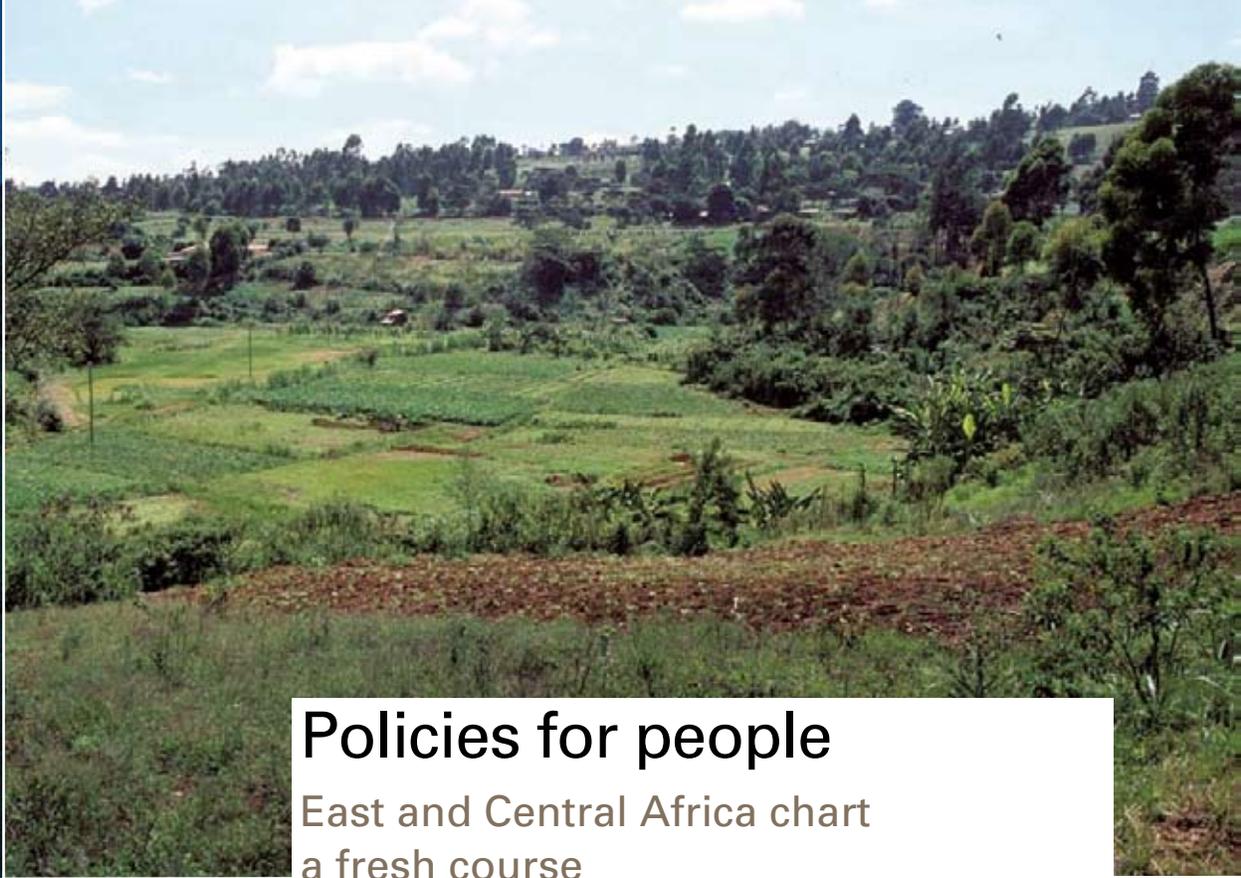


RURAL POVERTY and ENVIRONMENT



Policies for people

East and Central Africa chart a fresh course

IDRC: Peter Bennett

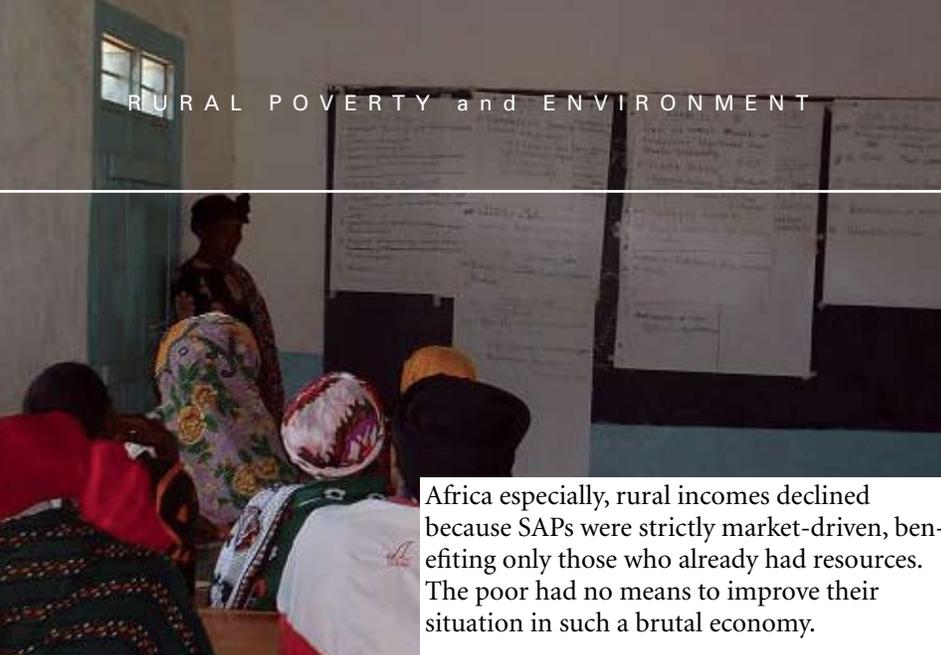
Agriculture remains central to the livelihoods of most rural populations in East and Central Africa.

Ten African countries — home to 250 million people — have banded together to pursue a more humane development model, a plan more firmly focused on the welfare of people and the health of the natural environment.

Mention “structural adjustment programs” to African policy-makers and they will cringe. These donor-driven initiatives — known as SAPs — were aimed at jump-starting weak economies. Although they have had some success achieving this goal, they have also left behind a trail of hopelessness and poverty.

By now, the story is well known. As a condition for receiving loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, “structural adjustment” was demanded of developing countries. Among other drastic measures, poor economies were expected to privatize and deregulate, cut social expenditures, and reduce trade barriers. Theoretically, these measures were going to promote growth, generate income, and retire debt.

Instead, the opposite happened. Although some countries did see an improvement in their national accounts, in the end poverty, stagnation, and environmental degradation only increased. In East and Central



IDRC: Luis Navarro

Africa especially, rural incomes declined because SAPs were strictly market-driven, benefiting only those who already had resources. The poor had no means to improve their situation in such a brutal economy.

A farmer in Lushoto, Tanzania, presents the action plans developed by her group during a watershed planning meeting.



IDRC: Luis Navarro

Spring development has reduced the burden on women and children.

Time for new ideas

SAPs viewed growth solely in terms of the cold efficiency of economic indicators and failed to take account of human and environmental factors. The whole SAP experience was a sobering one for agricultural researchers and policymakers in East and Central Africa.

Despite years of enduring these programs, fully half the population in the region continued to live below the poverty line — only USD 1/day. Political conflicts, famine, and misguided agricultural policies combined to threaten food security, thus jeopardizing millions of people whose survival depended on farming.

The intensification of farming by these millions — so desperate to live off the soil — inevitably degraded the natural environment. The amount and quality of arable land shrank, and the poverty and hunger that resulted pushed people even farther into marginal lands and more fragile ecosystems.

Clearly, the SAP approach wasn't working and new development models were desperately needed.

