

Advancing and Balancing Ecological Conservation, Agricultural Production and Local Livelihood Goals in Kenya's Kikuyu Escarpment Landscape

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SUMMARY

Central Kenya's Kikuyu Escarpment is host to rich wild biodiversity and a strong cultural heritage. It is also an important agricultural production area and the catchment for much of Nairobi's water supply. Increasing human population has put pressure on the natural resource base that most of the region's residents rely upon. The local organization, Kijabe Environment Volunteers (KENVO), has mobilized communities and adopted a landscape perspective to sustainably manage natural resources and balance the multiple functions of the landscape. This case study characterizes the Kikuyu Escarpment landscape and describes the ways in which an integrated landscape management approach has enabled local communities to define and pursue their goals related to agricultural development and profitability while conserving the area's critical natural capital.

KEYWORDS

Kenya, ecoagriculture, integrated landscape management

CATEGORIES

forests, agricultural areas, urban fringes

LANDSCAPE LOCATION

0.9 S latitude, 36.6 W longitude

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BACKGROUND

The ill effects of pressures from growing human populations on land and water resources are widespread and well documented. While most people perceive the challenges posed by these dynamics, some also see opportunities. In the late 1990s David Kuria, a native of the Kijabe area of the Kikuyu Forest Escarpment in Kenya recognized, the landscape's unsustainable development trajectory and its potential to harm local residents and ecosystems alike. He catalyzed the formation of a community organization to harness local concern, knowledge and labor that is transforming a landscape weakened by rapid population growth and natural resource degradation into an integrated blend's of sustainable agriculture, conservation and livelihood activity. This transformation has been aided by the group's adoption of a landscape management approach called ecoagriculture.

The Kikuyu Escarpment landscape rests on the eastern slopes of the Aberdare Mountains of central Kenya, just 30 km northwest of Nairobi (see Figure 1). Ancient forests and internationally-designated Important Bird Areas (IBAs) are interwoven with tree plantations, tea production, subsistence agriculture and dairy production. Historical sites, including caves used to hide fighters during the Mau Mau Revolution in the 1950s, and peaceful coexistence of several ethnic groups add to the area's rich cultural heritage. The region is a critical catchment area for the many rivers and springs that provide water to the local population as well as Kenya's capital city, Nairobi.



Figure 1. Breathtaking views of The Great Rift Valley are among many attractions for tourists in the Kikuyu Escarpment landscape. Photo credit: Courtney Wallace.

Recent population growth threatens to undermine a diverse and relatively healthy landscape: heavily cultivated farming systems diminish soil fertility and cause erosion; overharvesting of forest products and destruction of trees for charcoal, fuelwood, and construction materials disturb the local ecology while degrading livelihood assets; and a growing population of outsiders that is impoverished and lacks knowledge of local sustainable practices engages in short-term economic exploits that have long-term deleterious effects. Despite these challenges, residents' strong cultural heritage and local pride rooted in history have created a sense of common purpose, motivating community members to counteract troubling trends.

THE KIJABE ENVIRONMENT VOLUNTEERS (KENVO)

The Kijabe Environment Volunteers (KENVO) is a non-profit community-based organization established in the mid-1990s by local residents living adjacent to the Kikuyu Escarpment forest. Kuria, with other landscape leaders, founded KENVO to address the rapidly degrading local environment by mobilizing volunteers, particularly youth, to help curtail forest encroachment and initiate forest enrichment activities.

Early on, KENVO conducted a baseline study of challenges and opportunities for natural resource use and management in the landscape. The limited awareness of local communities about the value of natural resources emerged as a key contributor to forest degradation. KENVO concluded that local communities must be at the heart of long-term forest protection, and used insights from the baseline study to design its first program, a comprehensive awareness campaign (see Figure 2).

Since the Kikuyu Escarpment boasts rich and unique avifauna, KENVO was able to gain early financial support for their conservation work from BirdLife International and other donors. KENVO staff trained and supported local residents on how to keep the forests intact, protecting wild birdlife. Local residents mobilized to plant tree seedlings in the forests that had been exploited for charcoal and illegal timbering. Women and youth groups were organized to sustainably harvest trees to generate income while also increasing the local supply of agroforestry trees. Revenue from these activities raised their income and status in the community. Community surveillance efforts helped to keep intruders out of the forest.



Figure 2. The KENVO Resource Centre sits atop a hill overlooking the Kijabe forest. This facility is used for community training and capacity building on conservation and sustainable livelihood programs. Photo credit: Courtney Wallace.

