland together, producing a shared, first-hand diagnosis of degradation and urgency that no presentation could substitute for. Learning exchange visits to communities that had already undergone the CBWMP process did more than any single training to shift what people believed was achievable, by letting sceptical communities see functioning, community-led wetland governance for themselves. The participatory zoning, mapping and demarcation process then gave communities direct authority over defining and protecting their own wetland resources — turning them from subjects of a restoration agenda into its authors, which is ultimately what allowed earlier conflicts over use and boundaries to be resolved through the CBWMP process itself.

Over time, the language that communities used to describe their relationship with the wetland shifted. Where people once spoke of extraction and cultivation, they began speaking of stewardship and wise use. Community members who had previously been willing to sell their wetland user rights for UGX 100,000 — seeing papyrus as worthless — changed their position as they witnessed fish stocks returning and livelihoods improving. Conservation zones that communities themselves demarcated and protected became visible proof that the change was real.

> *"There were so many who could not see how nature, if left alone, can regenerate on its own. People are now seeing the area that was broken — vegetation is restoring itself."*
>
> — Writeshop participant, May 2026

What didn't work — and why it matters

Mindset change was not achieved uniformly. Community members who missed sensitisation remained sceptical or actively resistant — in some cases physically uprooting demarcation pillars. Neighbouring communities outside the project area continue to encroach, demonstrating that change within a project boundary does not automatically spread beyond it. The presidential directive created a lasting undercurrent of uncertainty that required continuous management throughout the project and remains unresolved.

Figure 5. Transect walk led by wetland users in Butaleja _ Source UCOBAC.

The lesson

Mindset change is the foundation of this work, and it cannot be shortcut. That means budgeting for sustained sensitisation well beyond the initial launch phase, and planning for a change arc that runs longer than most logframes account for. Peer learning between communities does more to accelerate this shift than any formal training or technical intervention.

Part 2 — What Comes Next: Gaps, Asks and Scaling

2.1 What Community Action Cannot Solve: The Structural Gaps

Four constraints emerged consistently as sitting above what community or project action can address. They require decisions from institutions and actors beyond the communities themselves.

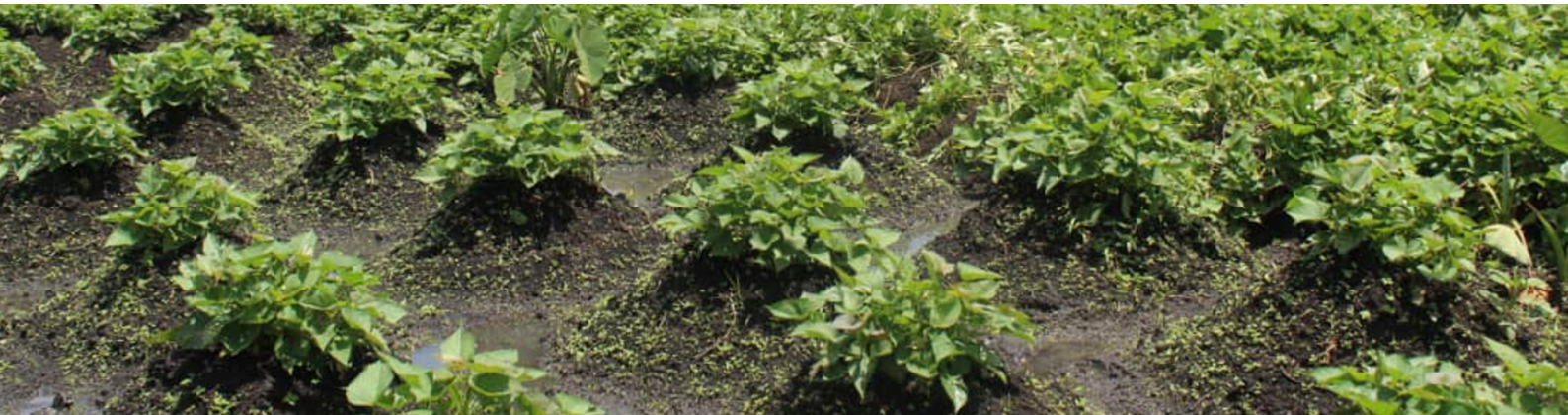
The presidential directive
While existing policies and laws support the wise use of wetlands, implementation has been constrained by a presidential directive instructing communities to vacate wetlands (Cabinet, July 2021) — a blanket approach that prevents agencies from working constructively with communities under existing wise-use frameworks. While Bukedi sub-region was initially exempted on the grounds that communities had been historically misled into occupying wetland areas, subsequent statements created continued ambiguity about the status of wetland users in the area. Butaleja district Members of Parliament publicly challenged implementation of the directive, noting that no alternatives had been provided.

