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Introducing a Transboundary Ecosystem Management Approach in the Mount Elgon Region

Alex B. Muhweezi
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The Need for Strengthened Institutional Collaboration

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The Mt Elgon ecosystem straddles the international boundary between Kenya and Uganda and is a watershed of international importance, feeding the waters of Lake Victoria, the Nile River system, and Lake Turkana. The core ecosystem in the Mt Elgon area is characterized by large montane forest landscapes; it comprises several protected areas. Adjacent is a vast, heavily populated agricultural landscape supporting up to 2 million people, whose livelihoods and economic activities are largely dependent on the ecosystem goods and services of the highlands. The mountain ecosystem of Mt Elgon is thus vital to the social and economic functioning of the surrounding areas, both in the highlands and in the lowlands. To manage this important ecosystem and

sustain the multiple functions and services it offers local people and visitors, there is a need for a regional transboundary ecosystem management approach and strengthened institutional collaboration between all stakeholders concerned at different levels. The Mt Elgon Regional Ecosystem Conservation Programme (MERECF) aims to secure the multifunctionality of the Mt Elgon ecosystem and enhance sustainable development in the long term, in order to secure livelihoods and alleviate poverty, both of which are priorities of the governments of Uganda and Kenya. The present article provides insights from experience and lessons learned to date regarding the planning and implementation of such a transboundary regional ecosystem approach.



The Mount Elgon ecosystem

Mt Elgon, an extinct volcano, is one of Africa's few single peaks rising 2000 m above the surrounding ground, reaching a height of 4321 m asl (Figure 1). The Mt Elgon ecosystem houses a rich and unique fauna and flora. There are 37 globally threatened faunal species (22 mammal, 2 insect, and 13 bird species, of which 9 species are endemic), making the area a priority for species conservation.

The Mt Elgon ecosystem comprises 4 broad classes: a community of mixed montane forest; a broad belt of bamboo and low canopy montane forest; a zone of high montane heath; and a high moorland community. Most of the plant species in the forest zone above 2000 m have been shown to be endemic to the Afro-montane Region, and a number of species in this zone are endemic to Mt Elgon. The renowned dominant tree species include Elgon teak, cedar, *Podocarpus* spp., rosewood, and others. Intriguing and unique plants include giant groundsel, giant lobelia, and giant heather.

Additionally, the Mt Elgon ecosystem constitutes a major catchment with many tributaries draining into the major rivers that lead to large bodies of water—lakes Victoria, Turkana, and Kyoga—and finally joining the Nile River system. The Mt Elgon core ecosystem consists of 5 protect-

