

# Adopting a Human Rights-based Approach to Ecosystem-based Adaptation

A Contribution To Sustainable Development



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#### **Cover photo**

A UNEP project in Burundi is helping communities living near Lake Rweru to adopt climate-resilient agricultural practices. Credit: UNEP/Essey Daniel.

**Adopting a Human  
Rights-based Approach  
to Ecosystem-based Adaptation:**  
*A Contribution to  
Sustainable Development*

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Credit: UNEP/Hannah McNeish

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Credit: UNEP/Hannah McNeish

## Acronyms

<b>CBD</b>	Convention on Biological Diversity
<b>CSO</b>	Civil society organization
<b>EbA</b>	Ecosystem-based Adaptation
<b>ESS</b>	Environmental and social safeguards
<b>ESSF</b>	Environment and Social Sustainability Framework
<b>EWS</b>	Early warning systems
<b>FPIC</b>	Free prior and informed consent
<b>GCF</b>	Green Climate Fund
<b>GEF</b>	Global Environment Facility
<b>HRBA</b>	Human rights-based approach
<b>HRuF</b>	Human Rights up Front
<b>IPCC</b>	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
<b>JILMI</b>	Jordan Integrated Land Management Initiative
<b>M&amp;E</b>	Monitoring and evaluation
<b>MTS</b>	Medium-Term Strategy
<b>NAP</b>	National Adaptation Plan
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PRA</b>	Participatory rural appraisal
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>SIDS</b>	Small Island Developing States
<b>TE</b>	Terminal Evaluation
<b>ToC</b>	Theory of Change
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNDRIP</b>	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
<b>UNEP</b>	United Nations Environment Programme
<b>UNFCCC</b>	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
<b>UNSDG</b>	United Nations Sustainable Development Group

## International instruments

<i>African (Banjul) Charter on Human and People's Rights</i> (1981)	Entered into force 21 October 1986.
<i>Charter of the United Nations</i> (1945)	Civil society organization.
<i>Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage</i> (2003)	Ecosystem-based Adaptation.
<i>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women</i> (1979)	Environmental and social safeguards.
<i>Convention on the Rights of the Child</i> (1989)	Environment and Social Sustainability Framework.
<i>Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment</i> (1972)	Early warning systems.
<i>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights</i> (1966)	Entered into force 23 March 1976.
<i>International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights</i> (1966)	Entered into force 3 January 1976.
<i>Male' Declaration on the Human Dimension of Global Climate Change</i> (2007)	Adopted 14 November 2007.
<i>Paris Agreement</i> (2015)	Entered into force 4 November 2016.
<i>Rio Declaration on Environment and Development</i> (1992)	Adopted 14 June 1992.
<i>United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples</i> (2007)	Adopted 13 September 2007.
<i>Universal Declaration of Human Rights</i> (1948)	Adopted 10 December 1948.

**Introduction.** Growing  
and inequitable  
climate impacts  
hinder sustainable  
development





# Growing and inequitable climate impacts hinder sustainable development



*“Average global temperatures are projected to reach 3°C above pre-industrial levels at the end of this century, a point at which many fragile and unique systems, for example, will have been heavily deteriorated or even lost ... The [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)] estimates that temperatures will likely be above rather than below the 1.5°C threshold in the near term (2021–2040) even under a very low greenhouse gas emissions scenario, and will very likely cross this marker without strong mitigation action...”*

(UNEP 2021a)

Climate impacts are far outpacing humankind’s efforts to adapt to them. Some impacts are already irreversible, and there are growing fears that the 1.5°C aspirational target of the Paris Agreement will not be met.

Many developing countries and marginalized populations are experiencing disproportionately severe effects on their economies, livelihoods, and cultures, despite their insignificant contributions to the increasing global greenhouse gas emissions that drive global heating. From Vunidogoloa in Fiji to Shishmaref in Alaska, communities are already being relocated due to climate change; globally, women make up 80 per cent of displaced individuals (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2017). The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report has found that some ecosystems have already reached hard limits to adaptation, and that climate change impacts and risks are becoming more complex and difficult to manage (IPCC 2022a).

Climate adaptation approaches that can contribute to poverty eradication and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in an equitable, environmentally sustainable manner have never been more urgent. This publication examines the potential of Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA) to meet sustainable development and human rights-based goals, drawing out lessons from UNEP’s experience to enhance and scale up EbA implementation.

1. What is EbA and how does it contribute to sustainable development and delivering poverty benefits?



# 1. What is EbA and how does it contribute to sustainable development and delivering poverty benefits?



*Transformative adaptation leads to fundamental shifts in States and the interactions of people and nature that address the root causes of vulnerability and lead to long-term solutions. Transformative adaptation is more anticipatory than other climate change responses, such as coping or incremental responses.*

(Fedele et al. 2019a; Fedele et al. 2019b).

EbA is the use of biodiversity and ecosystem services as part of an overall strategy to help people adapt to the adverse effects of climate change (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity [CBD] 2009). The concept of EbA recognizes that, because humans depend directly on the goods and services derived from ecosystems for their well-being, ecosystems play a critical role in helping people adapt to climate change.

UNEP's 2022–2025 Medium-Term Strategy (MTS) recognizes how three interconnected crises – climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution – are reducing opportunities to tackle poverty and improve lives, while also complicating recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The time is ripe to examine the lessons learned by UNEP on how EbA can increasingly contribute to sustainable development.

While the United Nations system has played a leading role in developing and codifying the concept of sustainable development since the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 (**Annex 1**), Indigenous peoples around the world have for generations lived and managed their territories sustainably in line with their traditional livelihoods and cultural practices.

Under its MTS, UNEP intends to drive gender-transformative, multi-stakeholder actions to address the causes of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. This shift towards transformational change, in line with the SDGs, presents complex challenges which require innovative, holistic solutions.

*The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report (2005)* describes four categories of ecosystem services: (i) provisioning services (e.g. food, fuel, fibre); (ii) regulating services (e.g. pollination, hydrological regulation); (iii)



cultural services (e.g. sense of place, tourism); and (iv) supporting services (e.g. soil formation, nutrient cycling). Healthy ecosystems deliver critical goods like fuel, food and fibre, as well as services like flood prevention and cultural amenities that underpin socioeconomic development and human well-being. Protecting and restoring ecosystems to enable adaptation and human well-being through EbA thus presents an avenue for integrated solutions. However, degradation from ongoing human activity combined with geographical constraints (like steep slopes and low-lying areas prone to flooding) has left many ecosystems and their interdependent human communities vulnerable to adverse climate change impacts, such as increased temperatures, rainfall and storm surges. EbA provides a means of harnessing ecosystem services to reduce climate impacts, while

also restoring their functioning. This aligns with the aims of the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021–2030, a global rallying call to “prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide, for the benefit of present and future generations”.

While EbA uses diverse methods adopted by conservation and development approaches, like sustainable natural resource management and community-based adaptation, EbA is distinctive in how it combines biodiversity and conservation approaches with sustainable socioeconomic development into an overarching strategy that supports people to adapt to climate change shocks and risks (Bertram et al. 2017).

**Figure 1. EbA as a subset of sustainable development**

EbA measures include mangrove conservation for coastal protection against increased storm surges; forest conservation and sustainable management to prevent landslides as rainfall intensifies; restoring degraded wetlands to mitigate against growing floods; agroforestry to aid continuous production despite a changing climate; and sustainable grassland management to reduce soil erosion and the impacts of floods (Secretariat of the CBD 2009). EbA can support communities in securing access to basic needs like water and food, in sustainable resource management, and in building ecological resilience (Friends of Ecosystem-based Adaptation [FEBA] 2020). Effective EbA measures vary across ecosystems, human vulnerabilities and specific climate risks (UNEP 2020), and can address climate impacts from both sudden-onset events like flooding from cyclones and slow-onset events like drought.



Source: Bertram et al. 2017

# Box 1

## UNEP's role and experience with EbA



UNEP promotes the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system and acts as a respected global advocate for the environment. UNEP's Climate Change Adaptation Unit, working within the Ecosystems Division, promotes increased knowledge, investment and action in adaptation to climate change, incorporating EbA that is also gender responsive and human rights based, through three main areas of work: (i) catalysing country-level action by accessing international finance for developing country governments and supporting them to execute innovative EbA projects; (ii) distilling evidence for normative policy and programming guidance to catalyse more action on climate change; and (iii) by strengthening networks and dialogue processes between people and groups engaged in adaptation, in particular on EbA. As of 2021, UNEP has implemented over 50 adaptation projects at national, regional, and global levels for more than 50 countries, amounting to over US\$365 million in grant finance, with over 50 projects currently under implementation or under design. This vast body of experience comprises a considerable body of knowledge that UNEP collates, analyses and shares on the global stage. In addition to project reports and associated studies like gender assessments and community consultations, UNEP recently conducted a meta-analysis of five Midterm Reviews and nine Terminal Evaluations (TEs), primarily in Africa but also including Albania and Cambodia, to provide recommendations for enhanced design and implementation.

