

RESULTS SUMMARY

Guardians of the Forest: Community-Led Forest Protection in the Albertine Rift

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PROJECT	Title:	Guardians of the Forest: Community-Led Protection in the Albertine Rift
	Partner:	Solidarity Uganda
	Country:	Uganda
	Period:	January 2024 to December 2026

CHANGE	Through organised patrols and forest monitoring technologies, communities across the Albertine Rift in western Uganda strengthened their ability to protect forests from illegal activities by organising collectively and gaining the tools needed to respond more quickly and effectively to emerging threats. With support from technological tools like Global Forest Watch and Forest Watcher, community monitoring patrols could detect illegal activities in real time, report them immediately, and mobilise rapid community action to tackle the growing deforestation of the forests they depend on. The results have been significant. Communities have detected illegal logging activities, contributing to the arrest of illegal loggers, dismantled charcoal kilns, and led large-scale tree planting initiatives involving over 200 people. As a result, forest ecosystems protection has greatly improved. In Matiri, tree cover loss fell by 33% from 2023 to 2025. New Community Forest Management groups have formed, local monitoring networks have strengthened, and experienced monitors are now training others to further disseminate local knowledge and sustain these efforts. At its core, this is more than a conservation effort; it is a restoration of agency. Communities who have long lived with and cared for these forests are now equipped with the timely information needed to respond more quickly and effectively to threats. What is emerging across the Albertine Rift is a quiet but powerful transformation: communities turning knowledge into coordinated action, and action into recovery. With each alert answered, they are protecting what remains of the forests, and in doing so, shaping a more resilient future for generations to come.
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CONTEXT	In West Uganda, forests that communities describe as having “once felt endless” like Matiri, Kasyoha-Kitomi, and Kalinzu were shrinking rapidly due to illegal logging, charcoal burning, and land encroachment. As the forests vanished, so too did the ecological systems that sustain daily life: reliable rains, fertile farmland, clean water, and protection against climate shocks. For families whose livelihoods depended directly on these ecosystems, the crisis was not abstract, it threatened food security and health. Meanwhile, illegal activities went unreported or were reported too late for meaningful intervention, while official authorities’ response was sometimes slow. Immediate action was essential to safeguard the remaining forest before it was lost beyond recovery. In response, the communities who depend on these forests made a decisive choice: to organise, to lead, and to protect what remained. They recognised their need for timely information, coordinated monitoring, and a direct pathway between local observers and rapid action. The introduction of organised patrols and the Global Forest Watch technology transformed this reality, and what began as a response to ecological crisis became a powerful example of community-led resilience.
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CONTRIBUTION

The intervention aimed to empower community forest monitors with real-time data and practical tools to detect forest loss, report illegal activities, and strengthen community-led conservation. This is critical in a region where forests sustain rainfall, clean water, food security, and climate resilience. By strengthening local capacity, the programme turned existing community commitment into more effective and timely protection.

To achieve that, Forests of the World worked with its partner Solidarity Uganda to strengthen community forest protection across Matiri, Kasyoha-Kitomi, and Kalinzu. A documentation and data collection retreat organised by the two organisations trained more than 25 monitors in the use of Global Forest Watch, Forest Watcher, and Avenza Maps, alongside practical guidance on reporting and coordination. This support enabled communities to shift from delayed detection to real-time monitoring and faster, more coordinated responses to forest threats.

While Forests of the World provided tools, training, and technical accompaniment that enabled systematic monitoring, faster interventions and the emergence of new Community Forest Management groups, a decisive force behind the change has been community empowerment and agency. Communities were committed to protecting their forests; what shifted was their ability to act with greater speed, coordination, and confidence. The role of the intervention was therefore primarily one of facilitation and knowledge transfer, enabling rather than directing local action. Ultimately, it is the determination of community forest monitors and their collective ownership of forest protection that has driven the reduction in deforestation and the emergence of more resilient, locally led conservation systems. Evidence from participant testimonies, retreat documentation, and field reports consistently link these changes to our contribution, with district officials also expressing interest in scaling the approach.

IMAGES



Caption: Forest monitors reviewing monitoring data during a documentation meeting

Photo credit: Solidarity Uganda



Caption: A woman from Bushenyi, Uganda, uses her phone to monitor threats to the forest through satellite imagery

Photo credit: Solidarity Uganda

[See next page for more details](#)

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

ACTIVITIES

Main activities included community support visits (reaching 280 participants), campaigns and direct forest protection actions such as dismantling charcoal kilns (395 participants), forest monitoring using Global Forest Watch and Forest Watcher (52 reports covering 60,300 ha), two capacity-building trainings (46 participants), engagement meetings with the National Forestry Authority (NFA) and district officials (41 participants), recruitment of new community members (155 participants), and a documentation and data collection retreat (26 participants). Together, these activities strengthened skills, improved real-time reporting, accelerated response to forest threats, mobilised wider community participation, and reinforced advocacy to address earlier gaps in coordination and timely information.

