While UNFCCC Parties debate, BirdLife project shows ecosystem-based adaptation in action

Title

November's meeting of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) affirmed "that best value adaptation [to climate change] is achieved through early and integrated planning and action at all levels". But climate change is already hitting some of the world's most vulnerable people, and progress on national adaptation planning which would help them cope is dangerously slow.

A pioneering project involving BirdLife's Global and African Secretariats, four national BirdLife Partners, and local civil society groups established and supported by the Partners, is helping to fill that information gap. The communities of four biodiversity-rich areas in East Africa are examining their vulnerability to the impacts of climate change, and devising action plans to restore and manage ecosystems to help them adapt and become more resilient. Their experience will be used to inform national and regional climate change adaptation plans, and passed on to UNFCCC and the Convention on Biological Diversity to inform decision- and policy-making processes.

Two weeks before representatives of the world's governments gathered in Warsaw for the 19th Conference of Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, a group of Rwandan villagers met to discuss the impact that climate change is already having on their health and livelihoods.

Since the year 2000, the incidence of serious flooding and prolonged droughts has increased around Rwanda's Akanyaru Wetland. Crop yields have shrunk, fish catches are down, and rates of water-borne diseases are rising. With government support, communities have migrated to safer areas, but this means that they are now distant from the most productive agricultural land.

The Rwandan government is supporting these vulnerable people with campaigns on health, tree-planting, agroforestry, and assistance with kitchen gardens for food security. But the common factor in many of the community's problems is the degradation of the Akanyaru Wetland ecosystem, upon which they depend for much of their food and the raw materials for livelihoods, and for services such as water, flood mitigation, and soil nutrient replenishment.

The villagers were meeting to draw up a vulnerability map, showing where climate change impacts pose increasing risk, for example from floods, soil erosion caused by heavy rainfall on deforested slopes, crop pest infestations, and the spread of invasive water hyacinth. The map is one of a number of participatory exercises

that the community is undertaking to improve their understanding of their exposure to climate change, and the role of ecosystems in protecting and supporting their livelihoods and wellbeing. The community will use this information to develop an action plan outlining the measures they want to take to help them adapt to climate change, and to reduce loss and damage.

The Akanyaru Wetland is one of four sites chosen by participants in BirdLife's Ecosystem conservation for climate change adaptation in East Africa project, which is supported by the UK Government's Darwin Initiative. The project, which is also being implemented in Burundi, Kenya and Uganda, is helping local people adapt to climate change through ecosystem-based approaches, and demonstrating the role that intact, well-connected natural ecosystems can play in providing communities with greater resilience in the face of climate change impacts.

The project also aims to share experience and best practice, raise awareness and build capacity for Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA) locally, nationally and regionally, and contribute to better informed decision-making on climate change at international level, including at events such as the Warsaw COP.

At Warsaw, many countries expressed disappointment with the slow progress that had been made on National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), which integrate mid- to long-term adaptation strategies into national policies. The COP19 decision on NAPs affirmed that "best value adaptation is achieved through early and integrated planning and action at all levels". BirdLife's East Africa EbA project will make a significant contribution to this process, since BirdLife and its national Partners are already working with the governments in Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda to mainstream ecosystem considerations into relevant policies, plans, strategies and projects, which include National Adaptation Plans.

As a Partner in the Nairobi Work Programme (NWP), BirdLife aims through the EbA project to contribute to the new workstream agreed upon at Warsaw COP19, which calls for the development and dissemination of improved knowledge products to inform adaptation planning at different levels, and requests further work on the role of ecosystems in adaptation, and the impacts of climate change on ecosystems. At the annual NWP focal point forum in Warsaw, the BirdLife focal point was able to provide examples of how BirdLife is using effective partnerships and coordinating across different scales to implement EbA.

All four BirdLife national Partners in the project have identified their case study sites: Mpungwe Mountain Chain in Burundi, Yala Swamp in Kenya, Akanyaru Wetland in Rwanda, and Echuya Forest in Uganda. These four sites lie within the highly biodiverse Eastern Afromontane Hotspot, and all have been identified by BirdLife International as Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas because of their unique and globally significant communities of birds and other species. With the support of the BirdLife Africa Partnership, the national Partners have established Local Conservation Groups (known in Africa as Site Support Groups, SSGs) at all the sites. These groups consist of local volunteers who conserve and manage the sites for the benefit both of biodiversity and their communities.

National workshops have been held in each country to raise awareness of EbA, and to explore integrating ecosystem approaches across different sectors. The workshops have provided opportunities for the development of partnerships and the exchange of information. For example, at the national workshop in Burundi, the environmental advisor to the President met community members from the EbA project site in the Mpungwe Mountains.

BirdLife's local-to-global Partnership structure also facilitates the transfer of information from communities and

conservation practitioners on the ground to policy-makers. In Kenya, where representatives of 18 Site Support Groups meet annually, a day was spent discussing EbA. Groups shared with each other their experiences and lessons learned dealing with climate change, and talked about the role and needs of ecosystems in adapting to climate change. Staff from national Partner Nature Kenya provide training to SSGs so that they can conduct their own vulnerability assessments, and develop their own adaptation plans. The wealth of local knowledge shared among communities is captured by Nature Kenya, who use it to inform local and national policy decisions. The information is passed on to the Secretariat of the BirdLife Africa Partnership, who disseminate it throughout the region and to the BirdLife Global Secretariat, who use it to inform the processes of international agreements like the Convention on Biological Diversity and the UNFCCC - including relevant sessions at COP19 in Warsaw.

By the time UNFCCC COP20 takes place in Peru in 2014, the East African EbA project should have a lot more solid evidence to contribute. Vulnerability assessments are being completed at all four sites to identify who is likely to be hit hardest by the impacts of climate change. Action plans to address these vulnerabilities will be drawn up with the full participation of the communities, involving restoration and conservation of ecosystems, and the diversification of livelihoods - such as developing agroforestry as a resilient alternative to over-dependence on a single staple crop. The communities will then be supported to lobby their governments for assistance, for example with tree planting to restore degraded forest, and to advocate for policies that promote resilient ecosystems

The action plans will address the specific needs of each community, but the experience will be shared with other communities within each country and beyond its borders. It will be passed upwards to those involved in devising the National Adaptation Plans, who will in turn share it at regional and international level. Each of the four sites will serve as a living demonstration of the benefits of ecosystem-based adaptation, and of conservation approaches that are based on sound science and rooted in local communities.