### EbA and the SDGs

Many of the SDGs have a direct connection with ecosystem health and biological diversity. At the same time, the livelihoods of many of the most marginalized people, whom the SDGs seek to benefit, are highly dependent on ecosystems (Conservation International 2011). UNEP's experience has shown that EbA connects with a large number of the SDG targets and indicators, including the protection of ecosystems, action on climate change mitigation and adaptation, access to basic services, human health and prosperity, and poverty reduction.<sup>1</sup> Each EbA project is additionally designed

to deliver livelihood benefits for poor and marginalized populations, and to advance gender equality by increasing women's economic empowerment and participation in decision-making, as a minimum.<sup>2</sup>

This evidence is backed up by the IPCC *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C* (2018), which found that EbA can form synergies with sustainable development in areas such as mangrove restoration, reducing coastal vulnerability, protecting marine and terrestrial ecosystems, increasing local food security, watershed management, reducing flood risks, improving water quality, and practices such as farmer-managed natural

<sup>1</sup> In an internal mapping of anticipated results of 38 UNEP EbA projects, all were designed to contribute to SDG-13 on climate action, as well as SDG-3 on good health and well-being. At least 13 would contribute to SDG-2 on zero hunger, 17 to SDG-6 on clean water and sanitation, and 12 to SDG-9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure. The project results were not mapped against SDG-1 (no poverty) or SDG-5 (gender equality) – but all projects are designed to integrate these goals to the extent possible.

<sup>2</sup> Other marginalized groups are singled out for special attention in many EbA projects – e.g. Indigenous peoples, the elderly and people living with disabilities.



*“While the value and function of grey infrastructure can be expected to depreciate over time, many green infrastructure solutions can appreciate and function over time as soils and vegetation generate or regenerate.”*

(UNEP 2014)

regeneration in drylands. Ecosystem restoration in the context of the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021–2030 is planned to address climate change and biodiversity loss at significant scales to support all 17 of the SDGs, and to deliver one third of the needed climate mitigation efforts in this decade (UNEP 2021b).

Thus, EbA offers an opportunity to achieve multiple commitments in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in a simultaneous, sustainable and cost-efficient manner. Conversely, as the SDGs include a strong set of indicators and targets to track progress, enhanced identification of the links between the SDGs and adaptation, including EbA, could help to identify trends and gaps in adaptation progress (Global Centre on Adaptation 2021).

There is growing evidence of EbA’s cost-effectiveness and contribution to resilience. A study of 13 EbA projects spread across a range of ecosystems in 12 countries in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America – all areas particularly vulnerable to climate change – found strong evidence of local communities bolstering their resilience, adaptive capacity and protection against climate change impacts (Reid et al. 2019). Community members attributed these benefits to livelihood improvements, crop diversification, knowledge- and capacity-building, reduced disaster risk, and stronger governance, all through the EbA projects. Eleven out of thirteen case studies reported EbA as cost-effective, and almost half of them provided evidence to back up their experiences. All the case studies provided numerous examples of perceived social co-benefits that contribute to building adaptive capacity.<sup>3</sup> EbA has also been shown to provide an economical alternative to concrete-heavy infrastructure deployed for adaptation (**Annex 2**).

Despite its recognized potential, EbA receives less than 2 per cent of global climate funding (Conservation International 2019). More work is needed to further consolidate the evidence base on EbA effectiveness in a consistent fashion (Reid et al. 2019), and to go beyond standard cost-benefit analysis that does not capture local priorities or the holistic assessment of

<sup>3</sup> This is based on the understanding that adaptive capacity is a function of the amount, diversity and distribution of human, social, physical, natural and financial capital



Credit: UNEP/Lisa Murray. A local farmer tends to a fruit tree at his farm in Nzove village in Burundi's Giteranyi commune, where a UNEP project is helping farmers to tackle soil erosion from increasingly extreme rainfall.



benefits from unquantifiable “ways of being” (McNamara et al. 2021). With recent experience, however, a better understanding of the trade-offs, costs and challenges of EbA has emerged compared with earlier reviews (Doswald et al. 2014).

Climate change and pollution in all their forms are increasingly being recognized as grave threats to biodiversity, human health, dignity and well-being. The 2015 Paris Agreement recognizes climate change as

a common threat to all people, and explicitly calls for States to respect, promote and consider human rights alongside climate action, while the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on human rights and the environment in 2017 that refers to ecosystems and biodiversity (A/HRC/34/L.33). But what does this growing emphasis on human rights mean in practice for the efforts to support EbA?

## Box 2

### Mangrove restoration as effective EbA



“If the mangrove is gone, I can say that the nation of Seychelles is gone. That is why we want to protect it for other generations to come.” Thus spoke Victorin Laboudallon, a conservationist and retired grandfather in Seychelles who has dedicated his life to protecting and restoring mangrove forests (UNEP 2019a). And for good economic reasons too: protecting mangroves is 1,000 times cheaper per km<sup>2</sup> than building a new sea wall, and has valuable co-benefits in addition to protection against storm surges and floods by dissipating wave energy. Mangroves currently reduce annual flooding for more than 18 million people; without mangroves, 39 per cent more people would be flooded annually, and flood damage would increase by more than 16 per cent and US\$82 billion annually (Losada et al. 2018).

The trees and roots provide habitat for fish and crustaceans which are valuable sources of high-protein food for coastal communities. Mangroves also store four times as much carbon dioxide as rainforests. But in the past 40 years, global mangrove coverage has halved, highlighting the need for renewed emphasis on mangrove restoration through EbA. UNEP is implementing this approach in several other projects, such as the Large-scale Ecosystem Restoration in the Gambia project. Additionally, as UNEP focuses on people and planet, the adoption of gender equality and a rights-based approach in mangrove restoration projects is recommended as a key driver for achieving environmental sustainability.

2. What is a human rights-based approach and why does this matter for EbA?



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*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, together with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, its two optional protocols (on the complaints procedure and on the death penalty) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and its optional protocol, form what is known as the International Bill of Human Rights.*

Human rights are inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, gender identity, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include procedural rights such as the rights to justice/remedies, access to information and participation; substantive rights such as the rights to life, water, health, housing, food and a healthy environment; and specific rights that certain groups and populations such as women, Indigenous peoples, children, migrants and refugees hold (UNEP 2019b). Human rights are:

- **Universal** – they must be the same everywhere and for everyone.
- **Inalienable** – rights should not be removed, apart from in specific situations and following due process.
- **Interrelated, interdependent, and indivisible** – the improvement of one right promotes the advancement of others, while the deprivation of one right negatively affects the others.

One of the United Nations' great achievements has been to create a far-reaching body of human rights law. Through this ongoing process, countries of the world have increasingly adopted a broad range of internationally accepted rights and established mechanisms to implement them. Human rights law includes specific standards to protect women, children, persons with disabilities, minorities and other people in vulnerable situations from long-standing discrimination experienced in numerous societies.<sup>4</sup>

It is now universally recognized that climate change is hindering the realization of human rights (UNEP 2015a). In 2007, a group of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) came together to adopt the Male' Declaration on the

<sup>4</sup> Some milestones in this process include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage; and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.



*“A human rights perspective on climate change not only provides a stark warning of what is at stake – it also gives us a beacon of hope that we can solve this problem together.”  
– John Knox, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment.”*

(UNEP 2015)

Human Dimension of Global Climate Change, the first intergovernmental statement that “climate change has clear and immediate implications for the full enjoyment of human rights.” The United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) has adopted several resolutions on human rights and climate change; created the mandate of Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change in October 2021; and appointed the first Special Rapporteur in March 2022.

UNEP (2015a) put out a publication on climate change and human rights to highlight the obligations of governments and private actors in responding to climate change, while the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a report (2021a) on Frequently Asked Questions on Human Rights and Climate Change to improve the understanding of the threats to human rights arising from climate change, as well as the associated human rights obligations of States and other duty-bearers.

Serious impacts resulting from changing temperatures, hydrological conditions, ecosystem functioning and agricultural productivity are being felt in many regions. Communities in low-lying coastal areas, particularly in SIDS, and those situated in the rapidly melting Arctic, are already being displaced. Climate change affects all people everywhere; however, the impacts are certainly not distributed evenly. As the IPCC Special Report (2018) found, some of the most damaging impacts of climate change on sustainable development will be experienced by children and the elderly, Indigenous peoples, poor people living in African cities, labourers who are poor, people dependent on agricultural and coastal livelihoods, and people and ecosystems in SIDS and the Arctic.

As affirmed by the HRC, the standards, principles and obligations of human rights can strengthen international and national policymaking on climate change and promote policy coherence, legitimacy and sustainable outcomes (A/HRC/RES/18/22). The adoption of a human rights-based approach (HRBA) serves as the main operational tool for realizing this potential in planning and implementing EbA, in turn providing a conceptual framework for development that is based on international human rights laws and standards, and operationally directed at promoting and protecting

human rights. HRBA seeks to analyse inequalities that lie at the heart of development problems, and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress (OHCHR 2006a). There is an intrinsic rationale for a HRBA, as it is the right thing to do, morally and legally; and an instrumental rationale, as HRBA leads to better and more sustainable human development outcomes.

As rights are universal to all human beings, a HRBA entails identifying those who hold rights (rights-holders) and those who hold power (duty-bearers), such as States and businesses. Under international human rights law, States are the primary human rights duty-bearers, and have a legal obligation to respect, promote, protect and fulfil human rights in a non-discriminatory manner.<sup>5</sup>

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**Credit: UNEP/Lisa Murray. A UNEP project in the White Nile State of Sudan has empowered thousands of women by helping them to grow vegetables in tough climatic conditions.**

<sup>5</sup> National human rights institutions play a crucial role in promoting and monitoring the effective implementation of international human rights standards at the national level. They are essential actors in promoting a rights-based approach to tackling climate change at the national level.