The structural gap remains: agencies find it difficult to implement a community-led management approach under a directive that was not designed with this model in mind. Resolving this ambiguity at national level is the single most important enabling condition for scaling what has been built in Butaleja.

Wetland use permits remain unapproved
The National Environment Act provides a pathway for communities to obtain wetland user permits for approved sustainable activities. Communities in Butaleja followed the required procedures in full, but permits were neither issued nor processed to completion during the project period, largely due to the blanket suspension on permit issuance linked to the presidential directive. Without permits, communities lack formal legal recognition of their user rights, undermining the tenure security that responsible stewardship requires.

Financing for CBWMP implementation
Existing funding in Butaleja focuses largely on general management and enforcement, with limited support directed toward implementing the priority actions identified in approved Community-Based Wetland Management Plans. This gap undermines governance structures, limits conservation initiatives and constrains communities' ability to transition to sustainable livelihood alternatives. Targeted financing that directly supports CBWMP operationalisation is essential for sustaining both ecological restoration and livelihood resilience.

Fragmented livelihood support
Support for alternative livelihoods remains inadequate despite the presence of isolated interventions by different organisations. Existing efforts are fragmented, limited in scale and insufficient to address the livelihood needs of wetland-dependent communities. Stronger inter-ministerial coordination and integrated institutional collaboration are needed — mechanisms that are currently weak or largely absent.



2.2 The Ask: Specific Actions by Actor

Each ask is concrete, assignable and actionable, ordered by urgency.

MWE / NEMA
Ministry of Water and Environment / National Environment Management Authority

- Prioritise processing and issuing formal wetland use permits to communities with validated CBWMPs. Legally recognised user rights are the foundation of responsible stewardship, giving communities the confidence to enforce compliance and sustain conservation gains over time.
- Issue formal written guidance clarifying the relationship between the presidential directive and approved CBWMPs. Ambiguity discourages investment in and enforcement of community-managed sustainable use arrangements.
- Formally integrate Sub-County Wetland Action Plans (SWAPs) into District Wetland Action Plans (DWAPs) and District Development Plans (DDPs), ensuring community-generated priorities directly shape local government planning and budgeting.
- Scale up and institutionalise CBWMPs nationally, establishing a standardised, nationally recognised framework that districts beyond current project areas can replicate.
- Strengthen coordination on compliance monitoring, enforcement, environmental education and adaptive management — functions central to NEMA's mandate that depend on effective coordination with local and community-level actors.
- Create dedicated financing mechanisms for community wetland governance, enabling community institutions to maintain monitoring, enforcement and restoration functions beyond the life of any single project.

MAAIF
Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries

- Provide agricultural extension and technical support to CBWMP communities — equipping farmers to produce more from existing land and reducing the productivity pressure that drives wetland encroachment.
- Coordinate the Uganda Climate Smart Agriculture Transformation Project to prioritise CBWMP communities, which are already organised and ready to receive complementary agricultural support.
- Promote climate-smart agriculture technologies and practices, including drought-resilient varieties, agroforestry, water harvesting, efficient irrigation, soil fertility improvement and sustainable land management, to build household and landscape-level resilience while easing dependence on wetland resources.
- Support market-oriented livelihood diversification — including horticulture, apiculture, aquaculture, agro-processing and value addition — providing households with viable economic pathways independent of wetland cultivation.
- Improve access to farmer organisations, finance, matching grants and market systems to support households transitioning away from unsustainable wetland dependence.

