

The importance of ecosystems and the ecosystem approach

Delivering tangible benefits for people and nature by putting biodiversity at the heart of development.



THRIVING ECONOMIES



IMPROVED LIVELIHOODS



FOOD SECURITY



WATER SECURITY



HEALTHY BIODIVERSITY



CLIMATE RESILIENCE



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Context and challenge

“Because nature is often invisible in the economic choices we make, we have steadily been drawing down our natural capital—without understanding either what it really costs to replace services provided for free by nature, or that man-made alternative solutions are sometimes far too expensive for these services to be replaced or substituted.”¹

Humanity is today consuming far more than one planet can provide². This puts current and future generations at risk and exacerbates the already vastly unequal access to the goods and services fundamental to human survival. As part of this process, a range of drivers – from pollution, land conversion and over-exploitation of natural resources to climate change – is causing massive biodiversity decline and the steady degradation of ecosystems around the world. Under a ‘business as usual’ scenario, this loss of biodiversity and the accumulating costs are expected to continue. One result is the disenfranchisement of many communities from their natural resources and the creation or deepening of poverty.

Well managed ecosystems deliver many benefits to people. It is no exaggeration to say that they contribute significantly to food, water and income security, and climate resilience. Ultimately healthy ecosystems provide the basis for sustainable development and a functioning society. Yet despite the clearly demonstrated economic and social importance of biodiversity, it remains largely sidelined in decision making by governments and businesses. Experts and stakeholders dedicated to confronting this global challenge are reaching several important conclusions. One is that protecting ecosystems and ensuring access to and sustainable use of biodiversity by the poor needs to be integrated into poverty reduction strategies and placed at the heart of international cooperation for sustainable development. Another is that adopting an ecosystem approach to the management of natural resources is absolutely essential.

Taking an ecosystem approach through civil society engagement

The ecosystem approach promotes the integrated management of land, water and living resources in a way that achieves mutually compatible conservation and sustainable use, and delivers equitable benefits for people and nature.³ Effectively applying an ecosystem approach across the globe will require new participatory governance models that integrate civil society as a key actor.

Civil society organisations which are proactive and empowered are crucial for ensuring good ecosystem management. The participation of citizens in the decisions that determine who has access to and control over the natural resources that they rely on is the foundation of an inclusive economy. Ecosystem-dependent communities are indispensable participants in sustainable management. Despite this, many people in developing countries continue to have little or no influence on decisions that affect the resources that they depend on.

The Ecosystem Alliance, sponsored by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, came together in 2010 with the goal to “*Improve the livelihoods of the poor and create an inclusive economy through participatory and responsible management of ecosystems*”. A joint initiative of three organisations with complementary aims and capacities – IUCN National Committee of the Netherlands, Both ENDS and Wetlands International – the Alliance has been active in 16 countries⁴ and further supports an international program component that focuses on advocacy and engagement with the private sector in Europe. Projects are currently underway with and through more than 130 Southern civil society partners along three themes:

1. Sustainable livelihoods,
2. Green, fair and inclusive economies, and
3. Mitigation of and adaptation to climate change.





“Human well-being is dependent upon “ecosystem services” provided by nature for free. Such services include water provision, air purification, fisheries, timber production and nutrient cycling to name a few. These are predominantly public goods with no markets and no prices, so their loss often is not detected by our current economic incentive system and can thus continue unabated... The world’s poor are most at risk from the continuing loss of biodiversity, as they are the ones that are most reliant on the ecosystem services that are being degraded.”

The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/economics/>

Impacts on communities, nature and policy

A wealth of data exists to demonstrate the real impact that taking an ecosystem approach has on people, their environments and the governance systems within which they operate. Diverse Ecosystem Alliance projects provide tangible evidence of results achieved, lives changed and lessons learned – from promoting sustainable soy value chains and payment for ecosystem services in South America, to assisted natural regeneration and Biorights in Africa, to ecosystem based adaptation and land tenure rights work in Asia. These cases and more information can be found on the websites below.

The way forward

Four key challenges remain to generating the scaling-up needed for truly systemic change:

- 1. Valuing the invisible** – Unless economic and political decisions are based on a true understanding of the value of ecosystems, as well as the associated implications of development options, poor decisions will continue to be taken at untold economic, social and environmental cost.
- 2. Connecting the local to the global** – Local decisions and processes must be better connected to those at the national and international levels in terms of policies, value chains and consumption patterns. Although progress has been made, there is much still to do to achieve a policy framework (both in Europe and globally) within which sustainable trade and development (cooperation) are the expectation and the norm.
- 3. Integrated approaches to land and water use planning and governance** – A multi-stakeholder cross-sectoral approach to natural resource use planning is needed to better connect private sector, government and the communities most closely dependent on healthy ecosystems. This approach must then be complemented by real progress at the other end of the value chain. Ecosystem Alliance partners will therefore continue to work with governments, businesses and consumers in Europe to encourage meaningful growth in the demand for sustainably sourced products.
- 4. Strengthened role for civil society** – Change will require the empowerment and active engagement of a broad range of local, often community-based, organisations. All actor must seek and apply effective pragmatic approaches to improving livelihoods while fostering local stewardship of natural resources. Success will depend upon tapping into vast reservoirs of traditional knowledge and expertise. The

development of pioneering decision-making mechanisms will enable and incentivise communities to play an active role in ecosystem management and wise use, build capacity and promote good governance.

Ecosystem Alliance partners are committed to mainstreaming the critical role of biodiversity and ecosystems in sustainable development. With an explicitly integrative approach to the Sustainable Development Goals⁵ emerging, the next 10–15 years could be an era of great progress for sustainable, equitable development. But the outcomes proposed in these Goals will be realised only if governments and private sector actors come together with civil society to mobilise the resources needed to raise living standards, establish new models of growth, and address the unprecedented risks posed by climate change. Policies that recognise the essential value of ecosystems to human wellbeing must be at the heart of this transformation.

There are many ways to contribute to scaling-up the ecosystem approach. Governments in the North and the South can give more support to local civil society organisations working on the front line. They can introduce new legislation and policies at national and international levels that value the essential services ecosystems provide to human wellbeing and the very foundation of our global economy. Across their entire supply chains, businesses can make improvements that help both people and biodiversity and empower communities to address local environmental challenges. Citizens everywhere can exert their right not to spend money on unsustainable products.

The Alliance has witnessed real changes in the decisions being taken by influential actors across a range of sectors, changes that are making a real difference. But the work has only just begun.

For more information, please contact:

IUCN NL: Henk Simons, henk.simons@iucn.nl;
Joost van Montfort, joost.vanmontfort@iucn.nl
Both ENDS: Tamara Mohr, tm@bothends.org
Wetlands International: Chris Baker, Chris.Baker@wetlands.org

Further reading

1. IUCN NL: http://www.iucn.nl/en/themes/green_ic/ecosystem_alliance/
2. Wetlands International: <http://africa.wetlands.org/Whatwedo/tabid/2927/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>
3. Both ENDS: <http://www.bothends.org/nl/Themas/Projecten/project/41/Ecosystem-Alliance>

REFERENCES

1. The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity: Challenges and Responses, Sukhdev, P. et. Al., in D. Helm and C. Hepburn (eds), Nature in the Balance: The Economics of Biodiversity, OUP, 2014
2. www.footprintnetwork.org/
3. <http://www.cbd.int/ecosystem/>
4. Argentina, Benin, Bolivia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, Paraguay, Philippines, Senegal, Uganda.
5. <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html>

MADE POSSIBLE BY THE ECOSYSTEM ALLIANCE