*“The principle of non-discrimination is included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; this means that States have an obligation to ensure that the measures they take to address climate change are implemented in a non-discriminatory manner. These and other agreements also recognize that certain individuals and groups, such as women; persons with disabilities; Indigenous peoples; minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer and intersex plus persons; older persons; and children, may be entitled to special protections.”*

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Many international instruments were drafted before climate change became recognized as a threat to human rights, and so do not explicitly refer to it. However, they do set out relevant rights and obligations, including the right to life, the right to adequate food, the right to water, the right to health, the right to decent work and the right to self-determination.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the concept of intra- and intergenerational equity has always been central to sustainable development – that is, the rights of present and future generations to a healthy environment.

<sup>6</sup> Notably, the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights contains a specific right to a satisfactory environment.



Credit: UNEP/CityAdapt. Building climate resilience of urban systems through Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA) in Latin America and the Caribbean

## The right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment furthers climate action goals



The right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment first appeared at the international level in 1972 in the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (or the Stockholm Declaration and Action Plan for the Human Environment), and has been recognized by over 150 countries.<sup>7</sup> As stated in the report of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations (A/HRC/43/53/Add.1.), the full enjoyment of human rights is fundamentally based on a healthy environment, and the exercise of human rights helps to ensure the protection of the environment. On 8 October 2021, a HRC resolution (A/HRC/RES/48/13) recognized the right to a “clean, healthy and sustainable environment” as a fundamental human right. The Executive Director of UNEP has said that the resolution “is a shield for individuals and communities against a plethora of risks to their health and livelihoods” and “is a historic landmark in our ongoing work for social and environmental justice” (Anderson 2021).

More recently, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment concluded that “a safe climate is a vital element of the right to a healthy environment and is absolutely essential to human life and well-being” (A/74/161). Climate change interferes directly and indirectly with a wide variety of human rights, as well as their effective enjoyment, due to its

impacts on ecosystems and natural resources, physical infrastructure, human settlements, livelihoods, health and security. Climate change is inherently discriminatory at the international level, e.g. for SIDS and developing countries, and for marginalized groups within countries. Climate change also disproportionately affects a range of rights for future generations, including the rights to life, food and a healthy environment.

Recognizing the claims of rights-holders and the obligations of duty-bearers, which is central to HRBAs, provides an opportunity to foreground the HRBA in combating climate change. A HRBA recognizes that actions, policies and projects have different impacts on women, men, girls and boys, and seeks to consider these impacts to ensure the effective enjoyment of human rights for all.

States have an obligation to mitigate climate change and to ensure that all persons have the necessary capacity to adapt to its consequences. The human rights obligations of duty-bearers in responding to climate change include procedural obligations such as the rights to information, to public participation in decision-making, access to justice; as well as substantive obligations relating to adaptation and mitigation (UNEP 2015).

<sup>7</sup> The procedural elements include the rights of access to environmental information, public participation in environmental assessments and decision-making, and access to justice and adequate remedies in cases where the right to a clean and healthy environment is being threatened or violated. The substantive elements include: a safe climate, clean air, safe drinking water and adequate sanitation, healthy and sustainably produced food, non-toxic environments in which to live, work, study and play, and healthy biodiversity and ecosystems.





*The climate crisis is the biggest threat to our survival as a species and is already threatening human rights around the world.*

– United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, February 2020

A rights-based approach has been taken up in the Paris Agreement (2015), the legally binding international treaty on climate change developed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) with the goal of limiting global warming to well below 2°C, and preferably to 1.5°C, compared to pre-industrial levels (UNFCCC 2016). The preamble to the Paris Agreement embraces HRBA, including people-centred development, participation, equity, non-discrimination, self-determination and the right to development. The preamble includes an acknowledgement “that climate change is a common concern of humankind” and that “Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity.”



*We urgently need a renewed social contract, anchored in a comprehensive approach to human rights, in the light of the pandemic and beyond, one that allows many more actors to tackle increasingly complex and interconnected problems.*

– United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, (United Nations 2021)

The various international declarations and agreements on sustainable development and climate change developed through the United Nations are infused with a rights-based approach. For example, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reflects the commitment of United Nations Member States to ensure that “no one will be left behind”, and to “endeavour to reach the furthest behind first”, while the Paris Agreement has strong integration of rights-based language that should guide all climate response – adaptation, mitigation, and loss and damage.<sup>8</sup> United Nations agencies have a pivotal role to play in promoting this, through normative and practical roles that include policy advocacy; technical guidance on project/programme design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E); and evidence generation (including through knowledge co-production) and knowledge dissemination. The Secretary-General’s report stresses that a renewed social contract that centres justice is urgently needed.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Climate change impacts that are permanent and irreversible are categorized as a loss, while damage refers to impacts where reparation or restoration is possible.

<sup>9</sup> Distrust across the world can be seen to emerge from people’s experience of inequality and corruption, which includes their perception that the State and its institutions treat them unfairly.

While the relationship between climate change and human rights is well recognized by the UNFCCC system, it has yet to be sufficiently implemented. At all levels, a HRBA would provide for more effective, inclusive, and sustainable climate policy and action. Adopting

an HRBA would help to operationalize a vital element of the UNFCCC system – the requirement to prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable, which include SIDS, Least Developed Countries, Indigenous peoples, climate migrants, youth and women.<sup>10</sup>

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### UNEP and other United Nations agencies have a role in promoting HRBA to address climate change

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*It is important to underline that human rights are the responsibility of each and every United Nations actor and that a culture of human rights must permeate everything we do, in the field, at regional level and at Headquarters.*

– United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, (United Nations 2020a)

Article 1 of the Charter of the United Nations established human rights as one of the core purposes of the United Nations, and reaffirmed “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women.” Under the Charter, all United Nations agencies, funds and programmes have a duty to promote and encourage respect for all human rights for all, without discrimination (United Nations Sustainable Development Group [UNSDG] 2017).

Yet the nature of the growing and interrelated challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss and increasing pollution – among others that threaten peace and well-being – calls for renewed attention to human rights both as a goal to strive towards and as a mechanism to achieve it. In view of this, the

10 In accordance with the UNFCCC/Paris Agreement Gender Action Plan.

Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights (United Nations 2020a) sets out a transformative vision for human rights (**Box 3**) and identifies climate justice and the advancement of the human right to an intergenerationally healthy environment as a priority thematic area. UNEP is co-leading the area on climate justice alongside OHCHR and UNDP.

Member States through the Fifth Session of the United Nations Assembly on Environment endorsed UNEP's 2022–2025 MTS, which tasks UNEP with advancing “human rights obligations relating to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.”<sup>11</sup>

## Box 3

### United Nations obligations on human rights: the Secretary-General's Call to Action



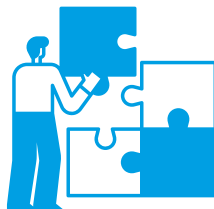
Human rights underpin the work of the entire United Nations system. All United Nations staff members have human rights responsibilities, irrespective of the entity to which they belong, and are expected to respect, protect and promote the human rights norms, standards and principles in international law, the United Nations Charter and United Nations standards and policies (UNSDG 2017). The centrality of human rights to the global system has been clear since the founding Charter of the United Nations, and has been reinvigorated through the process to implement the Human Rights up Front (HRuF) initiative, beginning in 2014. HRuF sought to tell every staff member that they had a role and a responsibility to implement the United Nations Charter's principles, and set in place performance assessment measures for senior staff (Gilmour 2019). Despite positive outcomes, a review of HRuF found that United Nations Country Teams are under-resourced and frequently continue to “dispatch their mandates in a way that emphasizes development cooperation with host States far more than dialogue with the relevant government on issues relating to human rights or security” (Damplo and Saad 2019). Through his Call to Action for Human Rights in 2020, the Secretary-General reaffirmed the urgency of centring human rights across the United Nations system. Focusing on seven thematic areas, the Call to Action recognizes human rights as central to our most pressing issues: the urgent achievement of sustainable development; the protection of all people regardless of their circumstances; tackling gender inequality once and for all; ensuring robust civic space for everybody; creating a healthy environment for future generations; ensuring a safe digital world; and – finally – all pitching in together to make this a reality.

<sup>11</sup> UNEP's work on human rights is also supported by several United Nations Human Rights Council resolutions, which have explicitly welcomed UNEP's environmental rights work. Resolution UNEP/EA.4/Res.17 also provided a mandate for UNEP to promote gender equality and human rights in environmental governance.

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## Key implications of HRBA for EbA and broader adaptation

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In summary, there are several key implications in adopting HRBA for EbA, which are further discussed with examples from UNEP's experience in the following section.