An alternative vision

One response came from leading researchers in the region. These scientists formed an alliance that saw development not just in terms of improved economic figures, but also took account of the everyday well-being of the poor and the health of their natural environment.

The Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA - www.asareca.org) is a coalition of the national agricultural research institutes of 10 countries: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. This group of nations is home to a quarter of a billion people.

Launched in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1994, ASARECA is headquartered in Entebbe, Uganda. Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the World Bank were the founding donors, but have been joined by other donors over time.

ASARECA seeks a new approach to farming that takes into account not just the economy and markets, but also people and the environment. It aims to increase the efficiency of agricultural research to replace traditional, unproductive forms of farming with growth in outputs and incomes, with reduced poverty, and with better ecological protection.

Strength in numbers

One important rationale for ASARECA is simple economies of scale. Some member countries — for example, Rwanda — are too small economically to invest in agricultural research and policy analysis on their own. The 10 institutes hope to benefit by banding together and pooling their resources.

Regional cooperation in research for development is possible mainly because ASARECA is firmly apolitical. For instance, when conflicts pitted member states against each other — Ethiopia and Eritrea, DR Congo and Uganda, Rwanda and DR Congo, and Uganda and Sudan — the association continued to maintain its operations in all countries.

ASARECA regards the improvement of agricultural production as being more than a mere “efficiency drive,” which had been the focus of traditional agricultural research and of the donor-driven SAPs. In ASARECA’s view, farm research should also address issues of equity, sustainability, and rural development. According to IDRC’s Luis Navarro, “Development has to do with uplifting the self-worth, self-esteem, and economic contributions of the poor.”

John Wanjala, of Kenya’s Ministry of Agriculture, takes up the theme: “You cannot divorce economic growth from equitable benefit. The rural poor, who can hardly access factors of production, have also to benefit from economic growth. And the resources that produce wealth have to survive to produce more in future.”

Thus, ASARECA scientists, and analysts keep asking themselves the hard question: how do we guarantee food security, improve incomes, and limit the depletion of the resource base, all without placing a burden on the already-impooverished farmer?

A wide umbrella: ASARECA’s research community

In the old days, scientists seeking solutions to problems like these would experiment with tangible factors, such as better agricultural technologies or improved farming practices. Nowadays, they also tend to look at more elusive issues, including the institutional arrangements and policies that determine the relevance, quality, and cost-effectiveness of research.

The association serves as the umbrella for 19 regional research networks and programs.

Thus, ASARECA examines organizational mechanisms that affect the degree of collaboration among the region’s national agricultural research systems or that influence the delivery of badly needed information and technology.

But ASARECA’s interest in institutional collaboration goes even farther. The association serves as the umbrella for 19 regional research networks and programs.

These networks and programs, collectively called the “research community,” serve to forge links and strengthen capacities across ASARECA’s constituent national agricultural research programs. They are grouped into topical categories — commodities, natural resource management, socioeconomic, and policy analysis — but at the same time a number of them cut across these divisions and tackle concerns like technology transfer, the strengthening of agricultural research systems, gender, marketing, and the delivery of agricultural information.

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Historical trends analysis in Ginchi helped to identify key driving forces behind negative trends in land use.



IDRC: Luis Navarro



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Use of socially disaggregated focus group discussions in Areka, Ethiopia, helped to ensure that diverse views were captured in watershed problem diagnosis.

“Why should we have abundant surplus food in Uganda when people are dying in Ethiopia?”

Two of these networks are supported by IDRC:

- The African Highlands Initiative (AHI, www.africanhighlands.org) brings together members of the rural community — a chronically marginalized sector — to participate in development in a manner that does not abuse the environment. The program deals mainly with the poor who, by virtue of their position in society, have trouble obtaining credit and, therefore, cannot invest in capital-intensive farming technologies.
- The Eastern and Central Africa Programme for Agricultural Policy Analysis (ECAPAPA) is a direct response to the SAP experience. At the time of ASARECA’s inception, most national agricultural systems in the region were unaware of or unconcerned with the policy changes arising from SAPs and were failing to adjust their own research agendas accordingly. ECAPAPA is designed specifically to strengthen the links between agricultural research and agricultural policy analysis.

