

Nature and Poverty Panel Discussion
Sponsored by The World Conservation Union - IUCN
Freetown, Sierra Leone 7 April 2006
Report and Analysis

BACKGROUND

To support increased collaboration and harmonization of approaches to nature conservation and environmental interventions in West Africa, The World Conservation Union – IUCN sponsored a panel discussion on nature and poverty, which followed a two-day regional assessment workshop called by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF).

CEPF brought together its grantees from across the Upper Guinean Forest Ecosystem to assess the impact its five-years of investment in biodiversity conservation in the region.

IUCN – specifically through the National Committee for the Netherlands (IUCN NL) and the Bureau Regional de l’Afrique de l’Ouest (IUCN BRAO) – brought some of their grantees together with the CEPF partners to examine the link between nature and poverty in West Africa. Government and other nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives from the environment, development and humanitarian sectors in Sierra Leone also attended.

Poverty is widely accepted as one of the most pressing underlying threats to nature conservation in the region. Both IUCN and CEPF recognize the impact poverty has on conservation and responsible use of natural resources as well as the negative impact poor natural resource management has on people and their livelihoods.

Development in Africa is a major priority for aid agencies and multilateral institutions globally. Yet, despite evidence which explains how human wellbeing and the quality of the environment are interrelated, the development agendas do not adequately integrate nature conservation, environmental management and sustainable natural resource use into prioritized action plans.

The panel discussion was prefaced by two presentations by leaders in conservation and humanitarian issues in West Africa:

- Ibrahim Thiaw, Regional Director of IUCN BRAO, presented the role of ecosystem services in supporting human wellbeing and progress made towards understanding the true economic and social value of nature. Thiaw dwelled on the economic impact of environmental damage and providing an established means for understanding how environmental damage contributes to poverty.
- Tommy Garnett, Regional Director of Programmes, Environmental Foundation for Africa (EFA) provided a comprehensive review of the context in which conservation takes place in West Africa. As measured by the Human Development Index, West Africa is the poorest region on Earth. Conflict and the effects of conflict impact most countries within the region. Yet, West Africa is immensely rich in biodiversity, culture and mineral resources. This disparity must be reconciled for conservation to succeed in safeguarding nature for sustainable use by prosperous societies.

The panel consisted of: Mandy Barnett, CAPE Action for People and Environment; Rietje Grit, IUCN NL; Eluem Blyden, Njala University; Mamadou Saliou Diallo, Guinee Ecologie; and Nnimmo Bassey, Environmental Rights Action (FoE/Nigeria). Ibrahim Thiaw moderated the discussion. The panel interacted with CEPF and IUCN grantees, Government of

Sierra Leone representatives and humanitarian and development actors. A list of attendees, the agenda and a transcript of the proceedings are attached.

OBJECTIVE OF THE PANEL DISCUSSION

By facilitating discussion among relevant stakeholders, articulate why and how nature and poverty are intrinsically linked to each other. This collaborative understanding will support the conservation and environment sector to convince the development agenda to incorporate nature conservation and environmental management into its priorities through partnerships with green actors. The following section summarizes the key conclusions and ideas from the panel discussion.

WHY AND HOW NATURE AND POVERTY ARE LINKED

Conventionally, poverty was defined by income per household and macroeconomic indicators. Within this narrow definition of poverty, the value of nature and the role natural resources and ecosystem services play is difficult to deduce. Today, poverty is better understood broadly in terms of access to and quality of infrastructure (roads, housing), water and sanitation, health, social support structures (including gender equality, children's rights), knowledge and skills, and rights (land tenure, laws and policies – specifically those which govern community rights and access to natural and other resources).

Nature and natural resources form the foundation of economies especially in West Africa which profits from the harvesting and mining of raw materials such as minerals, ores and timber. Additionally, natural resources and natural systems provide significant services which make life easier, safer and healthier. For example in Freetown, Sierra Leone, water regulation by surrounding forests reduces the occurrence of floods and provides regular water supply for the city's two million inhabitants. Without the forest, water is not absorbed and the water catchments are reduced to the point that Freetown will not have enough water to support its population. Already deforestation has reduced the amount of available water and contributed to mudslides in residential areas. This example clearly illustrates how nature and poverty, as defined above, are interrelated at a fundamental level. Any changes to the health of nature will impact one or more of the dimensions of poverty.

At the crux of the development and environment challenges in West Africa is the inconsistency between the wealth of natural resources (diamonds, timber, biodiversity, valuable mineral ores) throughout the region and the intense, widespread poverty that plagues these nations. Africa is the development priority for the international community. Without improving the living conditions and physical and social infrastructure in Africa, international peace and security remain uncertain. In West Africa, the state of the environment and use of natural resources have been impacted by war and instability especially where economies are driven by extraction of resources. Conflict in Liberia and Sierra Leone and now in Cote d'Ivoire has been fueled by profits from illegal sales of timber and diamonds. In the process of extracting these resources, which is done without adequate regulation, the environment is typically neglected leaving large tracts of forest completely destroyed and hundreds of thousands of people displaced. When the displaced settle in temporary homes, they in turn put enormous pressure on their neighboring resources and deplete raw materials such as arable land, forests (used for building homes, cooking) and water. The resulting unproductive landscapes, stripped of their vital ecosystems, no longer provide basic services such as water regulation, fuel, building materials and food to an already marginalized population. However, the relationship between a healthy environment and a healthy population is not adequately addressed outside the environmental sector. West Africa, with its wealth of natural capital, must integrate its currently conflicting development, humanitarian and environmental

agendas to ensure that stable societies are put in place that can exist without significant, long-term financial assistance from the international community.