KENVO'S EVOLUTION

While the initial awareness-building activities mobilized widespread community engagement in forest protection and rehabilitation, KENVO realized that threats to the area's forests and natural resources needed to be addressed at their roots. In the early 2000s, the organization conducted further studies to investigate causes of forest disturbances, assess residents' use of natural resources, and surveys community attitudes on forest values with the goal of informing improved forest management. Their findings prompted the

organization to expand its education and awareness, reforestation, and knowledge exchange activities, with a continued focus on youth, to energize a virtuous cycle. A school outreach programme introduced students to tree nursery management and fostered early appreciation of the rich local biodiversity through forest walks. The Exchange Programme created opportunities for peer learning and community exchange visits at the local level, while an international programme with Tanzania and Canada allowed youth to gain leadership skills and learn about different cultures.

In parallel, local farmers were encouraged to diversify and intensify their farms by integrating apiculture, fish farming, confined livestock management, agroforestry and soil conservation practices into their agriculture, and to share their experience with one another. The activities were designed to limit pressure by local inhabitants on forests through growing wood and other tree products on farm, to slow the expansion of agricultural lands into forest areas by producing more within the confines of small farms, to reduce soil degradation and enhance fertility, and to increase bird and other wildlife habitat in the agricultural portion of the landscape. As neighbors became aware of the economic and other livelihood benefits that earlier adopters of these practices were realizing, they sought to learn about them and to emulate their neighbors' experience.

By 2005, KENVO had made considerable strides, both in reducing deforestation and forest degradation, and in demonstrating the effectiveness of sustainable livelihood options based on diversified agriculture. Yet, as the population continued to grow and economic necessity continued to place pressure on natural resources—despite a greater awareness of conservation issues—it became clear that a more comprehensive strategy was needed. This new strategy would need to build on and reinforce the pride and sense of ownership that the local communities felt in their recent achievements. It would also need to address the new challenges in practical terms that spoke to the economic needs of local residents.

LEARNING ABOUT THE LANDSCAPE PERSPECTIVE

KENVO's co-founder David Kuria was accepted to participate in the first Ecoagriculture Leadership Course, facilitated by EcoAgriculture Partners,¹ the University of California at Berkeley, and the World Agroforestry Centre, in 2006. The course's 20+ participants were selected from diverse organizations in Kenya and Uganda to learn about ecoagriculture: an integrated approach to managing rural landscapes to build synergies among food production, sustainable rural livelihoods, and conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Box 1 introduces the ecoagriculture landscape approach, summarizing some of the primary reasons why a landscape is a suitable unit for effective, long-term management of agriculture and natural resources. KENVO applied to the Ecoagriculture Leadership Course with the aim of building its capacity to design and implement the type of comprehensive landscape approach that it was now convinced needed to be pursued in the Kikuyu Escarpment landscape.

Following the Ecoagriculture Leadership Course, KENVO received a post-workshop mini-grant to initiate follow-up activities to begin applying the ecoagriculture management approach. The first step in this process was to initiate a strategic landscape assessment and stakeholder dialogue about local priorities. KENVO's needs provided an excellent opportunity to apply and evaluate the landscape assessment framework and tool set that EcoAgriculture Partners had recently developed as part of its Landscape Measures Initiative.

¹ EcoAgriculture Partners is a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC, USA that promotes the ecoagriculture landscape management approach by providing training, research, policy solutions, and support to organizations working in the conservation, agriculture, and rural development sectors.

BOX 1. LANDSCAPE APPROACHES AND THEIR POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES

Landscape approaches are increasingly at the forefront of efforts to address food security and rural poverty, as researchers, practitioners, and policymakers strive to accommodate multiple functions on a finite amount of land while preserving the ecosystem services upon which important local and regional activities depend. Landscape approaches work at the scale of tens to thousands of kilometers (e.g., across clusters of villages, districts, or watersheds) to increase benefits and synergies for food production, ecosystem conservation, and rural livelihoods. Typically, landscape approaches involve participatory, multi-stakeholder planning, decision-making, and action processes to coordinate activities taking place in different parts of the landscape by different actors. An increasing number of groups that work in rural areas are finding that landscape approaches are necessary or advantageous to meet their objectives. Key reasons include:

