

Reimagining ecosystem-based adaptation practices based on community priorities and preferences in The Gambia

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Researchers argue that restoring degraded landscapes is dependent on communities' priorities, particularly, women's and men's preferences, which are key in determining success or failure of the adaptation intervention

The findings of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report of 2005 have changed the global perceptions on how humanity — in search of environmental goods and services— is contributing to ecosystem changes and the consequences of these changes to human and ecosystem wellbeing.

The report establishes that 60% of ecosystem goods and services are being degraded or used unsustainably, which may affect the ability of future generations to access them if the status quo remains. These changes are attributed to both human activities and changing climate.

To reverse this trend, different approaches are continuously emerging. They include the Ecosystem-based Adaptation approach that is gaining popularity as a people-centered, nature-based solution that aims to ensure that communities can cope with the adverse effects of climate change.

Ecosystem-based Adaptation

The Convention on Biological Diversity [defines Ecosystem-based Adaptation \(EbA\)](#) as ‘the use of biodiversity and ecosystem services as part of an overall adaptation strategy to help people to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change’. It brings together activities and initiatives at different levels that are ecosystems-based to support communities in adapting to changing climate.

Lalisa Duguma, lead scientist in the project from World Agroforestry (ICRAF), noted that EbA practices are cost-effective, locally relevant at community level, and easy to implement in any given context compared to most other adaptation options.

‘There are diverse EbA practices that communities can employ within their local contexts to achieve multiple benefits to both humanity and ecosystems,’ he said. ‘If well implemented, the practices can bring social, economic and environmental transformation at local and national levels.’

Insights from The Gambia

One of the most successful interventions using the EbA approach is the [Large-Scale Ecosystem-Based Adaptation in The Gambia River Basin: Developing a Climate Resilient, Natural Resource-Based Economy](#), popularly known as EbA project in The Gambia.

This is a flagship project funded by the [Green Climate Fund](#) and implemented by the Government of Gambia in technical partnership with ICRAF and support of the [United Nations Environment Programme](#).



A community member puts off a wildfire in Jarumehkoto, Central River Region North of the Gambia. Wildfires are among the major threats facing EbA practices in the Gambia. Photo: Ebrima Sanneh, Regional Forestry Officer, Central River Region North, The Gambia

‘The EbA interventions aim to restore the functionality of degraded farmlands and forests through diverse community-led EbA practices, in addition to promoting nature-based enterprises,’ said Malanding Jaiteh, the EbA project manager.

‘Climate change and variability, coupled with human activities, are a major threat to the functioning of ecosystems in The Gambia and we need initiatives such as EbA to reverse the trend,’ said Bubu Jallow, the project’s chief technical advisor.

During the life of the project, various critical insights on how to succeed in the implementation of an EbA project have emerged, which have been extensively discussed in the technical brief, [*Ecosystem-based adaptation through the lens of community preferences.*](#)

According to Duguma, one of the major lessons is the critical nature of prioritizing a community’s preferences if the practices are to have positive and lasting impacts.

‘Community involvement in EbA practices goes beyond consultations to inclusion in the actual implementation of the activities,’ he said. ‘Community buy-in is essential for the sustainability of the project.’



A community-managed tree nursery. Such nurseries are crucial in supplying seedling for farmlands and forests rehabilitation, and are also viable nature-based enterprises. Photo: World Agroforestry/Kennedy Muthee

His sentiments are echoed by this author, a researcher at ICRAF. I suggested that the needs of both women and men must be addressed when designing EbA projects. Each gender has its own needs and preferences and these must be factored in for the project to be successful. For example, men may prefer income-generating activities, such as handicraft enterprises, while women may prefer activities that generate food for their family, such as vegetable gardening within their homesteads. The gender-influenced perspectives of EbA practices are largely a factor of the gender roles and perceptions of the men and women in a particular society.

The existing environment is also crucial when choosing which options can work best, thus, the need to understand the enablers and barriers to implementing proposed practices.

‘Enablers such as policy frameworks and governance structures that affect execution of a given practice should be considered when designing EbA interventions,’ said Peter Minang, principal science advisor at ICRAF.

There is, however, consensus that the practices must generate social, economic and environmental benefits for communities. One of the ways to do so is through building or strengthening enterprises within a particular EbA practice.

‘EbA practices, such as vegetable gardening, can both feed a family and generate income from the sale of vegetables while establishment of woodlots can support firewood and timber-processing enterprises,’ said Judith Nzyoka, a researcher at ICRAF.

Through income generation, both the EbA practice and related enterprise can be more sustainable and can achieve multiple cross-cutting benefits.

In essence, The Gambia experience has revealed that EbA is about the whole system: people, policies, institutions and larger ecosystems. Failure to adopt the entire system approach may contribute to the failure of otherwise well-designed EbA intervention.

Download the technical brief

Duguma L, Duba D, Muthee K, Minang P, Bah A, Nzyoka J, Malanding J. 2020. [Ecosystem-based adaptation through the lens of community preferences](#). ICRAF Technical Brief No. 3/2020. Nairobi, Kenya: World Agroforestry (ICRAF).

The technical brief was produced using lessons, data and information from the project, [Large-scale Ecosystem-based Adaptation in The Gambia River Basin: Developing a Climate-resilient, Natural-resource-based Economy](#). The project is funded by the Green Climate Fund and implemented by the Government of The Gambia with support from the United Nations Environment Programme.

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