1. Adopting HRBA highlights the importance of addressing the root causes of vulnerability, which may be far-ranging and go beyond what is the central focus of an adaptation project. Therefore, environmental and development agencies may need to work across sectors, expanding beyond the siloed approach to develop effective ways to access the highest-risk groups and engage in a deeper, more collaborative manner in tackling the root causes of problems (OHCHR 2006).
2. The emphasis of HRBA on identifying “rights-holders” and “duty-bearers” provides strong guidance for designing and implementing EbA: as all human beings are “rights-holders”, they are entitled to protection from the negative impacts of climate change, particularly the individuals and peoples most affected by it. In addition, HRBA entails strengthening the ability and accountability of the “duty-bearers” – those institutions that bear responsibility for respecting, protecting and fulfilling rights.
3. Participation, access to information, access to justice and to effective remedies are human rights,<sup>12</sup> and their importance in environmental and sustainable development matters, have been frequently reaffirmed, including by Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. Participation and access to information are not just “boxes to tick”, but essential steps towards empowering people to know and claim their rights, including for equitable climate action implemented through EbA. It is essential for adaptation projects to include mechanisms that promote the realization of access to justice and to effective remedies, for example through grievance mechanisms.
4. Many international human rights instruments emphasize the need for a particular focus on the rights of Indigenous peoples, among other marginalized groups. This is necessary not only from the primary equity perspective, but also because successful adaptation (and mitigation) requires prioritizing human rights advocacy for Indigenous peoples, whose territories comprise 40 per cent of the protected areas globally and who take care of almost 20 per cent of the total carbon that tropical and subtropical forests sequester (218 gigatons). They are therefore primary stakeholders in EbA.

12 As established by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other international human rights instruments.

5. HRBA highlights the interconnections between climate action, development and peacebuilding. Principle 25 of the Rio Declaration states that peace, development and environmental protection are interdependent and indivisible. UNEP and its partners have placed increasing attention on the synergies between EbA and peacebuilding in fragile and conflict-affected environments, and can play a leadership role in strengthening and scaling this up.

At the same time, EbA has a strong role to play in contributing to HRBA. With its focus on restoring ecosystems for natural and societal benefits, EbA proposes a major contribution to the attainment of human rights under a changing climate. As ecosystems provide critical services to many people and their livelihoods, failure to protect vulnerable ecosystems causes adverse effects on the rights of persons reliant on these ecosystems. The array of ecosystem services

includes provisioning services like food and water; regulating services such as erosion and flood control; cultural services in the form of spiritual and aesthetic benefits; and supporting services, which include photosynthesis and the water cycle.

The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report has highlighted the increased evidence of maladaptation – defined as an adaptation that fails in reducing vulnerability and increases it instead (IPCC 2001) – across many sectors and parts of the world since the Fifth Assessment Report. It is important for EbA design processes to avoid creating “lock-ins of vulnerability, exposure and risks that are difficult and expensive to change.” Maladaptation may also worsen existing inequalities, but making HRBA central to EbA design and implementation provides several tools to avoid maladaptation, as explored in section 3.



Credit: UNEP/Georgina Smith. Children at Mukubwe Primary School in Zambia, where UNEP and partners are helping local communities adapt to climate change.

### 3. Human rights-relevant lessons learned from UNEP's programming

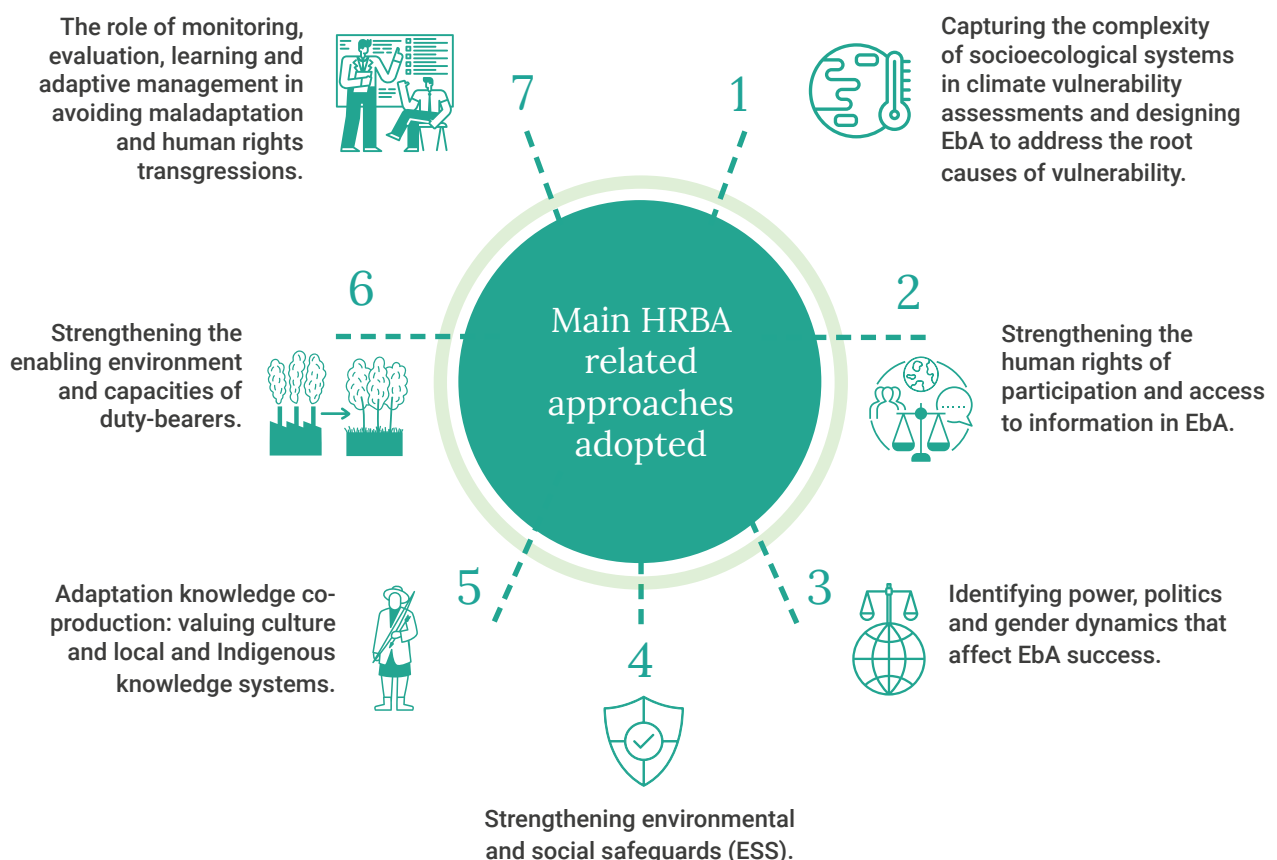


### 3. Human rights-relevant lessons learned from UNEP's programming

Cross-cutting, multidimensional and systems-focused, EbA is well positioned to advance the realization of human rights, if implemented in a coherent and inclusive manner. However, the term is not always fully understood regarding adaptation design and implementation, and experience highlights numerous complexities in implementing EbA that may require skilled management as well as sufficient time and resources to navigate. This section presents evidence from UNEP's EbA programming of how EbA already promotes the integration of human rights into climate action and identifies ways in which better integration of HRBA can make EbA not only more equitable, but also more effective and sustainable.

Although human rights have not been the primary focus of EbA projects, the project intervention theories do consider human rights issues such as the principles of participation and inclusion; approaches such as fairness in design and implementation, and the need to target those who are most vulnerable; and substantive rights like access to food and decent employment through income-generating activities. Analysis reveals seven main HRBA-related approaches adopted to varying degrees by UNEP and partners to further the inclusion of human dimensions into EbA:

**Figure 2. Adopting human rights-based approaches in EbA practices**



These approaches make clear that adaptation that is not based on HRBA could lead to the further abuse of human rights, and likely entrench and/or increase vulnerability to climate change. On the other hand, rights-based, participatory climate adaptation programming will lead to more integrated, effective and sustainable results, while providing a robust mechanism to translate

the four cross-cutting principles in UNEP’s new strategy that reflect a HRBA: (i) human rights, gender equality and women’s empowerment; (ii) leaving no one behind; (iii) sustainability and resilience; and (iv) accountability. Each of the seven approaches listed above can be strengthened by more conscious integration of HRBA, as discussed below.

## 1.

# Capturing the complexity of socio-ecological systems in climate vulnerability assessments and designing EbA to address the root causes of vulnerability



### 1.1 Introduction to the issue

A wide variety of factors contribute to the differential exposure and vulnerability of individuals or societies to climate hazards, including wealth, education, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, class/caste, disability, race, sexual orientation, gender identity and health status. People who are marginalized or discriminated against in social, economic, cultural, political, institutional, historical and/or other ways are often more susceptible to potential harm and possess fewer resources to adapt. As many of these factors may be intersecting, people experience vulnerability to climate impacts in numerous ways. To be effective in the long term, therefore, adaptation interventions must address these intersecting vulnerabilities at the root.

### 1.2 Approaches to reach these HRBA aims

Adopting a HRBA places additional demands on vulnerability assessments and stakeholder engagement processes – which are key HRBA tools – to go beyond the “usual suspects”, often delineated merely as

differential vulnerabilities between a few different “groups”: women and men, and older and younger people. A HRBA calls for a more contextualized and personalized approach to EbA project design and implementation; capturing the complexity of the socioeconomic and cultural situations of different individuals and groups in vulnerability assessment forms an essential element of this. This calls for expanded partnerships across United Nations agencies and other actors. Civil society organizations (CSOs) often have the skills to support a more holistic implementation of EbA that considers the human dimensions of social capital development, including multiple causes of vulnerability, and poverty reduction together with the technical aspects of ecosystem restoration. They frequently demonstrate a comparative advantage over government agencies for activities such as awareness-raising and capacity development, which are instrumental in developing adaptive capacity (understanding and capabilities) of marginalized communities and groups.

