

# Learning from Participatory Vulnerability Assessments – key to identifying EbA Options<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Accelerating rates of climate change cause (or will cause) catastrophic effects globally that impact human livelihoods, economies and the ability to sustain human-kind. The effects of climate change, such as rising sea level and species loss, have led to the decline of ecosystems that threaten the wellbeing of human societies. Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA) is an approach to enhance human resilience to climate change, through the use of biodiversity conservation, ecosystem management, and enhancing the adaptive capacities of people. This approach aims to reduce ecosystem vulnerability, impacts of climate change on biodiversity, as well as increasing the resilience of ecosystems.

Assessments of ecosystems are vital in order to measure and target appropriate areas and efficiently use resources for EbA projects. Vulnerability Assessments (VAs) are a useful tool to measure the stability of a particular ecosystem as well as the vulnerability of human communities. VAs have proven essential in the planning and implementation of EbA projects that foster adaptation and mitigation to deal with the negative impacts of climate change.

Case studies of the Mountain EbA Flagship project components implemented by IUCN, UNEP and UNDP<sup>2</sup>, together with implementing partners in Peru, Nepal, and Uganda serve as important learning opportunities for the successes and challenges of participatory and rapid vulnerability assessments.

Vulnerability Assessments were undertaken by all projects, in a participatory manner, prior to implementing no-regrets EbA measures.

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<sup>2</sup> This [Flagship Mountain EbA](#) project is implemented globally by UNEP, UNDP and IUCN with funding from [the BMUB Climate Initiative](#) of the German Government.

**Participatory** planning combines the involvement of field experts and local community members in order to obtain reliable information on the ecosystem(s) and communities of focus. Community perceptions of local climate related problems allow communities, practitioners and policy makers, to directly address community impacts, through the process of participatory vulnerability assessments. Such VA's use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to understand how socio-ecological systems respond to climate change.

Rapid and Participatory rural appraisal tools were used to involve experts working with local communities and working together. This helped everyone better understand the local situation and problems they are facing, as well as working to identify solutions based on local priorities and knowledge with the support of scientific information and technologies, through methods such as, transect walks, focus group discussions, and seasonal trends. Part of the EbA process, the no-regret <sup>3</sup>approach, focuses on maximizing positive and minimizing negative aspects of nature based adaptation strategies and options in both the short and medium terms.

The combination of community input and diagnosis, expert observation and analysis and data allow for a more accurate, though rapid, assessment of a community's resilience to climate change, resulting in effective and efficient subsequent adaptation. Case studies of the Mountain EbA Flagship project components implemented by IUCN and implementing partners in Peru, Nepal, and Uganda serve as important learning opportunities for the successes and challenges of participatory vulnerability assessments.

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<sup>3</sup> Working definition of no-regret actions by UNEP, UNDP, and IUCN under the Mountain EbA Project is "measures taken by communities [and/or facilitated by organisations] which do not worsen vulnerabilities to climate change or which increase adaptive capacities and measures that will always have a positive impact on livelihoods and ecosystems regardless of how the climate changes".

## Key Lessons

### Peru

The Integrate Participatory Rural Appraisal (IPRA) approach showed that no-regret adaptation measures selected by the communities of Miraflores and Canchayllo in the Nor Yauyos-Cochas Landscape Reserve, were associated with the communities' social processes. The infrastructure component, in both cases, is a short-term intervention and should be associated with opportunities and actions to strengthen local organizations.

The IPRA participatory approach fosters reflection-action-reflection cycles that contribute to the landscape's governance in the Nor Yauyos-Cochas Landscape Reserve (NYCLR) by promoting (i) participation, through local researchers and their organizations, is a means to inform and influence at both the local level and for the NYCLR; (ii) the conservation policies provide direction and design in the NYCLR territory, (iii) a better understanding of local interests and perspectives for management decisions and (iv) the definition of responsibilities of each party (community, local government and protected area) and monitor compliance with those obligations was agreed to. An important finding in the IPRA's validation stage was to ensure that the proposed no-regret measures are integrated in the best possible way in the long-term NYCLR planning process and contribute to the strategy's institutionalization.

### Nepal

Participatory approaches were used throughout - site selection, planning, design, validation, implementation of activities and delivering the results on the ground. This is a key factor in delivering bottom-up activities that empower and enhance the ownership and involvement of local communities in the project. Capacity development on EbA is crucial at different levels as it becomes difficult to consult with stakeholders on specific elements of EbA and criteria for EbA activities. Thus, it is crucial to have a multidisciplinary team comprised of local stakeholders, researchers, community representatives and technical experts to define the no-regret measures and further analyse selected no-regret measures and their potential impacts on society and the environment. Some of the no-regret activities can be easily

identified without vulnerability assessments, as these activities directly address climate change impacts, such as drought, whereas some activities need research, which can indicate whether potential EbA activities could be recommended. The participatory approach played an important role in assisting communities, stakeholders and researchers to reach a common understanding of local vulnerabilities to climate change and possible adaptation strategies.

A combination of different approaches (which are participatory, integrative, consultative, gender sensitive and interactive) are an important, useful and effective means for identifying and implementing no-regret EbA measures. Gender, social inclusion, access to resources and rights are also integral parts for successful implementation of activities, particularly using the participatory approach.

### Uganda

Rural communities are knowledgeable about the critical issues affecting them, including many of the solutions to address such challenges. However, they feel left out in decision making as most projects are designed and activities pre-determined without their prior engagement. It is very important to recognise the value of local knowledge (and institutions) and use it to make decisions. The vulnerability assessment confirmed the hotspots and interventions that had earlier been identified through rapid assessments and IUCN participatory processes. The vulnerability assessment has helped the project to strengthen the EbA aspects from both ecosystem and catchment approaches. This confirmed the wealth of knowledge and skills within the community, and the need to take advantage of these skills. As a result, there has been sustained engagement, with a high rate of adoption and scaling up in all the IUCN sites in Kapchorwa and Kween districts.

Sustained community involvement and implementation of desired changes requires continuous and in-depth social assessment. This is needed so as to build trust and better understand the key, underlying social dynamics and issues that have resulted in current behaviours and actions. Such an assessment is

often complicated by the very dynamic nature of peoples' attitudes. IUCN's work, with and through local partners, to informally understand some of these issues has helped the project to adjust accordingly and ensure that it remains on track.

### Conclusion

The case studies from Peru, Nepal and Uganda demonstrate the importance of participatory planning processes for EbA so as to address climate change impacts on communities. Common to all case studies is the importance of engaging with the community throughout the planning, implementation and monitoring processes. First-hand experiences of the impacts of climate change from community members enhances the understanding of their needs and allows for the appropriate measures to take place that will directly address and benefit the specific community. Using a multifaceted approach — that is participatory, consultative, integrative and interactive — yields greater success in understanding and addressing community needs than any single approach on its own. An interdisciplinary team incorporating the skills and knowledge of both local and external researchers, local stakeholders and community representatives enhance the participatory process. The key challenge faced was implementing a truly integrated approach that simultaneously addresses social, economic and environmental variables.

The key take home messages relate to: (a) the legitimacy of bottom-up participatory approaches; (b) the importance of knowledge dialogue between local and technical expertise and mutual respect of different knowledge systems; together with (c) the importance of having the resources and time to carry out such participatory approaches, together with the level of detail required, which can complement other VA approaches. Central to this is having teams to lead these processes, who need to be able to use such participatory processes in an integrated team approach that embrace different disciplines.