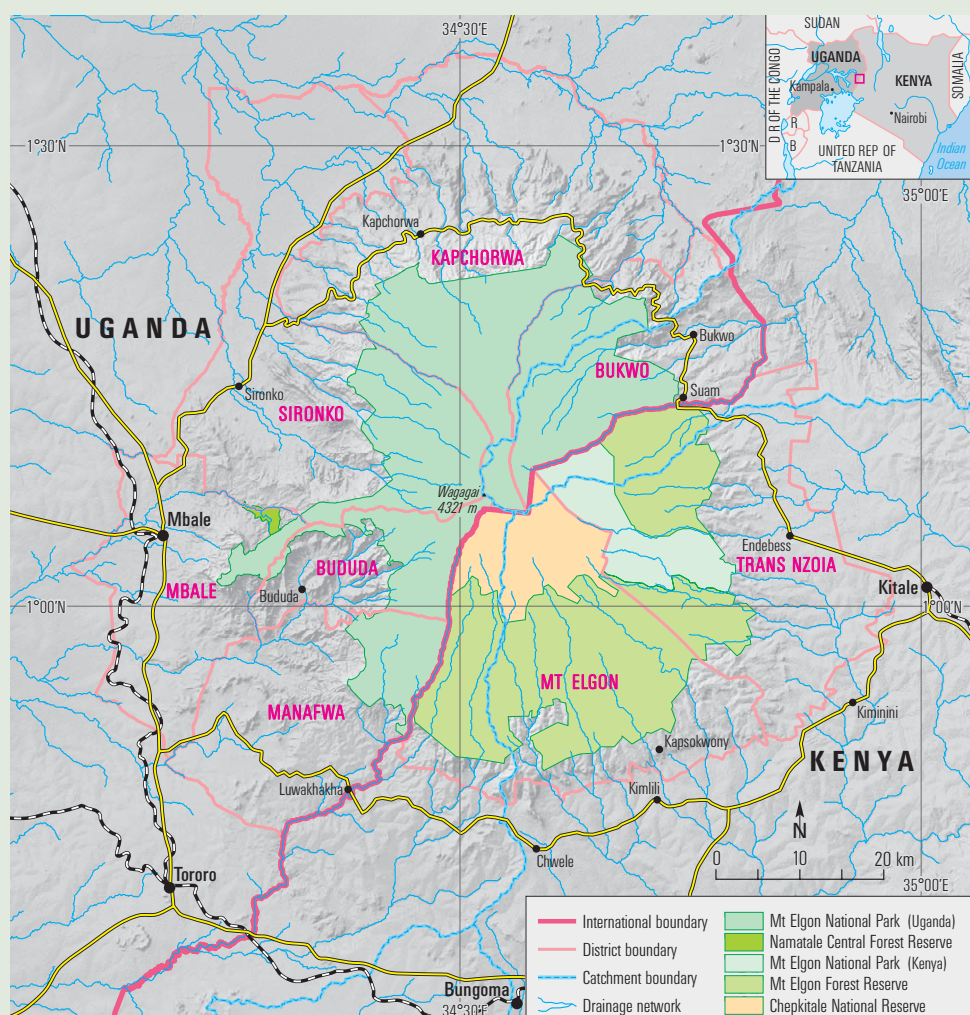


FIGURE 1 The Mount Elgon region. (Map by Andreas Brodbeck, based on maps by authors)

ed areas (Mt Elgon National Park and the Namatala Central Forest Reserve in Uganda; Mt Elgon National Park, the Trans-Nzoia Forest Reserve, the Mt Elgon Forest Reserve, and Chepkitale National Reserve in Kenya), open areas, and other categories of land use without conservation status. The key values of Mt Elgon are presented in the form of natural heritage, biodiversity, water catchments, agricultural base, and tourism. Because of its value and uniqueness, Uganda and Kenya are in the process of nominating Mt Elgon as a Transboundary Biosphere for recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Threats to the multifunctionality of the ecosystem

The total population of all the districts around the Mt Elgon ecosystem is approximately 2 million people, with different ethnic backgrounds. The growth rate of the population is high (2.3–4.3%). Per capita landholdings are small—approximately 0.8 ha on average—and most households are poor. People in the Mt Elgon area are predominantly peasant farmers involved in crop production and animal rearing. This takes the form of both small-scale commercial and subsistence farming. Other economic activities include beekeeping, lumbering, and poultry keeping.

Pressure on the Mt Elgon ecosystem is thus very high (Figure 2). This leads to encroachment on protected areas and forest reserves on the mountain, as well as cultivation of ecologically fragile areas such as steep slopes, swamps, and river-

banks, as well as cases of conflict over land and other natural resources. In the long term, this jeopardizes the multifunctionality of the Mt Elgon ecosystem.

A regional ecosystem conservation program

The Mount Elgon Regional Ecosystem Conservation Programme (MERECF) is a four-year (2005–2009) transboundary natural resource management program of the East African Community (EAC). The EAC is a regional intergovernmental organization of the republics of Kenya, Uganda, and the United Republic of Tanzania, with Burundi and Rwanda expected to join in June 2007. MERECF is funded by the Kingdom of Norway. IUCN (The World Conservation Union) is providing the technical and managerial support to the program, while 19 institutions from both Kenya and Uganda are implementing the program. The key challenge of MERECF is to manage and develop the natural resources of the Mt Elgon ecosystem base in order to meet the increasing demand for livelihoods while ensuring that development is sustainable.