1. Scale of key ecological functions and processes. Many flows that are critical to human wellbeing—such as water, nutrients, sediment, plants, and animals—operate beyond the farm or village level to encompass the entire landscape. Protection of key ecosystem services such as clean water for human consumption and irrigation thus requires broader geographic foci.
2. Scale of key institutional frameworks. Governance in many developing nations has been devolved to the sub-national level, while villages, communities, and NGOs are increasingly forming partnerships to address shared objectives, creating opportunities from both the top and the grassroots to address challenges at a landscape scale.
3. Changing face of the rural agricultural economy. Market-linked agriculture is becoming more widespread. Rural communities are becoming increasingly interdependent, increasingly dependent on physical infrastructure and regional markets, and increasingly influenced by global economic forces.
4. New market opportunities. Rural land stewards are being presented with new market opportunities—such as eco-certification and payments for ecosystem services—that place value on rural land uses that protect ecological values. To take advantage of these opportunities may require management at the landscape or watershed scale, where many ecosystem services are mediated.
5. Climate change. Addressing climate change in a rural context requires strong emphasis on resilience, adaptation, and regional cooperation to accommodate shifting patterns of agricultural suitability, water availability, and habitat quality.
6. Increased emphasis on resilience and adaptation. Negotiating the increasingly thin margins of error for human wellbeing in many landscapes requires the ability to re-evaluate circumstances and adapt management solutions based on new information. This involves the continual development and use of traditional as well as scientific knowledge at appropriate scales.

Adapted from Milder et al. 2009

EcoAgriculture and KENVO had complementary interests in learning how integrated landscape management could address demonstrably conflicting uses of land, water and forest resources in the context of intense population pressures. Could ways be found to overcome conflict between different uses and users in the Kikuyu Escarpment—supplier of dairy and horticultural products and a major water source for the capital city of Nairobi as well as a wildlife tourist destination? The two organizations came together to conduct a landscape-scale assessment of the region with the goal of identifying priority actions that would increase synergies and reduce tradeoffs between biodiversity and natural resources conservation, agricultural production and local livelihood goals (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The agricultural landscape near a strip of Kijabe forest is a mosaic of land uses that provide a wide range of benefits to local residents, downstream water users, and others. In this photo, farms maintained with windbreaks and other planted trees create habitat and corridors for biodiversity, guard against erosion, provide fuelwood and help protect watershed services. Photo credit: Seth Shames.

ASSESSING LANDSCAPE PERFORMANCE

The ecoagriculture Landscape Measures Framework is encapsulated in 20 Questions for assessing the performance of ecoagriculture landscapes (Box 2). These questions encompass the key dimensions of a multi-functional rural landscape, including food production, human wellbeing, conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services, and adequate social and human capacity. As a framework that is both thematically broad and operationally straightforward, these questions have proven useful both for structuring stakeholder conversation about landscape performance and for designing more formal landscape assessment processes. For KENVO, the 20 Questions provided a structure for explicitly studying the Kikuyu Escarpment landscape as an integrated system, placing a balanced focus on agricultural production, livelihood and conservation dimensions, and the institutional support required to advance and keep them in balance.

BOX 2. TWENTY QUESTIONS FOR ASSESSING THE PERFORMANCE OF ECOAGRICULTURE LANDSCAPES

Conservation Goal: The landscape conserves, maintains, and restores wild biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Criterion C1: Does the landscape contain an adequate quantity and suitable configuration of natural and semi-natural habitat to protect native biodiversity?

Criterion C2: Do natural and semi-natural habitats in the landscape approximate the composition and structure of the habitats historically found in the landscape?

Criterion C3: Are important species within the landscape biologically viable?

Criterion C4: Does the landscape provide locally, regionally, and globally important ecosystem services?

Criterion C5: Are natural areas and aquatic resources degraded by productive areas and activities?

Production Goal: The landscape provides for the sustainable production of crops, livestock, fish, forests, and wild edible resources.

Criterion P1: Do production systems satisfy demand for agricultural products (crops, livestock, fish, wood) by consumers inside and outside the landscape?

Criterion P2: Are production systems financially viable and can they adapt to changes in input and output markets?

Criterion P3: Are production systems resilient to disturbances, both natural and human?

Criterion P4: Do production systems have a neutral or positive impact on wild biodiversity and ecosystem services in the landscape?

Criterion P5: Are species and varietal diversity of crops, livestock, fisheries and forests adequate and maintained?

Livelihoods Goal: The landscape sustains or enhances the livelihoods and wellbeing of all social groups who reside there.

Criterion L1: Are households and communities able to meet their basic needs while sustaining natural resources?

Criterion L2: Is the value of household and community income and assets increasing?

Criterion L3: Do households and communities have sustainable and equitable access to critical natural resource stocks and flows?

Criterion L4: Are local economies and livelihoods resilient to change in human and non-human population dynamics?