MGLSD
Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development

- Support sustained gender-transformative programming beyond single project cycles, recognising that behaviour change around deeply rooted norms requires long-term engagement.
- Ensure women and men have equal access to the livelihood opportunities created through CBWMP implementation, in line with MGLSD's mandate to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

- Prioritise youth, the elderly and persons with disabilities in alternative livelihood programmes — groups that are often most dependent on wetland resources yet least able to absorb the shock of restricted access.

- Link wetland-dependent households into MGLSD's broader social protection and community mobilisation systems, ensuring those most exposed to livelihood shocks from wetland-use restrictions are covered by existing safety nets.

RVO / Donors

Netherlands Enterprise Agency and development partners

- Continue and sustain funding — the governance foundations have been laid, but the livelihood gap and the policy gap both require sustained investment to resolve.

- Fund the maintenance work — sensitisation, monitoring and peer learning — not only project launch activities. Community wetland governance structures need continuous reinforcement to remain functional.

- Contextualise funding mechanisms for the land and wetland sector, supporting integration into government planning cycles rather than parallel project structures.

- Continue supporting documentation and knowledge sharing to enable replication of the CBWMP approach across Uganda and beyond.

2.3 For Implementing Organisations: What Replication Requires

The CBWMP model is ready to replicate. The governance architecture is documented, the tools exist and the methodology is tested across eight communities over five years. What replication requires is a set of enabling conditions:

• Budget adequately for sensitisation. A minimum of four days per community — often a full week — delivered in local language by trusted actors. This is the most under-resourced and most critical phase. Budgets should include translation of relevant laws and policies into local languages.

• Design inclusion deliberately. Be intentional about including all stakeholders — men, women, youth and children — throughout the entire process. Develop participatory approaches that enable wetland users to fully engage in design and implementation, not only consultation.

• Apply a gender-transformative approach from the start. Inclusion does not happen by default in contexts shaped by patriarchal norms. The project used a suite of deliberately designed tools — Male Champions, the Securing Your Family's Future (SYFF) household dialogue tool, Gender Evaluation Criteria and Youth Responsive Land Criteria — to embed gender equity at every level of engagement. Organisations replicating this approach should budget for these tools and the sustained facilitation they require, recognising that behaviour change around gender norms takes longer than a single project cycle.

• Build peer learning networks. Organise learning exchange visits with communities that have successfully completed the process. Peer learning enables communities to exchange practical lessons and experiences that build confidence and shift mindsets more effectively than external training.

• Resolve the presidential directive before scaling. Unresolved directives create uncertainty and mistrust. Engage all relevant stakeholders through multi-stakeholder platforms to harmonise policies at national, district and community levels before introducing the approach in new areas.

• Coordinate with complementary programmes. Interface with the Uganda Climate Smart Agriculture Transformation Project and other livelihood initiatives from the outset — integrating livelihood support into the CBWMP process from design, not as a subsequent phase.

Closing — In Their Own Words

Three voices close this document — the community, the implementing partnership and government. Each answers the same question: what would you tell another community, organisation or government starting this work?

From the community

"The conflicts in Butaleja were violent, with killings. Through the mediation committees we now have the confidence and capacity to deal with conflicts before they reach serious stages."

— Community leader, Butaleja District

"I rather sell my user right for 100,000 shillings than give it to papyrus growing — that was said before. Now this is no longer the case."

— Community member, Butaleja District

From the implementing partnership

"When a meeting is called now, it is more women who show up. That tells you everything about what has changed."

— UCOBAC project implementer, Writeshop, May 2026

From government

"The wise-use principle is working. Tree planting has continued — it has helped to control floods from the wetland. We can see the change with our own eyes."

— Butaleja DLG Environmental Officer, Writeshop, May 2026

"Mindset change is the foundation."

— NEMA representative, May 2026

The communities of Butaleja have done the hard work.

They changed their minds, governed their wetlands, resolved their conflicts and improved their livelihoods — without eviction, without force, with the resources available to them.

What they cannot do is approve their own permits, resolve a national directive, or write themselves into district budgets.

Those decisions sit with you.
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Colophon

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