How it works: ASARECA’s administration

ASARECA can be compared to a clearinghouse, where initiatives are vetted and then forwarded for implementation to the relevant program or network.

Conflicting rules and standards created barriers to investment, trade, and the transfer of technology and frustrated efforts to alleviate poverty.

The directors of the national agricultural research institutes of ASARECA’s constituent countries — who form the association’s committee of directors — review important initiatives and policies of the programs and networks. They also appraise project proposals and decide which are to be funded through a recently established competitive grant system (CGS), which is supported by various donors. An advisory board appointed by the directors helps establish the policies and procedures that are used in approving these proposals.

The core research themes for the CGS are derived from consultations with stakeholders, including farmers and others, and are based on potential economic as well as environmental impacts.

Success story: ECAPAPA and seeds

One project frequently cited as evidence of ASARECA’s contribution to regional integration and development is ECAPAPA’s harmonization of seed policies and regulations in East and Central Africa.

Before the establishment of ASARECA, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania each enforced their own national laws, regulations, and standards regarding the trade in plant seeds. The result: cross-border transfers and other procedures relating to seeds were expensive and time-consuming.

“To import seeds into Uganda, it took a minimum of 14 days to apply for registration and fill up forms,” says Isaac Minde, ECAPAPA’s coordinator. “Such a process, ideally, should take a maximum of 48 hours.”

Conflicting rules and standards created barriers to investment, trade, and the transfer of technology and frustrated efforts to alleviate poverty.

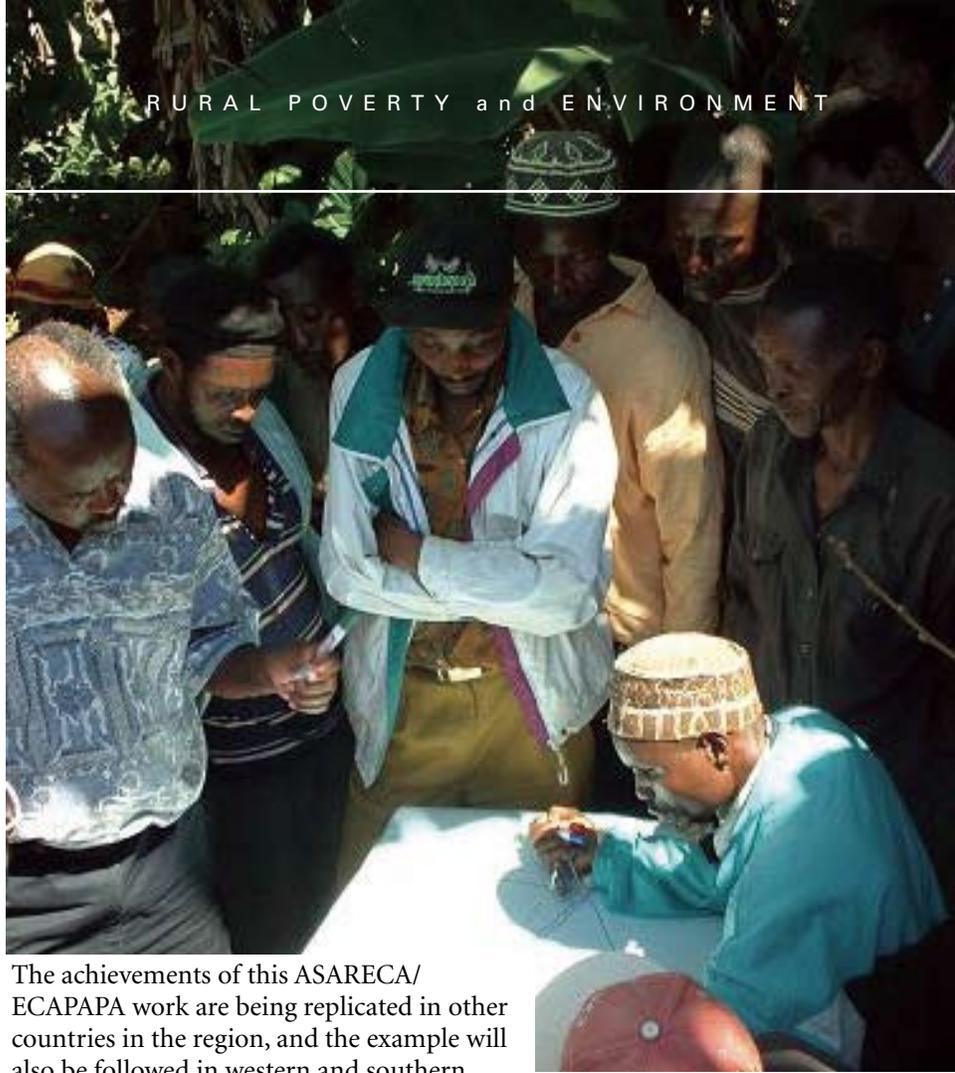
This is where ECAPAPA’s seed sector harmonization program stepped in to help. Its goals: to empower poor farmers by providing them with access to quality seed, to foster increased efficiency and competition among seed breeders, and — ultimately — to improve food security in the region.