Participatory planning approach

In a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cooperation on Environmental Management between Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (upgraded to the Protocol on Environment and Natural Resources, and awaiting approval by the Heads of State Summit) signed in 1998, the Partner States have committed themselves to promoting public awareness programs and access to information, as well as measures to enhance public participation in environmental and natural resource management issues. Based on this MoU and other national policies and laws, MERECF was designed between 2001 and 2005. The participation of beneficiary communities and institutions active in the Mt Elgon ecosystem from the earliest planning stages was therefore perceived as the best strategy to ensure the long-term success of MERECF and its smooth integration into national and local government development plans, work plans, and budgets in both Kenya and Uganda (Figure 3). Com-

FIGURE 2 Mount Elgon National Park boundary in Uganda and neighboring agricultural area with high population growth that exerts pressure on park resources. (Photo by Agni Klintuni Boedhihartono)



munities and district-level stakeholders were involved in the situation analysis and prioritization of issues that MERECP would focus on. Views generated from these consultations fed into technical discussion involving districts and central government agencies managing the protected area components of Mt Elgon.

The goal of this lengthy and careful planning process was to generate information from diverse stakeholders and to solicit priority areas for consideration for MERECP. Specific objectives for stakeholder involvement in the design of MERECP included the following:

- Demonstrate openness and accountability in the design of the program;
- Identify priority areas for consideration in the design of the program;
- Tease out cross-border issues on which to hinge the proposed program;
- Pilot a range of activities, particularly those of a regional character;
- Define the institutional and decision-making structures for the coordination of MERECP implementation.

Strengthening institutional collaboration

The innovations, drivers and factors that have steered the planning and implementation of the MERECP program include:

1. *Planning for regional level actions that would integrate management of the Mt Elgon ecosystem into broader national and regional development frameworks.*

MERECP objectives were integrated into various development plans, such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers for Kenya and Uganda, management plans for the protected areas (Mt Elgon national parks and forest reserves), and many other regional and national strategies.

2. *Informed planning, including implementing small-scale pilot activities that aimed at testing the regional approach and generating baseline information.* The planning design involved two phases:

- The pre-inception phase, which aimed to establish baseline information in consultation with local government authorities, technical departments, community-

based organizations (CBOs) and NGOs, on issues and priorities in conservation and development of the Mt Elgon ecosystem. These consultations were extended to cover national and regional levels with the intention of securing commitment to one regional program for the ecosystem.

- The inception phase, during which additional baseline studies were conducted to update the information base and to inform planning for implementation. The complex nature of the program was tested in order to assess its applicability in the face of the trans-boundary nature of the program. This helped define an implementation framework that includes a 3-tier decision-making process, with specific terms of reference. It entailed decision-making at the bilateral level between the EAC and the Kingdom of Norway, the Program Policy Steering Committee, and the Coordination Committee, consisting of representatives from all implementing institutions.

3. *Brokering and convening governmental, non-governmental, private sector, and academic/research institutions, regional bodies, and local people into one action plan.* One of the conspicuous innovations of this program design and implementation was the development and implementation of an intergovernmental program by an NGO. IUCN conceived and led the development and negotia-

FIGURE 3 Discussion with local people in Tuikat village, Mount Elgon, Uganda. (Photo by Agni Klintoni Boedhihartono)



tion of the program, secured ownership by the governments of Kenya and Uganda, and concluded the program design with a regional economic block, the EAC. Consequently, MERECP is a joint and collaborative action, involving all stakeholders without diplomatic, political, or national sovereign limitation to its objectives and implementation (Figure 4).

4. *Developing a regional implementation model and tools that ensure common procedures for implementation across all implementing institutions and at different levels.*

Because of the uniqueness and complexity of involvement of many stakeholders in MERECP, tools and procedures were developed to enhance its implementation. The tools and procedures are a hybrid of governmental, non-governmental, and intergovernmental processes and procedures, applicable to all implementing institutions across the board.

Initial achievements of MERECP

Though MERECP implementation only began in October 2005, significant changes have become manifest. These include the following:

- *Collaboration between and among the implementing institutions:* collaboration has been enhanced through information sharing, joint planning, and activity implementation. This includes joint patrols of protected areas by the protected area institution (Figure 5), preparation of work plans and budgets—which brings together all the implementing institutions—and engaging in political processes, bringing

together local councilors and Members of Parliament from in and around the ecosystem through joint tours, thus enabling them to interact with managers of protected area authorities and other stakeholders. This collaboration has benefited from, and continues to galvanize, political support at local and national levels.