Integrating (mainstreaming) nature conservation and environmental management into development planning is a viable solution to repair the disparity between the wealth of resources available to West Africans and the abject poverty plaguing the region. Creating enabling policy environments which requires advocacy at the government and international levels and translating the policies into action on the ground through interventions which provide tools, information and expertise to private sector and government in formats which are accessible and useable to them. Two examples were cited during the discussion:

- IUCN's work valuating the economic benefits of restoring the functions of the floodplain in Diawling National Park in Mauritania. The World Bank was able to use these figures to justify restoration work.
- Integrated land use planning in South Africa. CAPE Action for the People and the Environment shared that by creating and explaining alternatives to current unsustainable practices, environmental interests were able to influence how development took place in the Cape Floristic Region.

We need one agenda that is embraced by environment, development and private sector parties. The environment and conservation community must be bold and see its role at the highest levels and influence the people and institutions who govern financial spending and planning.

West Africa has rich and varied cultures which have survived and thrived in the environment from as early as 12,000 BCE. Colonialism significantly impacted the region and brought new ideas and problems to the region. In a post colonial phase, the international community through the multinational companies and aid programs are again bringing foreign influences into West African cultures. While recognizing that globalization allows for exchange of ideas and lessons, when solving the problems facing West Africa, including the development of its people and society, the strategy must be rooted in an understanding of how West Africans themselves relate to their surroundings. An understanding of the established social systems and beliefs as recorded in music, literary pieces, religions, languages and other components of culture provide keys to solving the "wealthy but poor" paradox. After colonialism, a sense of pride must emanate from within West Africa. At the same time, the notion of "living in harmony with nature" needs to be addressed. While it was stated that 40 years ago in the Sahel, people lived in balance with the environment, it should be acknowledged that times have changed. Increased population pressure and a lack of environmental management policies in newly created states, have contributed to poor environmental management. Traditional governance practices related to environmental management may not be appropriate for the immense challenges that we face today. Respecting the link between nature and poverty, solutions must come from a sense of pride in the richness that belongs to West Africans and democratic control by West African societies over their own resources. People need to take ownership of their destiny and become responsible for their natural resources. Modifying policies is a step in the right direction to adapt to emerging situations.

Gender dynamics plays a role in how resources are used and the quality of life experienced by a society. There is widespread agreement that women play a valuable role in natural resource management. Women must be inspired to become more involved in the environment sector and share their knowledge about how resources are used and how they contribute to stable societies.

A regional approach is now seen as the best way to safeguard the environment in West Africa and put in place enabling conditions for development. Shared resources such as water basins and contiguous forests are a logical starting point from a scientific perspective. They require

management based on geographic boundaries not political boundaries. The environment sector needs a way of organizing and coordinating efforts at a regional level, as well. A consolidated approach will also make it easier to work with the development and private sectors to incorporate environmental management and nature conservation principles into policies and actions. In the CEPF model for coordination used in other parts of the world, for example in the Cape Floristic Region and Succulent Karoo Hotspots of Southern Africa, grant-making and implementation are coordinated through local coordination mechanisms which not only ensure that individual grants complement one another and contribute to a larger portfolio effect, but also bring together all stakeholders involved to regularly share ideas, lessons learned and coordinate large scale policy activities. IUCN NL is implementing its first phase of the Regional Focal Point (RFP) initiative which aims to improve overall coordination of its investment by operating through a focal point organization (in West Africa this role is played by the Environmental Foundation for Africa). The RFP initiative aims to improve synergy among grantee partners, raise the capacity of these partners and coordinate regional level activities such as advocacy and communications (sharing lessons learned, raising the profile of environment in West Africa, etc.).

The Green Actors of West Africa (GAWA) network, created by organizations involved in the environmental and conservation movements, many of whom are supported by IUCN NL and CEPF, is a new model for regional collaboration and communication (www.gawa.nu) in West Africa. With support from their GAWA network, green actors will work together to integrate nature conservation priorities in the development agenda across West Africa. A pilot project will be undertaken in 2006 to improve the capacity of members of the GAWA network to better conduct powerful advocacy campaigns.

SUMMARY

How are poverty and nature linked?

- There are many dimensions of poverty including access to and quality of infrastructure, water, health and sanitation, social support structures, knowledge and skills, and human rights.
- Ecosystem services (food, fodder, timber, regulation of climate and clean air, water flow, coastal protection, etc.) support these dimensions.
- When the ecological systems fail and natural resources are depleted quality of life decreases and poverty (as defined above) is exacerbated.

Can environmental conservation take place without considering the poverty context?

- Nature conservation and environmental interventions are unsustainable if poverty is not addressed because the environment is the foundation for life.
- Natural resources and ecological systems are a direct source of raw materials for sustaining livelihoods and economies.

What are some of the ways that we can ensure poverty and nature are linked?

- Integrate the known science about ecosystem management into development and other planning processes so that environment is an integral part of all planning.
- Environment and development actors work in partnership to harmonize our agendas.
- Experts in nature conservation and environment provide tools which help development actors incorporate environmental principles in large-scale planning.
- Improve tenure and access rights of local populations.
- Create enabling policies, especially at the regional level.
- Work in a really participatory manner with the local communities.
- Remember this is a long term process!

Who are the actors that need to be involved in making the link?

- Environmentalists, conservationists, development agencies, governments, nongovernmental organizations with expertise in a broad range of areas including health, gender, social issues, communities. The answer is in partnership.

How does culture fit into this discussion?

- Solutions to environmental and development challenges must be inspired and owned by West Africans.
- Draw upon the thousands of years of history as an immense source of knowledge to inform decisionmaking about incorporating environment and poverty actions.
- Indeed this knowledge represents part of the wealth in West Africa which can be used to overcome the paradox of a wealthy but poor region.