

Ecosystem Alliance Final Report – Executive Summary

The Ecosystem Alliance (2011–2015)

The Ecosystem Alliance (EA) was a joint initiative by the IUCN National Committee of the Netherlands (IUCN NL), Both ENDS and Wetlands International. These alliance partners worked with Southern civil society organizations (CSOs), selected companies and governments on nature-based approaches to poverty reduction and other development goals. The main goal of the EA was *to improve the livelihoods of the poor and create an inclusive economy through participatory and responsible management of ecosystems*. The EA also facilitated the organization of national and international CSO networks to create communities of influence for better management, restoration and conservation of ecosystems. Improving women's rights and strengthening their voice in decision-making was an integral part of the programme. The EA programme ran from 2011 to 2015 and was funded under the Dutch government's MFS II co-financing grant scheme for development aid. Given the need to double global food production by 2050 while preventing ecosystem degradation, the EA programme was an important step towards putting sustainable use of biodiversity by the poor at the heart of international cooperation for sustainable development. This is because the majority of the world's poor depend for their livelihoods on ecosystems which must also provide water, climate resilience and other essential services.

The EA ran 16 country programmes – 9 in Africa, 4 in Latin America and 3 in Asia – and an International Component (IC) in collaboration with 136 local NGO partners. The projects and activities were clustered around three programme themes: Livelihoods and Ecosystems; Greening the Economy; and Ecosystems, People and Climate Change. Each theme was delivered through three intervention strategies: 1) poverty alleviation through sustainable alternatives, 2) lobby and advocacy for integration of natural capital in policies and practices, and 3) institutional capacity, network and partnership development.

At the end of the programme 362 projects had been implemented. Overall, we estimate that the EA positively affected over 120,000 households, improved the management of more than 1.5 million hectares of land, and improved livelihood conditions in around 570 communities. The programme improved the capacities of around 340 CSOs across the 16 target countries. It reached around 99 companies and at least 38 adopted more sustainable practices or committed themselves to do so. More than 160 policy adjustments were reported at the local, regional and international levels. In the final year we reviewed the activities, achievements and problems to identify lessons learned to be taken into account in future programmes.

Theme 1 – Livelihoods and Ecosystems – aimed to enable the rural poor to make sustainable use of the land by empowering communities, community-based organizations (CBOs) and CSOs to improve their capacities and skills in land use management. Raising awareness of the links between ecosystem services and local livelihoods stimulated the engagement of communities, local governments and private landowners. Lobby and advocacy at the local national and international levels led to 77 adjustments in policies and legislation on ecosystem–livelihood links and the influencing of 33 global and regional agreements.

Several EA partners held training courses and assisted local communities with sustainable resource exploitation, including the development of markets for non-timber forest products (such as honey, oils, fruit, rattan and dyes), local products and community-based ecotourism. In various countries the programme strengthened sustainable agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries, and mangrove restoration and management. Micro-credit schemes were introduced in various countries. In eight projects in Mali and Burkina Faso, the introduction of farmer-managed natural regeneration (FMNR) on 35,000 hectares around critical biodiversity hotspots turned previously barren land into productive agroforestry landscapes, ready for further upscaling.

EA partners initiated and negotiated the development of participatory local agreements on sustainable natural resource use, secured rights-based access to natural resources and improved the capacity of local authorities to support sustainable land use. Empowerment by the EA resulted in improved rights

for 261 communities in various countries. Revitalized community natural resources institutions and mechanisms contributed to protect local and indigenous land uses. These include village forests (*hutan desa*) and community-based forest management in Indonesia, sustainable development and protection plans for Ancestral Domains in the Philippines, and Ecologically Sensitive Areas in India.

The EA also supported two regional and several national projects as well as global lobby work in support of Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Territories and Areas (ICCAs). The development of Community Resource Management Areas (CREMAs) in Ghana in particular has given local communities control over their natural resources. ICCAs are effective vehicles for establishing the rights of local communities and increasing their involvement in land use planning. Participatory mapping proved to be a useful tool for getting governments to recognize the existence and boundaries of such areas and to raise awareness of community and women's rights and needs. In multi-stakeholder and multi-land use settings, integrated landscape development (ILD) is an effective approach for tackling the drivers of ecosystem degradation, optimizing the benefits for all and securing community livelihoods. True participation of communities is furthered by basing ecosystem management and planning on the best locally available knowledge and affordable nature-based solutions.

Theme 2 – Greening the Economy – addressed the economic drivers of rural poverty and ecosystem degradation. Focusing on global commodity chains linked to the EA programme countries that have both a large ecological footprint and a significant uptake by EU and Dutch markets - soy, palm oil, biomass and the extractive industries -, the program strengthened the knowledge and capacities of CSOs to 1) influence trade related policies, 2) lobby governments, commodity roundtables and companies, and to 3) adopt more ambitious green policies, more sustainable business models and practices. This resulted in thirteen agreements with companies, industry associations, NGOs and government on sustainable trade and practices.

Achievements include the revision of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) Principles and Criteria to include peatland conservation, greenhouse gas emission reductions and management of high conservation value (HCV) areas, as well as the establishment of a Dispute Settlement Facility. Another achievement is the incorporation of land user rights and free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) into the toolkit for forest conservation. Engagement with the Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS) led to the production of maps showing HCV areas, proposals on payments for ecosystem services (PES) schemes, and the adoption of minimum soy sourcing requirements by the European Feed Manufacturers' Federation. In South America, the soy observatory OSAS prepared land use guidance maps and made proposals for alternative sustainable scenarios for soy expansion and cultivation.