Logical, coherent design based on past knowledge accumulated from similar projects is an important step in designing projects to address the root causes





Credit: UNEP/Rwanda Environment Management Authority (REMA). Building the capacity of Rwanda's Government to advance the National Adaptation Planning process

of vulnerability. The Theory of Change (ToC) approach, deployed during project design, can be used to map out the causal pathways from project activities and outputs to outcomes and then impact, factoring in the climate drivers and barriers to adaptation. This can improve EbA efficiency and effectiveness, so that it can deliver on its integrated socioecological aims.

Supporting adaptation programming in areas of need that are more challenging to work in is an important strategy to further a HRBA to climate change, because these areas are frequently neglected, despite high levels of climate risks and vulnerabilities, due to the formidable logistical challenges of implementation. This neglect compounds the inequalities already inflicted on these places from climate risks they experience due to historical greenhouse gas emissions from developed countries. A good example is the case of SIDS, which are already exposed to the extreme consequences for health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security and economic growth entailed in the global warming of 1.5°C (IPCC 2018).

### 1.3 Lessons learned

A recent analysis of the effectiveness of internationally funded adaptation interventions found that the lack of an in-depth understanding of the vulnerability context was one of four main mechanisms leading to maladaptive outcomes (Eriksen et al. 2021). While this analysis was not confined to EbA and considered a range of adaptation approaches, its findings are universal and applicable to all development projects.

UNEP's meta-analysis emphasizes the importance of mapping out the causal pathways during project design, from outputs to outcomes, and linking them to expected impacts that factor in the climate drivers, assumptions and barriers to adaptation experienced in the project localities, using the ToC approach. A solid understanding

of the causes of the issues to be addressed is essential to the ToC process. For example, when planning the reforestation in a 2011–2016 Comoros water resources management project, sufficient attention was not given to analysing the causes of the land's deforestation. As a result, most of the reforestation made on communal land had been lost at the time of the TE.

Evidence has emerged that an essential element of climate resilience-building in fragile and conflict-affected zones has been combining resources and forming coalitions for action and policy that include CSOs, local community members, business leaders, non-governmental organizations and international organizations. This highlights the importance of broad-based partnerships that include civil society in addressing the root causes of vulnerability and progressing the social dimension of EbA programming.<sup>13</sup>

EbA projects need to find the right balance between having a defined focus that allows for effective adaptation and having a sufficiently integrated and holistic intervention that supports sustainability. For example, an EbA project may be considered to have a different focus to a land tenure project, but if there are undefined property rights, reforestation may not be successful. Therefore, the EbA project will need to forge partnerships to address these critical issues in project design, if it is unlikely that they will be covered separately by other actors. As the Sixth Assessment Report has found, multisectoral adaptation initiatives that address socioeconomic inequalities, and include differentiated and cross-cutting actions to address climate risk, are likely to be more feasible and effective (IPCC 2022a). This also requires more time, resources and skills, as the following quote indicates:

<sup>13</sup> While partnerships with non-governmental organizations for restoration may work well, they may not always be cost-effective. This was demonstrated in Madagascar, where, due to low quality of reforestation by a public agency, local non-governmental organizations – which were on the ground and already familiar with the context – were instead contracted to do the work. However, this solution, although technically sound, did not prove to be cost-effective.



*The more transformative the adaptation strategy, the higher the human inputs and re-organization required – along with significant investments of time, money and skills.*

(Conservation International 2019)

## 1.4 Good practices

Fragile and conflict-affected situations present unique challenges in addition to considerable needs. It is not that these needs are unmet, but rather that they may not be adequately met.<sup>14</sup> UNEP and partners have developed an integrated climate-fragility risk assessment procedure and a range of operational tools, which they have successfully deployed in Nepal and Sudan. The climate-fragility risk assessment conducted in Sudan identified interlinked entry points for addressing climate-fragility risks, which led to targeted actions on conflict resolution, as part of the adaptation strategy (**Box 4**).

### Box 4

#### Using UNEP's methodology for addressing climate-fragility risks in Nepal and Sudan



Financed by the European Union's "Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace" (IcSP), UNEP's project on climate-fragility risks in Nepal and Sudan (2017–2021) aimed to strengthen the resilience of crisis-affected countries by integrating climate change in peacebuilding efforts and reducing conflict risks in climate programming. It developed an approach and tools for broader use in conflict-affected adaptation initiatives, including a Guidance Note for strategies and projects that seek to increase resilience by linking climate adaptation, peacebuilding, and sustainable livelihoods. An associated Toolbox includes a conflict sensitivity checklist, guiding questions for inclusive planning, various mapping approaches, and conflict analysis tools such as a conflict tree and using force field analysis; and basic principles of conflict- and gender-sensitive M&E, including how to measure adaptation and peacebuilding results. Sudan, which is affected by persistent conflicts and has a fragile political situation, is experiencing an intensifying aridity and drought with no projected reduction (World Bank 2020).<sup>15</sup> The climate-fragility risk assessment conducted in 600 households in the Wadi El Ku area identified two interlinked entry points: (i) improving capacities to cope with and adapt to climate/environmental change, particularly apropos water and agriculture; and (ii) improving the management of its knock-on effects on livelihoods and governance. The assessment led to, inter alia, community-based training workshops on conflict resolution mechanisms for farmers and pastoral communities, and for community forest management (Foong, Pohl and Rüttinger 2020).

14 The Global Environment Facility, for example, invests more than one third of its global portfolio in countries affected by major armed conflict, but did not, as of 2020, have specific procedures for designing and implementing projects in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

15 Sudan has warmed by 0.8–1.6°C from the 1960s to the first decade of the twenty-first century, with summer temperatures in the north often rising above 43°C.

An example of a detailed ToC that factors in the climate drivers and how they interact with non-climate drivers of vulnerability, such as structural poverty, can be found in the design of the Madagascar coastal EbA project. Non-climate factors that exacerbated climate vulnerability and low adaptive capacity included poverty, high population densities and rapid urbanization, over-reliance on and mismanagement of rain-fed agriculture and natural resources, limited use of adaptation technologies, and an inadequate legislative framework to deal with climate threats. The project strategy was consequently developed to accommodate and address the climate and non-climate factors.

UNEP's work has demonstrated how disparate actions that are well sequenced can reinforce each other and produce positive outcomes for social development,

while incorporating elements of HRBA. For example, in the EbA in Mountain Ecosystems project (**Box 5**), initial rapid assessments and implementation of "no regrets" measures that delivered tangible benefits laid the basis for more in-depth vulnerability assessments that enabled the validation, redesign or elimination of early measures and the scaling up of evidence-based EbA, which in turn provided leverage for increased financing and policy integration of EbA.

As a good practice to reduce the risk of maladaptation, the project design team could develop scenarios to spell out how maladaptation could result from planned project activities and then refine the project strategy in response. The maladaptation scenarios should be based on sound, inclusive and disaggregated vulnerability assessment, as well as stakeholder engagement.



Credit: UNEP/Hannah McNeish. Students tend to a vegetable garden set up at a school in rural Cambodia where UNEP and partners are helping communities adapt to climate change and diversify their farming methods and diets.

## Box 5

### Good practice in planning for EbA through a global mountain ecosystems project



The Ecosystem-based Adaptation in Mountain Ecosystems project, funded by the International Climate Initiative, was implemented from 2011 to 2016 through UNDP, UNEP and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, in partnership with the Governments of Nepal, Peru and Uganda. Mountain ecosystems experience increasing temperatures that melt glaciers and snowpacks, bringing flooding, frequently followed by drought; increasingly frequent landslides follow more intense rainfall, devastating remote agricultural villages. Mountain people tend to be among the world's poorest and most marginalized populations, facing challenges related to elevation, topography and climate compounded by discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and more.

A two-phase process was used in this project (UNDP 2015). Firstly, initial rapid participatory assessments increased understanding of the linkages between climate change, ecosystems and livelihoods, and set the stage for the early implementation of “no regrets” measures such as “grey-green” water infrastructure and promoting alternative livelihoods that yielded tangible and visible environmental and social benefits and helped secure local commitment and ownership. This allowed the case to be made for implementing broader, scaled-up EbA measures at the landscape level, such as watershed restoration, sustainable grassland management, reforestation, and soil and water conservation, alongside environmental benefits that included enhancing water provision, reducing soil erosion and increasing vegetation. Social benefits included enhanced food security, access to clean water, strengthened local organizational and technical capacities, and the empowerment of women and disadvantaged groups. Economic benefits included increased productivity, new sources of livelihoods and increased income. More in-depth vulnerability and impact assessments helped frame EbA options in a climate change adaptation context by assessing available projections of anticipated climate impacts at regional and local scales. Undertaking more detailed vulnerability and impact assessments enabled the validation, redesign or elimination of early “no regrets” measures and a shift towards evidence-based EbA measures.

## 2.

# Strengthening the human rights of participation and access to information in EbA



*Three central procedural elements of the right to a healthy environment are the rights of (i) access to environmental information; (ii) public participation in environmental assessments and decision-making; and (iii) access to justice and adequate remedies in cases where the right to a clean and healthy environment is violated or abused.*



Credit: UNEP/Lisa Murray. In Mangatsiotra village in Madagascar, a UNEP project is teaching local communities how to make handcrafts from a climate-resilient local reed known as rambo.