Criterion L5: Are households and communities resilient to external shocks such as flooding, drought, changes in commodity prices, and disease epidemics?

Institutions Goal: The landscape hosts institutions that support the planning, negotiation, implementation, resource mobilization, and capacity-building needed to integrate conservation, production and livelihood functions.

Criterion I1: Are mechanisms in place and functioning for cross-sectoral interaction at landscape scale?

Criterion I2: Do producers and other community members have adequate capacity to learn and innovate about practices that will lead to integrated landscapes?

Criterion I3: Does public policy support integrated landscapes?

Criterion I4: Are market incentives conducive to integrated landscapes?

Criterion I5: Do knowledge, norms, and values support integrated landscapes?

Source: Buck, et al, 2007; Landscape Measures Resource Center www.landscapeasures.info

To apply the 20 Questions in multi-stakeholder processes, EcoAgriculture also brought two tools that it had recently designed and pilot tested in a landscape in Uganda with characteristics similar to KENVO's: a Landscape Performance Scorecard and an Organizational Performance Scorecard (Box 3). Stakeholder groups use both tools to reflect individually and collectively on existing landscape performance as well as needs, gaps, and opportunities relative to each of the four main landscape outcome goals (conservation, agricultural production, livelihoods, and institutions). Successful application of these tools hinges on the makeup and engagement the stakeholder groups that apply them.

During an initial workshop in 2008 KENVO convened 22 stakeholders, two-thirds of whom were farmers. The remaining one-third was composed of representatives of public agencies of forestry, agriculture, livestock and social services, and leaders of church groups and other local organizations. Approximately one-third of participants were women. KENVO and EcoAgriculture co-led the five hour workshop, with several short breaks for informal conversations.

BOX 3. ORGANIZATION PERFORMANCE CRITERIA FOR MANAGING INTEGRATED LANDSCAPE PROCESSES

1. Longevity in the landscape – history of activity in the area
2. Financial capacity – access to monetary resources that might contribute to landscape management
3. Human capacity – technical and managerial resources available for landscape management
4. Demonstrated leadership – recognition and trust by other organizations in landscape
5. Demonstrated coordination capacity – frequency and quality of planning, learning, resource sharing and managing activity with other organizations

Source: Buck, et al, 2007; Landscape Measures Resource Center www.landscapemeasures.info

THE ASSESSMENT WORKSHOP

To help participants understand the exercise and internalize the components of the integrated landscape assessment, facilitators from KENVO began by translating the 20 Questions into terms that were meaningful in the context of the Kikuyu landscape. They provided examples to ensure participants could visualize the meaning behind each of the twenty landscape performance criteria. Each participant then completed a landscape performance scored card, by scoring each question on a 10-point scale.

The organizational scoring exercise was conducted in plenary, beginning with a brainstorm of all the public, private, civic or hybrid organizations that have influence in the landscape. Participants then scored each organization on a scale of 1 to 10 according to six performance criteria.

Meeting facilitators gathered the two sets of individual scorecards and entered data into a spreadsheet, allowing easy computation of summary results. With the landscape performance data they generated a 'spider-gram'. The spider-gram visually depicted landscape performance relative to conservation, agriculture production, livelihood and institutional objectives. Results were projected on a wall, prompting group discussion of the reasons for differential performance across the 20 Questions as well as options for future action to address areas of need. While organizational performance data also were summarized and projected, participants found the wall charts they constructed for the plenary scoring exercise to be especially useful output to focus on-going discussion about who they might engage in landscape management efforts going forward. Following the discussion, facilitators met with a select group of participants to debrief, review the process, comment on the usability of the scoring tools, and assess the buy-in of the larger group. Participants discussed the findings with others throughout the landscape (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. David Kuria, Director of KENVO, guides a stakeholder discussion on strategies for integrated landscape management in Kijabe. Photo credit: Jamie Herring.

LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES

Workshop leaders described three main achievements of the workshop. First, a high level of engagement and successful incorporation of participants' knowledge and individual expertise resulted in rich and credible workshop products, including the scorecard results and an institutional map of the landscape.

Second, the workshop cast a direct light on the longstanding reality that the Kikuyu Forest Escarpment landscape was more effectively meeting conservation goals than livelihood goals. On the other hand, the scoring process also led participants to realize that important conservation benefits and ecosystem services were being provided not just by the forest but within the agricultural mosaic itself. The scoring exercises were thus helpful in framing new priorities and needs for KENVO and its stakeholders to take on—priorities that had not become fully apparent during earlier, less integrated assessments and programs.