Roundtables are important multi-stakeholder platforms for dialogue and defining sustainability. Their certification standards are the best available, but progress has been slow. A specific problem for soy has been the low market demand for certified soy and a lack of commitment by the industry and retail to buy RTRS certified soy. Efforts have been made (and are still ongoing) to enter into more action-oriented collaboration with companies to define concrete targets and meet the pledges made, with full support from the brands, retailers and financiers further down the supply chain. To create a more enabling environment, governments must establish more inclusive and coherent legal and planning frameworks and adopt tax measures and mandatory import criteria.

Mineral extraction is a major threat to protected areas and valuable natural resources. Lobby and advocacy by local EA partners in the Philippines halted several large mining operations and improved their social and environmental performance. In DRC local partners were involved in the international campaign to save Virunga National Park from oil extraction, and local action in Uganda led to environmental improvements in the cement industry. A key to success is support from legal and scientific experts for training and capacity building and for input to lobby and advocacy on matters such as ecological impacts and complex EIA procedures.

Various EA partners were trained and are actively involved in biodiversity and ecosystem services valuation (TEEB) in Kenya, Indonesia, Uganda and the Philippines. Certification schemes for more sustainable production and biodiversity conservation were developed in Brazil and Argentina.

Theme 3 – Ecosystems, People and Climate Change – sought to reduce the impacts of external climate shocks and safeguard livelihoods through ecosystem-based climate change adaptation and mitigation. The EA and its partners improved the adoption and implementation of ecosystem-based adaptation (EbA) and REDD+ initiatives. No less than 23 EA pilots were used for climate change policy development, and at least 13 recommendations by the EA were included in global climate change policies.

Ecosystem-based adaptation involves a wide range of ecosystem management activities, including protecting and restoring the connectivity of green infrastructure in the landscape, preserving genetic diversity, and managing grasslands and rangelands in a sustainable way. Field-based evidence is crucial in convincing global, national and local policymakers and decision-makers of the advantages of EbA. However, current knowledge is often too academic and abstract and needs to be infused with realities on the ground. The EA built the EbA capacity of more than 160 partner NGOs and other CSOs. As a direct result, 7 EA partners in the Philippines, Bolivia, Argentina and Paraguay developed EbA activities. The EA and its partners proposed 50 EbA-related policy recommendations to authorities at local, national, regional and global levels, and EbA plans and measures are in place for a total of more than 525,000 hectares. The EA and partners have been successful in gaining greater access to the Green Climate Fund (GCF) to support community-based EbA and policy recommendations have been taken up by the GCF Board.

The EA has helped to mainstream ecosystems, biodiversity and the interests of indigenous peoples and local communities into REDD+ policymaking and programme development. Four learning, exchange and capacity building workshops held in the Philippines, Ethiopia, Brazil and Ghana were attended by EA partners, other CSOs and governmental organizations from Africa, Latin America and South East Asia. This allowed participants to make progress with specific projects and also led to the incorporation of FMNR and CREMAs into the national REDD+ strategies of Burkina Faso and Ghana. The EA supported the development of six REDD+ initiatives in the Philippines, Ethiopia, Vietnam, India and Burkina Faso. Overall, 63 communities were empowered to defend their interests in REDD+ initiatives. A REDD+ Landscape Alliance has been established to continue the work initiated under the EA to support the further development and financing of REDD+ landscape approaches.

Initiatives also sought to combine sustainable production with the creation of financial value for the carbon stored in forests and integrate REDD+ into value chain initiatives by companies. The EA's REDD+ Business Initiative attracted considerable interest from government, the private sector, research institutions and NGOs, and the EA helped to bring six companies into socially and ecologically sound REDD+ projects. One of the lessons learned in this perspective is that business cases should be tailored to all stakeholders along the value chain. Solutions turned out to be most successful when locally driven and when they are embedded and integrated into existing and new public sector planning policy and legislation.

Capacity building and lobby and advocacy

An explicit intervention strategy was strengthening the capacity of EA partners through a continuous and interactive process. The most valued capacity strengthening strategies were 'learning by doing', along with national networking to exchange ideas and knowledge and take collaborative action. Multi-stakeholder dialogues involving government, the private sector and civil society have been successful. The CSO partners found new tools and concepts such as TEEB, EbA, SEA, REDD+ and PES to be particularly important for strengthening their bargaining position in advocacy-related work and scaling up their activities.

The key to successful policy influencing is a combination of strategies and complementary approaches, backed by coalition building and networking between CSOs. A strong and validated knowledge-base is crucial for effective lobby and advocacy and raises the credibility of NGOs. Timely involvement of government actors is crucial and joint field missions by CSO and government representatives are important for generating the political will to act. Getting policies and legislation changed is a valuable first step, but implementation and enforcement must not be forgotten.

Reflections on the way forward

The alliance partners are satisfied with the many results achieved under the programme, especially on including and strengthening the voice of civil society in the governance of ecosystems. The Ecosystem Alliance has been more effective than expected in influencing policies, though acknowledging that often the challenge lies in transforming policies into sustainable and inclusive practices. For this to happen, a strong civil society remains essential and the alliance partners will use the experience gained in their future capacity building efforts.

Working as an alliance generated added value because it brought together complementary skills and experience, partner networks and target audiences. This was most evident at the local level and between Southern partners, where it matters most, and for specific thematic issues (e.g. agro-commodities). Where possible all alliance partners will replicate, build on and scale up the successes achieved under the EA in the Strategic Partnerships and other programmes. Hopefully, the recent Paris climate change agreement will be the beginning of a new era that unlocks many new opportunities to reposition ecosystems and biodiversity as a part of the solution, and IUCN NL, Wetlands International and Both ENDS aim to capitalize on this set of commitments in the Strategic Partnerships.