### 2.1 Introduction to the issue

A central tenet of a HRBA is that the most vulnerable and/or disenfranchised segments of the population are centred in discussions throughout all the stages of the decision-making and conception of projects affecting climate change, from the planning to the M&E stages. Not only access to, but also capacities for meaningful participation, are essential under HRBA. This means that informed participation and stakeholder engagement are important procedural human rights.

### 2.2 Approaches to reach these HRBA aims

There is consistent evidence from UNEP's practice that a participatory approach contributes to the success of an EbA project by conferring greater ownership of the project on the part of more stakeholders. Moreover, involving a wide range of stakeholders, including local communities and those who would benefit from the project, is important for successful project implementation, particularly where long-term impact depends to a large degree on their actions. While engaging the right stakeholders in appropriate ways, through rigorous and disaggregated stakeholder participation, is crucial in project design and throughout implementation, achieving this is often extremely challenging given the limited funds available up front to support project development and what are commonly tight time frames for design processes. UNEP's experience shows that this can be addressed through building flexibility into the project design and allowing for the fine-tuning of the activities in the early stages of the project.

Awareness-raising and capacity development of project beneficiaries prove to be crucial supportive elements in enabling informed participation. While most EbA projects include awareness-raising, it is sometimes considered by the more “technical” specialists – and by some funding agencies – as an activity that pulls resources away from the delivery of “concrete” adaptation benefits. However, growing experience shows that awareness-raising is a necessary step for increased access to information on climate risks and adaptation measures; the enhanced understanding that follows it enables participants to participate meaningfully in adaptation projects and make informed decisions about their current and future livelihood options. This is critical for the sustainability of EbA projects, particularly because long-term benefits require the maintenance of assets beyond the project’s lifespan.

Access to information about climate risks and impacts is an important element of HRBA-infused adaptation, as it affects the ability of individuals and groups to increase their adaptive capacity and maintain or adjust their livelihoods. In the case of extreme events such as cyclones or flooding, functioning early warning systems (EWS) are vital to protect the right to life and other rights.

### 2.3 Lessons learned

Lessons learned show the importance of consistently enabling participation in diverse ways throughout all phases of the project, particularly with respect to engaging district, local and community stakeholders and learning from them. For example, a learning-by-doing approach was used in Rwanda and the Gambia to make sure that the management of the project was sufficiently participatory, and to plan for and ensure strong stakeholder involvement. In Zimbabwe under the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) process, seven training and awareness-raising workshops were held across four districts for groups with heightened vulnerability, including women and children. Awareness-raising is best carried out through comprehensive community

outreach campaigns that include contextualized messaging. Community consultations are also held during project TEs to “ground-truth” project results – as happened under the TE of the Enhancing Climate Change Resilience of Rural Community Living in Protected Areas in Cambodia project, and the TE of the Building the Resilience of Kune-Vaini Lagoon through EbA project in Albania. Adequate human rights-responsive stakeholder engagement necessitates the right “soft” procedural skills and managerial skills within project teams, as well as the “hard” technical skills for EbA.

While involving all relevant stakeholders, it is important to prioritize the highest-risk groups – such as the poorest and most resource-stressed sectors of communities – for project services and assets. This lesson learned from UNEP’s experience coheres with the principles of HRBA. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development guiding principle of leaving no one behind means actively reaching out to marginalized groups to enable their procedural rights, as well as substantive rights that can accrue through project benefits. Project design documents should clearly identify how and to what extent the various groupings of people impacted by the project’s activities will participate, and, at the local level, involve the full range of local groups while prioritizing those most in need.

A key lesson from the experience in Djibouti was the importance of engaging traditional leaders, nomadic and semi-nomadic people in project design and implementation. In Sudan, initiatives were focused on the most marginalized people, including people with disabilities, older people, young people and women.<sup>16</sup>

### 2.4 Good practices

UNEP has developed and used survey tools along with a range of approaches to facilitate strong and inclusive participation at the village and other levels, under its Global Environment Facility (GEF), Adaptation Fund and Green Climate Fund (GCF) projects. The Environment and

<sup>16</sup> In one village, 20 shami (improved) goats were distributed to female-headed households, and have so far given birth to more than 196 kids that have been distributed to other vulnerable families.



*“Every individual has the right to information about climate-related hazards. Indeed, access to information is not simply a liberty right but a welfare right. Early warning is necessary for the enjoyment of basic human rights including the right to life.”*

(UNEP 2015b).



Credit: UNEP/Hannah McNeish. A farmer in a village in the Upper River region of Gambia holds a variety of rain-fed crops that have become increasingly difficult to grow due to climate change.

Social Sustainability Framework (ESSF) discussed under key approach 4 is an overarching tool to enable inclusive participation, among other goals. Good practice tools for social inclusion that can also be used for disaggregated vulnerability diagnosis include frameworks for community consultations that incorporate rights-based questions; and tools for implementation and monitoring developed in response to identified issues/threats. This was the case during the design of the GCF Jordan Integrated Land Management Initiative (JILMI) project, where a specific survey tool and sampling methodology was developed. Stakeholder analysis in the JILMI design followed the interest/influence methodology, through which stakeholders' levels of interest and influence were assessed and thus classified into different types,<sup>17</sup> after which engagement approaches/strategies were developed for each stakeholder category.

Still under design at the time of writing this publication, the JILMI project also highlighted that awareness-raising is needed to establish a very strong linkage between the improvement of livelihoods and the adoption of climate change-based solutions, measures and practices, and that awareness-raising strategies should ideally be based on creative approaches that are co-developed with target groups. In the case of JILMI, the design team recognized that a particular focus was needed on women at the household level, as well as on unemployed youth and small farmers, and identified concerns about the project adopting “conventional” but ineffective awareness-raising approaches and activities. Interactive awareness through in-field experimentation, household demonstrations, group and peer learning, exchange visits, e-learning tools, social media platforms and community-based competitions were identified as being more effective.

In the Gambia, traditional communicator groups were trained on climate change and EbA, while in Nepal, under the Climate and Security project, orientation on climate-fragility risk was carried out in six secondary schools, with more than 272 secondary level students (157 girls) participating in the events. In Antigua and Barbuda, public awareness-raising on climate change and adaptation was conducted through television, radio and social media, with an exhibition space and various events.

<sup>17</sup> Core stakeholders have considerable influence and interest in the sector. Potential stakeholders have high interest in the site but low influence in decision-making. Critical stakeholders enjoy a high level of influence but lack the interest to engage or support and facilitate. Marginal stakeholders lack the interest or ability to influence the sector or the target area.



### 3.

## Identifying power, politics and gender dynamics that can affect EbA success



*“Differentiated climate impacts are further exacerbated for women living in poverty, indigenous women, women belonging to ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious minorities, LGBTI women, women with disabilities, women refugees and asylum seekers, internally displaced, stateless and migrant women, rural women, single women, children, adolescents and older women, who are often affected disproportionately compared to men or other women.”*

(One UN Climate Change Learning Partnership 2022)

### 3.1 Introduction to the issue

Issues around power and politics have always had a significant impact on the outcomes of development projects. This is no different in the EbA arena, where those who can exert more influence leverage access to resources and benefits over people with less sway, who often comprise the more climate-vulnerable and marginalized segments of the population. The IPCC (2022b) notes that “adaptation strategies can worsen social inequities, including gender, unless explicit efforts are made to change those unequal power dynamics, including spaces to foster inclusive decision making.”

UNEP’s 2022–2025 MTS (2021c) highlights that “gender equality and a rights-based approach are key to ending all forms of discrimination and ensuring progress towards environmental sustainability.” In addition to being a stand-alone goal, SDG 5 voices support for the fulfilment of leaving no one behind and for economic growth and sustainable development across all the SDGs, including its environmental goals. Women are more likely to experience the adverse effects of climate change than men due to discrimination, inequality and systemic barriers such as patriarchy, as well as the gendered contrast in views, needs and lived experiences. It is therefore essential to develop targeted ways for involving women in EbA planning and implementation. While gender equality from the perspective of women is well recognized in adaptation planning, HRBA adds greater depth and substance to this point, specifying that all other marginalized or minority groups must also be accorded special attention to ensure equality for all.

Moreover, gender-based violence (GBV) may be an important consideration in designing and implementing adaptation projects from an HRBA perspective. Many environment- and climate-related stressors are risk factors for increased GBV, which harm the well-being of survivors by impeding their adaptive capacity and resilience. In this vein, GBV poses a unique challenge in

the aftermath of disasters (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2015).<sup>18</sup>

### 3.2 Approaches to reach these HRBA aims

Human rights-based analysis provides insight into the distribution of power. Transforming the way in which power is distributed is a central tenet of a HRBA (OHCHR 2006b). Human rights-based analysis identifies groups lacking the enjoyment of their rights, as well as groups that are denying the rights of others; accordingly, it can expose the root causes of poverty and vulnerability. As such, integrating HRBA into EbA design is a means to explore how political and social institutions and processes affect the livelihoods of poor and at-risk people and groups (OHCHR 2006b). Creating opportunities for women and marginalized groups to overcome gendered barriers forms an important step that necessitates considering how the dynamics between genders in households are affected by cultural and faith-based practices. In the summary of their report on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2022), the OECD reaffirms SDG 5:



*“the empowerment and full enjoyment of human rights by all women and girls are universal goals in their own right.”*

Moreover, there is evidence that EbA can be a good vehicle for promoting equitable adaptation: a study of 13 EbA projects found that EbA can be designed as a pro-poor approach to adaptation, as EbA-linked perceived improvements in resilience, adaptive capacity and vulnerability tended to accrue among particularly

marginalized groups of people, including the elderly, children, the poorest, women and Indigenous peoples (Reid et al. 2019).

