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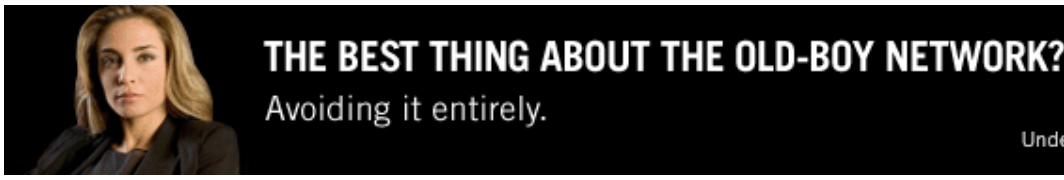


**Mabira - Signs of Consumer Uprising**

**The Monitor** (Kampala)
OPINION
April 24, 2007
Posted to the web April 23, 2007

By Shaban Sserunkuuma

TO say it is crunch time for government over the planned de-gazetting and, subsequently, the expected allocation of 7,100 hectares of Mabira Forest reserve to the Sugar Company of Uganda Limited would be a gross understatement.

To consumers, one critical question hangs over the whole saga: do local consumers have justification and the stomach to take action against the identified villain(s)?

Specifically, does Scoul's bid for the woods make the company a rogue corporate; a leper in the marketplace, liable for isolation and punishment by consumers?

We are in the midst of an ever-escalating conflict. Shortly before the standoff between government and protestors under the umbrella group, Save Mabira Crusade, had reached a crescendo, a campaign to wean consumers off Scoul's sugar was launched through Short Messaging Service (SMS) on all mobile phone networks, email and word of mouth.

The message was simple: it urged consumers not to buy Scoul sugar citing a catalogue of sins.

On my part, it was an exciting development not because I wanted Scoul to go under by all means, but because it gave me a cost-free opportunity to gauge consumer behaviour.

Of course, for the record, I do not support the giveaway of Mabira for any other use. It was only last year that I took part in a study on effects of the European Union Sugar Protocol on social and economic welfare of East African farmers and we clearly observed that Kenya's model of using out-growers (they supply 70 per cent of the cane to mills), though not perfect, was rewarding to farmers and the economy. I shall leave that story at that.

Back to the Mabira standoff. By following the path of boycotting, are protestors speaking as consumers or could it be wolves hiding in sheep skin so as to reach their ulterior motives? Do consumers have any business questioning where or how the products they pay for are produced? Can they make industry and government accountable for their actions?

I have on many occasions written about the UN consumer protection framework and many other instruments and policies that provide for consumer rights and responsibilities or obligations, including the responsibility to safeguard the environment. In this column, I shall not delve there but to the more relevant 'underworld' of society.

Major changes in Uganda have not come about through established policy and legal framework. In fact, it has been through defying the same.

I found portent signs of this in the marketplace when I went out to establish whether indeed the funeral of Scoul's sugar could be round the corner.

Many dealers in Kampala confirmed that indeed an active consumer revolt was underway.

Consequently, several retailers told me they had suspended stocking Scoul sugar until 'normalcy' returned, something one shopper said could only happen "if they leave our forests to the trees and monkeys."

My informal survey may not have captured a reliable picture about the reality on the ground but we have one development that has provoked stinging and calmly taken consumer action.

Yet, by looking at the boycott, we may only be observing symptoms. We are witnessing a consumer revolt against market failures, in part, many see as a result of blind and made-for-the-rich economic and social government policies.

Against a background of trying times: a major power crisis blamed on drought and ebbing of water in Lake Victoria; disruptions to the country's food production capacity, triggering sharp increases in food prices and the dramatic increase in the cost of living in the country, we are likely to see increasing participation of ordinary people (read consumers) in matters affecting them. Ominously, since most of the adverse effects are founded in natural phenomena, like climate, over which government neither has direct control nor the stomach to mitigate, more protests are inevitable.

As you might expect, at one point, we shall look at the balance sheet of Mabira and, as suspected, we may find that some politicians pursuing raw partisan ends rode on the back of consumers and the environment disguise.

Bandits and vandals, too, could have made a rich harvest wearing masks of the innocent; and, joy-riders may have whiled away a few minutes devoid of teargas. However, the real winners, in the end, will be consumers.

If Scoul, with support of government, succeed in their bid to chop the woods, it would be largely for politics-laced boardroom ends and not in the name of consumers and taxpayers. Even then, consumers shall retain the power to determine the fate of the sugar on the market.

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