- *Uniform program and activity implementation procedures and systems:* all institutions apply similar implementation systems and procedures. A program implementation manual that was developed and tested during the inception phase has been integrated and applied in all institutions. The manual provides objective and transparent decision-making procedures on MERECP work plans, budgets, and reports; detailed systems and procedures for personnel, financial procurement, asset management, and coordination; definition and delineation of responsibilities between the various implementing agencies; and mechanisms for information flows and accountability.
- *Adoption of land management and natural resources production technologies:* the program has fostered land management technologies that provide multiple values and benefits and thus foster adoption by beneficiaries outside protected areas. For example, zero-grazing is promoted as an income-generating activity and at the same time conserves soil and water; or cow waste is used to produce biogas for domestic use and the slurry—a by-product—is used as an organic fertilizer to improve crop yields.

Approximately 1.5 years into the implementation of the program, the outcomes, in the particular institutional successes described above, are becoming manifest. Additionally, activities such as illegal harvesting of forest produce and poaching have been drastically reduced and previously degraded sites within the protected areas have started to regenerate. However, the program has not yet assessed the impact of these successes on the ecosystem and its multiple functions and services. A systemic analysis of the impact of MERECP on the multifunctionality of the mountain ecosystem is urgently needed.

FIGURE 4 Collaboration between program partners (here: representatives of IUCN, MERECP CIFOR, Ecoagriculture Partners, and local Ugandan Wildlife Authority institutions meet in the field) is successful in the Mount Elgon area. (Photo by Agni Klintoni Boedhihartono)



Lessons learned

Sustaining the multifunctionality of mountain ecosystems within national jurisdictions is complex. However, it is even more complex in ecosystems such as Mt Elgon, which transcend national boundaries because of the involvement of many stakeholders with diverse interests. It may seem early to share lessons learned since the implementation of MERECP, but the following lessons regarding the strengthening of institutional collaboration to advance the sustainable management of mountain ecosystems and their multiple functions are worth noting:

- Political support at all levels is critical to the success of transboundary approaches to ecosystem management.
- Program ownership is best achieved if it is responsive to local, national, and regional conservation and development priorities. Ownership enhances acceptance of the program processes and outcomes. In addition, ownership of such a program buys into institutional work plans, budgets, and management plans, because it adds value to ongoing activities rather than being seen as imposed from outside.
- Credible institutional partners are critical to the success of programs such as MERECP. IUCN has for the last 15 years been active on both the Uganda and Kenya sides of the Mt Elgon ecosystem. This long-term visibility creates credibility because people see the continuity of the organization and are able to link it with previous outcomes and impacts. In addition, credibility also arises from tested methodologies and approaches, some of which include the involvement of the beneficiaries in program design and implementation.
- Credible management and coordination tools and procedures are essential for the success of complex programs such as MERECP. In particular, mechanisms for decision-making, coordination, and policy direction of the program are critical. The MERECP Coordination Committee brings together all the focal persons from the implementing institutions, coordinates the implementation, and undertakes monitoring and evaluation of program implementation. The Policy Steering Committee constituted at the ministerial level oversees MERECP implementation, provides strategic direction and policy guidance, and links the program to government ministries and agencies in Uganda and Kenya.
- Strengthened institutional capacities and policy and legal frameworks enable conservation and sustainable development of the transboundary ecosystem by adding value to natural resources and by providing new livelihood options to the people living in and outside the Mt Elgon region.

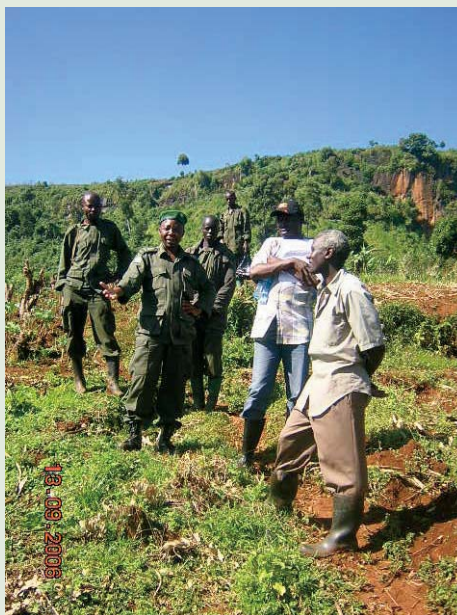


FIGURE 5 Discussing the implementation of activities along park boundaries with Ugandan Wildlife Authority rangers. (Photo by Mathias Chemonges)

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