Third, KENVO and local stakeholders recognized the usefulness of the landscape approach, and decided to invest in the development of additional tools and analyses for assessing landscape performance, as a means to informing landscape-scale coordination and action. Participants thus were motivated to further develop 'landscape literacy' among residents and stakeholders.

CREATING AN ACTION AGENDA

The workshop made clear that local livelihood needs required more of KENVO's attention. It seemed likely that because the landscape had received external funds for conservation, the overarching emphasis for some time had been on the health of forests, in particular as habitat for wildlife. The landscape assessment illustrated that long-term landscape health would require action and investment in local livelihoods. Further discussion revealed market development and eco-tourism to be two critical opportunities to support local livelihoods in an environmentally compatible manner. Stakeholders decided that private sector organizations could be recruited as partners to enhance KENVO's activities in this area.

Markets and marketing

Producers in Kikuyu tend not to organize themselves formally to market their products; rather they sell them as individuals. Some dairy cooperatives exist, but lack sufficient capacity to ensure competitive market prices. Instead of benefitting from the landscape's proximity to Nairobi, local producers tend to settle for the low prices offered by local middlemen. Inadequate storage facilities and financial services, minimal value addition, and lack of reliable market information often give local farmers little choice but to accept these low prices. With these challenges in mind, KENVO is now pursuing partnerships and funding for technical assistance to assess key obstacles to profitable marketing and implementing practical marketing strategies that take advantage of the nearby Nairobi market.

At a more innovative level, KENVO is also pursuing the possibility of establishing a "landscape label" for Kikuyu-produced products. Landscape labels seek to command premium prices by capitalizing on the interest of consumers in purchasing products that were produced in a specific place (with associated quality attributes) or in a way that helps to conserve and deliver multiple ecosystem values, including clean water, wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration and local livelihood security. Landscape labeling thus helps producers gain financial benefit from the environmental benefits they provide through sustainable production practices. Tea from the Kikuyu Escarpment is a leading candidate for landscape labeling.

Agro-eco-tourism

KENVO's leaders have explored possibilities for linking eco-tourism with eco-certified products of the region, in so-called agro-eco-tourism schemes through a grant secured from external sources. Through research and consultation KENVO recognized the potential value of sharing the exceptional vistas found at the edge of the Great Rift Valley in Kijabe and throughout the Lari district with tourists. Coupled with the region's cultural and historical value, and its rich wildlife, the area is highly appealing to visitors with diverse interests. Considering the wealth of attractions and activities, as well as the involvement and unanimous support for ecotourism development from local communities and resource managers, Kijabe demonstrates a high potential for landscape level, community operated agro-eco-tourism.

KENVO has initiated the development of agro-eco-tourism infrastructure principally to capture value from tourists passing through the area on the way to other destinations. It has constructed a small bungalow for tourists on a suitable site, and developed a business management plan to support it. The organization's leaders continue to explore efficient and equitable ways to engage local community members in provisioning the tourist enterprise with local food, and the development of tours that emphasize food and agriculture components of the landscape.

CONCLUSION

KENVO's early success in organizing and mobilizing communities in and around the Kikuyu Escarpment to restore and protect the area's rich forest resources provided a strong foundation for exploring integrated landscape management. Experience with the approach has provided insight and focus for bringing together diverse organizations in the landscape to pursue creative solutions for addressing the ongoing need to balance interests in conservation, production and livelihood security in the face of population expansion. KENVO distilled the following key lessons through its landscape initiative and collaboration with EcoAgriculture Partners:

- The need to balance conservation objectives and livelihood improvement; communities in a landscape will only identify themselves with and support interventions that have direct benefits for their livelihoods;
- The need to engage and collaborate with existing institutional actors, including governmental departments who are crucial for interpreting the government's directives for application at local level;
- The need for market linkages, both internal and external, which generate self-sustaining financial and social systems that are vital for rural development.

As the organization moves forward to strengthen community links with external markets, build cooperative marketing capacities among community members, pursue landscape labeling, and expand agro-ecotourism activity it appears destined to become intimately familiar with ways that integrated approaches can generate positive returns to the region. And as KENVO's learning deepens about the challenges posed by the complexities of integrated management, as well as the rewards, the organization and its partners surely will remain beacons of innovation from which landscape initiatives elsewhere stand to benefit.

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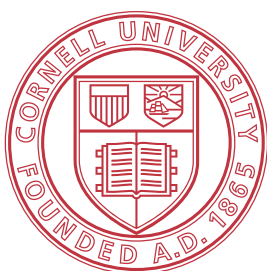
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