### 3.3 Lessons learned

UNEP’s experience has highlighted how power and politics, including gender dynamics, interplay with ecosystems and climate change and affect adaptation success. Methodologies such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and other community surveys that use open-ended questions have proven to be important ways to surface issues around power and politics that may otherwise remain hidden but could de-rail EbA interventions if not identified and addressed in design and implementation (as used in Jordan – see **Box 6**).

Equitable distribution of project resources and benefits is integral to advancing gender equality through EbA – and indeed in any development project. UNEP has acted to formalize and strengthen agency-wide gender mainstreaming efforts through its Gender Equality and the Environment policy (UNEP 2015c), the Global Gender and Environment Outlook research study, and by including gender-responsive elements in existing and planned projects. Gender assessments are usually conducted in EbA planning to identify the gender context and differential vulnerability and adaptive capacity related to cultural, religious, political and other aspects; and to design adaptation activities to address constraints. During the design of the GCF project in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, extensive and targeted engagement with women and men through village-level consultations with over 100 participants across nine villages in three provincial capitals led to the development of the Gender and Social Inclusion Assessment and Action Plan, and the Environment and Social Action Plan.

<sup>18</sup> Increased GBV, together with other effects on gender relations, has been correlated with the negative shocks, loss of family members, livelihoods and homes, and increased domestic conflict levels after a disaster.

### 3.4 Good practices

Equitable sharing of project resources was a major concern raised by women during community consultations for the JILMI project (**Box 6**). Projects could fail – as they had in a previous project – in reaching out to women and ensuring their full involvement away from the male-dominated project implementation. Where local and traditional cultural norms favour men’s involvement and benefits over those of women, projects must facilitate a constructive social dialogue between women and men to negotiate the best approaches needed to ensure benefit sharing and the optimal involvement of women without jeopardizing their social relations. This requires the right level of process-related “soft skills” on the part of project staff, as well as asking the right questions in an open-ended fashion, such as “How will your life at home change if you earned more income?” and “What would happen if you started earning more income than your husband/partner?”, which were included in the JILMI questionnaire for participants.

In Sudan, integrating gender into participatory vulnerability and adaptation assessment led to the deployment of gender-specific adaptation actions and livelihood diversification initiatives that focused on addressing the systemic climate-related vulnerabilities and low adaptive capacities of people living with disabilities, women, young people and elderly people. Activities targeting women-headed households in all 43 targeted villages included homestead vegetable gardens, fruit tree seedlings, improved cooking stoves and small livestock (UNEP and GEF 2021).

UNEP is also supporting five highly dispersed Pacific SIDS to implement climate services and EWS (see **Annex 4**). While these activities do not constitute EbA in themselves, they will lay the foundation for effective EbA and broader adaptation interventions by improving observation and early warning capacities, and providing an evidence base for planning, decision-making and responses that can save lives and livelihoods.



Credit: UNEP/Lisa Murray. Enhancing the resilience of communities living in climate-vulnerable areas of Sudan using ecosystem-based approaches to adaptation

## Box 6



### Community consultations for EbA in Jordan – power and politics

Jordan's hot and arid climate, in which 94 per cent of annual rainfall is lost through evaporation, makes it the fifth most water-stressed country in the world, whose per capita water availability amounts to just 125 m<sup>3</sup>/year. The annual renewable water supply deficit is 416 million m<sup>3</sup> and is projected to decline to 687 million m<sup>3</sup>/year by 2040, due to climate change. This will reduce agricultural production, increase ecosystem degradation and reduce local communities' well-being. JILMI aims to increase the resilience of Jordanian ecosystems and vulnerable communities in the Jordan Rift Valley, Zarqa River Basin and the Gulf of Aqaba through an integrated land and water management approach that entails improved ecosystem management, managed aquifer recharge, rainwater harvesting, floating photovoltaics, and climate-resilient agriculture and diversified livelihoods. A total of 32,800 households (~5 people per household) will benefit from improved quantity and quality of ground and surface water supplies, while 164,000 people will benefit from enhanced climate resilience due to restored ecosystems delivering more goods and services. The project will increase water resources by 8.22 million m<sup>3</sup> by project closure, equivalent to US\$48.5 million in installed dam capacity.

A PRA survey carried out during project design among 179 respondents (92 of whom were women) revealed several issues relating to community politics and power dynamics. The survey tool included open-ended questions, such as "What aspects of the project excite you? What aspects of the project worry or concern you? Do you think that the project is fair and inclusive to all the host communities? If not, how do you think that can be improved?", in addition to questions on existing climate impacts, responses, sources of support, and more. The open-ended questions led to valuable and specific concerns being raised on power and politics within the localities, including the possible absence of fairness, equity and transparency in the distribution of project benefits and opportunities, especially for women; conceivable mismanagement of project funds; and the high potential for conflict between the project and local communities during implementation. The survey considerably influenced project design, resulting in a stronger oversight role for watershed management committees; a set of Standard Operating Procedures on working with communities to be included in any contract with technical partners, consultants and contractors; a post for a full-time Safeguards Officer; additional budget for community outreach; and activities added to the Gender Action Plan, Stakeholder Engagement Plan and Social Risk Management.



Credit: UNEP/Essey Daniel. A UNEP project in Burundi is helping communities living near Lake Rweru to adopt climate-resilient agricultural practices.

## 4.

# Strengthening environmental and social safeguards and redress mechanisms



### 4.1 Introduction to the issue

Access to justice and adequate remedies in cases where a human right – such as the right to a healthy environment – is being threatened or violated is itself a procedural right and a cornerstone of an HRBA. Robust human rights-based social and environmental safeguards that are closely monitored are an important HRBA tool to incorporate social and environmental integrity. They not only provide a mechanism to incorporate the principles of equity, stakeholder participation and sustainability into EbA design, but also provide the means to operationalize the procedural human rights of access to justice and adequate remedies for rights infringement. Not only must rights-holders be meaningful participants in and primary beneficiaries of climate action, but they must also have access to effective remedies. This is where grievance redress mechanisms specifically to protect local communities and Indigenous peoples come in.

### 4.2 Approaches to reach these HRBA aims

Having strong safeguards and accountability mechanisms in place is as important for sound project design and sustainability as it is for the meaningful participation of affected persons, Indigenous peoples and local communities. With adequate resourcing, UNEP's ESS policies and procedures<sup>19</sup> are an important means of integrating HRBA into EbA programming to ensure it is effective and does not otherwise harm people or their environment, for example through displacement and the destruction of livelihoods as well

as the lack of meaningful and informed participation. Through the ESSF, UNEP's work is guided by four principles: (i) human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment; (ii) leaving no one behind; (iii) sustainability and resilience; and (iv) accountability. The principles are expected to inform all of UNEP's work and are to be applied by all projects and programmes; as well as eight Safeguard Standards, which reflect UNEP's "do good" and "do no harm" commitments.<sup>20</sup>

ESS screening is conducted to identify the risk category that the components of the proposed project or programme will fall into. The scope and depth of the environmental and social assessment that follows on from screening is proportional to the level of risks and impacts identified during screening, in line with the ESSF standards and organizational policies. An Environmental and Social Management Plan is required for most project categories.

### 4.3 Lessons learned

UNEP's Gender Policy and Strategy marked a new stage in the promotion of social safeguards in UNEP programme and operational activities. Nevertheless, the agency has identified the need for additional understanding – of the importance of promoting HRBA in the agency's work – to be developed on the part of international staff and those in project management units, including through the ESSF, and regularly carries out safeguarding training for UNEP staff to achieve this.

<sup>19</sup> The term "environmental and social safeguards" is used by development institutions, international treaties and agencies to refer to policies, standards and operational procedures designed to first identify and then try to avoid, mitigate and minimize adverse environmental and social impacts that may arise during the implementation of development projects.

<sup>20</sup> These are: (i) biodiversity conservation, natural habitats, and sustainable management of living resources; (ii) climate change and disaster risks; (iii) pollution prevention and resource efficiency; (iv) community health, safety and security; (v) cultural heritage; (vi) displacement and involuntary resettlement; (vii) Indigenous peoples; and (viii) labour and working conditions.

Grievance redress mechanisms are evolving at the project level alongside several international finance institutions having installed independent accountability mechanisms, such as the GCF's Independent Redress Mechanism, related procedural requirements of the Adaptation Fund, and the GEF's grievance mechanism.<sup>21</sup> UNEP's Stakeholder Response Mechanism provides the means for people to submit complaints directly to UNEP if they believe they have been adversely affected by project activities of UNEP-funded projects and programmes. It thus provides a mechanism to remedy unintended potential or actual impacts from project actions that have not been anticipated in project design but arise from the complex implementation realities. This is done in a fair, transparent, neutral and considerate manner. The Stakeholder Response Mechanism complements local grievance redress processes and mechanisms established for UNEP projects and programmes, which are usually the first point of contact. A lesson learned by UNEP is that project websites should ideally list all the available grievance mechanisms so that complainants can choose the most appropriate.