ECAPAPA hosted consultations among officials of the three governments, stakeholder institutions, and academic disciplines. All agreed on a number of important technical issues.

- They decided that the amount of time spent testing new varieties should be drastically reduced and that there should be fewer phytosanitary regulations on quarantine pests in the region.
- They agreed that the private and public sectors ought to regard themselves as partners in development and that the private sector should take over a number of functions previously carried out by the state.
- They decided that “seed working groups” would be formed to continue assessing and validating existing restrictions.

According to Minde, this project was unprecedented in Africa, where national agricultural research institutions had focused exclusively on agricultural technologies per se — that is, on farming and its determinant factors such as soils and water. Agricultural scientists had seldom attempted to link their research efforts to policy analysis or to consider how policies affected the farming industry as a whole.

IDRC: Luis Navarro



The achievements of this ASARECA/ECAPAPA work are being replicated in other countries in the region, and the example will also be followed in western and southern Africa. In addition, ECAPAPA will join in efforts to harmonize regulations in other areas, including dairy, fertilizer, and biotechnology sectors.

The success of the project shows how cooperation at the regional level can help enhance agricultural development by boosting the flow of information, services, and commodities. Minde puts the issue clearly: “Why should we have abundant surplus food in Uganda when people are dying in Ethiopia?”

More links to come

The association recently prepared a strategic plan for its second decade. This plan will lead to the adoption of efficient technologies among agricultural and natural resource practitioners and is expected to result in an overall reduction in poverty and environmental degradation.

Researchers assist Lushoto farmers determine key watershed problems affecting their livelihoods.

Spring development is used as an entry point to more complex watershed innovations in AHJ benchmark sites.



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To assist this effort, ASARECA is strengthening its collaboration with the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, the East African Community, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development, and other regional bodies that support the development ambitions of the UN millennium development goals and the New Partnership for Africa's Development through its Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Program.

Once again, ASARECA will foster this regional integration by identifying impediments to progress and by helping to harmonize the disparate policies that compromise trade and

the sharing of technologies and materials across national boundaries.

This brief was prepared by Patrick Kavanagh based on a case study by Ken Opala, Isaac Minde, and Luis Navarro.

IDRC's Rural Poverty and Environment (RPE) program is a global program launched in 2005 to support research that meets the needs of the rural poor who live in fragile or degraded ecosystems in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East. Its goal is to strengthen institutions, policies, and practices that enhance food, water, and income security.

For information visit
www.idrc.ca/rpe

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