Implementation was led by Solidarity Uganda with support from Forests of the World, working directly with around 25 community forest monitors and local chapter members across Matiri, Kasyoha-Kitomi, and Karinzu. Activities followed a practical sequence of retreat, training, field forest walks, real-time reporting, reflection discussions, and campaign planning. A key feature of implementation was the integration of mobile technology into a low-resource, rural context, combined with open storytelling sessions where participants shared lived experiences of forest threats and responses, strengthening trust, solidarity, and collective problem-solving.

Several adaptations and innovations shaped the process. These included the use of digital tools for real-time forest monitoring, informal breakfast meetings as multi-stakeholder dialogue spaces, and the application of community-led, non-violent direct actions such as dismantling charcoal kilns. A turning point came when monitors realized that real-time alerts allowed them to reach sites before further destruction occurred, shifting their approach from delayed detection to proactive intervention. Another important milestone was the decision emerging from a Kalinzu meeting to establish a Community Forest Management (CFM) group focused on coordinated digital forest monitoring, which was later formally registered at district level.

LESSONS

Overall, key lessons point to the importance of combining technology with strong community systems and enabling conditions. Real-time alert tools significantly improve response times, but only when communities can physically reach sites and act on information. Early investment in transport, safety, and authority engagement is therefore essential. Sustained motivation is also strengthened when communities clearly understand the link between forests, rainfall, and water security. Furthermore, creating space for shared learning, such as retreat-style gatherings where experiences and solutions are openly exchanged, has proven to be a low-cost but powerful way to build solidarity, practical knowledge, and long-term effectiveness in community-led forest protection.

Several challenges emerged during implementation that shaped further important learning. In some areas, particularly Matiri, there was resistance or limited cooperation from certain NFA officials, while broader institutional changes, including the NFA merger, created uncertainty and affected staff motivation. At the community level, limited digital literacy, poor connectivity in remote areas, and the cost of devices constrained full participation. External shocks such as election-related disruptions and an internet shutdown in December 2025 further reduced engagement. These experiences reinforced the lesson that technology alone is not sufficient. Effective forest protection also depends on digital skills, access infrastructure, security, and constructive engagement with authorities.

In response, several practical adaptations were identified to strengthen effectiveness going forward. These include providing basic transport such as bicycles or motorbikes to reach remote patrol sites, establishing clearer referral and coordination pathways with local authorities to ensure faster response, and developing safety protocols for monitors operating in sensitive or high-risk areas. In addition, voice- and SMS-based reporting where smartphones or connectivity are limited, and strengthening peer-to-peer training systems, would help expand inclusion and resilience. Flexible planning aligned with seasonal and political realities would further improve continuity and impact.

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The evidence for change is both quantitative and strongly grounded in lived experience across Matiri, Kasyoha-Kitomi, and Kalinzu. Participant testimonies consistently describe a shift from delayed discovery to real-time response, with one monitor noting: “Before this app, we would walk for hours and find trees already cut. Now we get alerts on our phones and reach the spot quickly.” This is reinforced by monitoring data showing 52 reports covering 60,300 ha, a sharp reduction in forest loss alerts (for example, Kasyoha-Kitomi dropping from 30 to 4), and documented instances of halted illegal activities, destroyed charcoal kilns, and the start of forest recovery.

Further evidence includes expanded community engagement and capacity: more than 200 people involved in tree planting activities, 46 individuals trained in digital forest monitoring, and monitors actively training others, indicating sustained knowledge transfer. The formation of a new Community Forest Management group in Kajugangoma provides additional proof of institutionalisation of the approach at community level. Across all three forest landscapes, these outcomes were consistently reported by multiple participants, strengthening the credibility of the findings.

The evidence aligns clearly with the theory of change. Real-time alerts from Global Forest Watch and Forest Watcher reduced the time between detection and response, enabling communities to intervene before further destruction occurred. This shift from delayed awareness to rapid action explains the observed reduction in illegal activity and emerging forest recovery. The documentation and training processes further strengthened this mechanism by building skills, coordination, and shared ownership, ensuring that technology translated into effective and sustained community-led protection.

Additional supporting materials can be found in the Solidarity Uganda 2025 annual report, participant quotes, forest walk descriptions, monitoring data, and photos and videos. Solidarity Uganda and Forests of the World’s retreat reports, GFW app monitoring data, follow-up case studies, and visual documentation (forest walks, destruction sites, community meetings, breakfast meetings) can also be consulted.

		<i>Development strategy priorities:</i>	Insert strategy priority
		<i>Changes in the lives of people facing poverty, marginalisation or vulnerability</i>	X
		<i>Changes in laws, policies and practices that affect people’s rights</i>	-
	DO	<i>Changes in the capacity of organisations and communities to support rights</i>	X
	MA	<i>Changes in partnerships and collaborations that support people’s rights</i>	-
	INS	<i>Changes in participation of groups facing poverty, marginalisation or vulnerability</i>	X
		<i>Changes in local leadership of development and humanitarian work</i>	X