Using nature to help people adapt to climate change in East Africa

Title
Countries in the seasonally dry tropics of East Africa are predicted to suffer significant negative impacts from climate change, with increasing variability in climate, and more extreme weather events, including sustained droughts and flash floods. This will have serious impacts on water availability, food security, human health and biodiversity.

Healthy ecosystems and their services (the benefits that people receive from nature) can play a key part in helping people adapt to such climate change impacts.

With support from the UK government's Darwin Initiative, BirdLife International is working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources, is raising awareness and building capacity on the role of ecosystems in adaptation amongst government and civil society in Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda.

> "Ecosystems in good condition can form a portfolio of 'insurance policies' protecting against climatic impact", said Robert Munroe, Climate Change Officer at BirdLife International. "Natural infrastructure, such as forests that manage water flows, absorbent wetlands and barrier mangroves, can form an effective first line of defence against mudslides, flash floods, and cyclones."

Diversity of species also plays a part. For instance, if the plant diversity of grasslands includes drought-resistant species, livestock farmers will be better able to cope with the expected disruption of seasonal rainfall patterns.

Despite the increasing profile of ecosystem-based approaches for adaptation to climate change at the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), many governments have not yet integrated them into their strategies for adjusting to climate change impacts and conserving biodiversity.

The BirdLife International project will work with national multi-stakeholder groups to build capacity and knowledge within government, NGOs and community-based organisations; and review national policies to identify opportunities for greater recognition of the role of ecosystems in climate change adaptation. In addition, it aims to improve the evidence base

for such approaches, through engaging with local community groups at case study sites; and develop national guidance and local experience-based guides on ecosystem-based approaches for adaptation.

The work will be profiled at relevant national (e.g. supporting National Adaptation Plan and National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan processes), regional (e.g. African Ministerial Conference on the Environment) and international meetings (e.g. CBD and UNFCCC) to facilitate widespread learning.

“This Darwin initiative-supported project is significant and timely”, said Michael Opige of Nature Uganda (BirdLife in Uganda). “Our government is reviewing its National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan that will set targets and guide actions until 2020, and Uganda will also be a beneficiary of the UNFCCC National Adaptation Plan process. We will be working to ensure that there is appropriate recognition of the role of ecosystems in human adaptation in both processes.”

“Our government needs support in considering adaptation across sectors, for example agriculture, water and transport”, explained Bizimana Dieudonné of ABO (BirdLife in Burundi). “Considering ecosystem-based approaches for adaptation makes it clear that we must work at appropriate scales to make sure that one sector’s adaptation approach does not negatively impact another.”

Paul Matiku of Nature Kenya (BirdLife in Kenya) added: “Adaptation approaches that recognise the role of ecosystems can be accessible, enduring and cost-effective to local communities, as they can be locally managed. As we have seen in Kenya, this can be in sharp contrast to the high start-up and maintenance costs of, and the technological expertise required for, hard infrastructural adaptation.”

“The poor communities that we work with are often innovators of practical and effect solutions, many of which recognise the close links between well-being, livelihoods and the natural world”, confirmed Serge Nsengimana of ACNR (BirdLife in Rwanda). “This project will help to link local solutions for tackling climate change impacts with local and national adaptation planning and strategy development.”

This project is being highlighted as a Darwin project of the month:
http://darwin.defra.gov.uk/featured-project/2012-08-19022/