While greater emphasis has been placed on climate mitigation responses that risk human rights violations if not properly implemented, the risks are real for adaptation programming as well. REDD+ programmes (Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation and Fostering Conservation and Forest Carbon Stock), which incentivize the restoration and maintenance of forests, can lead to expropriation of land and displacement of people, and a range of negative impacts including cultural rights violations against Indigenous peoples, who have strong historical and spiritual ties to their ancestral lands. As adaptation implementation is scaled up, increased attention to these issues in EbA planning must accompany the strengthening of safeguarding policies and remedies to reduce risks and ensure more equitable and sustainable adaptation.

#### 4.4 Good practices

Within the scope of the ESSF, UNEP has innovated some ESS processes and implemented practical examples that have considerably enhanced programming from an HRBA perspective, while emphasizing gender equality and women's empowerment and ensuring the inclusion of marginalized people. Risk identification and refinement, as well as risk management actions, achieve the best results when engaging the project task managers, project consultants, stakeholders, executing partners and safeguards adviser team. Engaging safeguards advisers during the project development phase on risk types and levels will help projects avoid or reduce safeguarding risks.

A specific good practice example concerns the social and environmental safeguards process in South Sudan, the world's newest country, where droughts, floods and deforestation are increasing tensions over access to natural resources. These risks are threatening the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people. Community consultations were carried out to assess the environmental, social and economic risks and to provide a platform for local communities to participate in the project design, which proved critical in helping avoid or minimize harm to people and the environment through project activities (UNEP 2018a). UNEP also carried out training for government staff on safeguards, HRBAs and risk identification, which transformed the nature of the conversation, as the duty-bearers reached the understanding that, for effective and equitable EbA, HRBA and the safeguarding process are essential.

<sup>21</sup> At a more macro level, the Paris Agreement currently does not provide a judicial mechanism for persons claiming to have their rights violated by projects aimed at reducing carbon emissions



Credit: UNEP/Lisa Murray. Funded by the Adaptation Fund, a UNEP project in Madagascar is developing climate-resilient rice farming practices to help the farmers adapt to climate change.



## 5.

# Adaptation knowledge co-production: valuing culture and local and Indigenous knowledge systems



*Article 7 of the Paris Agreement acknowledges that adaptation action should follow a country-driven, gender-responsive, participatory and fully transparent approach, taking into consideration vulnerable groups, communities and ecosystems, and should be based on and guided by the best available science and, as appropriate, traditional, local and Indigenous peoples' knowledge systems.*

### 5.1 Introduction to the issue

Culture, along with local and Indigenous knowledge systems<sup>22</sup> and the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples over their natural resources,<sup>23</sup> must be protected as fundamental human rights, notably due to their essential role in enabling sound, locally driven development in global climate responses. These commitments are codified in international human rights law and reflected in national legal instruments, but in practice are lacking. Less than 1 per cent of climate finance from developed nations supports Indigenous and local community tenure security and forest management – itself a serious equity issue (Rainforest Foundation Norway 2021). Despite this, Indigenous and tribal territories where collective land rights are formally recognized have considerably lower deforestation rates (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and Fund for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean 2021), demonstrating that Indigenous peoples and local communities have an ongoing and historical role in safeguarding natural ecosystems.

### 5.2 Approaches to reach these HRBA aims

In the context of the global zero-carbon transition required, all actors must respect the principle of free prior and informed consent (FPIC) that is required through the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in project design, so that the human rights and authority of Indigenous

<sup>22</sup> Indigenous knowledge refers to the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings.

<sup>23</sup> Resource extractive industries critically affect Indigenous communities through land loss, environmental damage and harmful social phenomena.

peoples and local communities are protected.<sup>24</sup> EbA has an important role to play in protecting the rights of Indigenous peoples and traditional local communities, as it seeks to restore ecosystems and ensure greater benefits from this process, thus actively working against the conversion of natural ecosystems that can undermine the livelihoods and even the existence of these peoples.

UNEP's ESSF coheres with relevant international human rights agreements such as the UNDRIP, including in the principles of FPIC and self-government.

### 5.3 Lessons learned

Indigenous and local knowledge and cultural heritage play an acknowledged role in adapting to climate change, as these knowledge systems underpin adaptive capacity through "the diversity of indigenous agro-ecological and forest management systems, collective social memory, repository of accumulated experience and social networks" (Hiwasaki et al. 2015).<sup>25</sup> The loss of Indigenous and local knowledge due to climate change, globalization and lifestyle changes undermines this role; climate change specifically is having detrimental impacts on Indigenous socioecological systems, encompassing both tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Pearson, Jackson and McNamara 2021). Successful long-term adaptation that integrates human rights also requires recognizing and protecting environmental defenders (**Annex 1**).

A related point concerning local adaptation knowledge, and one which is a frequent cause for concern in EbA projects, is the necessity of limiting access to resources during ecosystem restoration periods. Whether community members understand the need for this or not, they may prioritize the well-being of their livestock, which may include access to animal drinking sources such as streams and natural springs. Suitable and agreed-upon alternatives or compensation arrangements need to be developed through negotiation with local resource users, and formally adopted before the commencement of any field interventions.

### 5.4 Good practices

Despite their vulnerability to disasters and climate change, societies in the Pacific Islands have used long-standing methods for managing the burdens of climate and disasters using traditional practices and coping mechanisms, such as community-level EWS, natural resource management, weather pattern interpretation and information dissemination. These are complemented by intra-household practices like food preservation and housing construction. Through a participatory process, the Pacific GCF programme (**Annex 1**) will map out the use of local information and EWS to develop user-friendly and gender-responsive climate services products that are informed by local expertise, artisanal practices and traditional knowledge, while also empowering women to play key roles in addressing climate vulnerability in the most at-risk sectors (UNEP and GCF 2020).

During the community consultations in its design stage, the South Sudan EbA project explored the extent to which relevant Indigenous knowledge was used so that traditional coping and prediction mechanisms could be understood. This was combined with other fruitful lines of inquiry that included questions probing how existing social traditions, institutions, rights, religion and the status of different groups promoted or impeded people's capabilities to take decisions and gain access to resources needed for adaptation.

Some EbA projects have adopted the process of knowledge co-production – which usually refers to substantial collaboration between academics and non-academics, including Indigenous peoples and local communities – in designing and implementing initiatives. Critical skills for this, on the part of development professionals and academic researchers, comprise listening and rigorously examining one's assumptions. The integration of traditional and local knowledge into the forest management plans developed to guide EbA in central and northern Benin provides a good example of knowledge co-production (UNEP 2022b). Maps developed there to zone EbA actions were based on the generating of adaptation options and community-led resource inventories.

24 A just global transition also includes a just transition for fossil fuel-dependent communities; while this goes beyond the scope of this briefing paper, it is nonetheless an essential element of a HRBA to the green transition.

25 This finding was assessed as having "medium evidence" and "high agreement".



*“People often ask how can we integrate Indigenous knowledge into Western science. But framing the question in this way upholds the unhealthy power dynamic between Western and Indigenous scientists. It makes it sound as though there are two singular bodies of knowledge, when in fact Indigenous knowledge – unlike Western science – is drawn from thousands of different communities, each with its own knowledge systems.”*

– Dominique David-Chavez (Sidik 2022)

Regarding limiting access to resources during ecosystem restoration, JILMI (see **Box 6**) used a PRA survey tool during project design for consultations with local communities, which asked, “Will reducing access of communities to ecosystems during restoration have any negative impacts, such as on livelihoods?”, and received targeted responses that could be acted upon before implementation commenced. The responses maintained that restoration should only be undertaken after clear agreements with users who have traditional rights of access and use, and that adequate financial compensation would be put in place by the project during the access limitation period. The Enhancing Capacity, Knowledge and Technology Support to Build Climate Resilience of Vulnerable Developing Countries project – known as EbA South (**Annex 5**) – provides similar lessons on the need for in-depth planning with local communities, to incentivize them and compensate them for land taken out of production during the restoration process (Mills et al. 2020).



Credit: UNEP/Lisa Murray. A farmer in Burundi is planting grass on his farm to stabilize the soil and prevent erosion caused by heavy rainfall. The grass can also be collected to feed livestock.

## 6.

# Strengthening the enabling environment and capacities of duty-bearers



### 6.1 Introduction to the issue

Enhancing the capacity and accountability of the individuals and institutions responsible for respecting, protecting and fulfilling rights is a central tenet of a HRBA. Project actions that develop the institutions and regulatory framework to be more responsive to a rights-based approach have the co-benefit of promoting the sustainability of EbA project interventions. Strengthening the enabling environment and capacities of duty-bearers for HRBA-infused EbA are also essential for scaling up EbA after a project ends.

### 6.2 Approaches to reach these HRBA aims

In addition to empowering rights-holders to claim their rights, awareness-raising and targeted training of government staff at all levels are necessary steps for the development of the capacities of duty-bearers to meet their obligations. Under a HRBA to programming, building responsibility, motivation, commitment and leadership, among other elements, are integral to the capacity development of duty-bearers. Developing these capacities contributes to a more favourable enabling environment for equitable and effective EbA. HRBA also emphasizes the importance of participatory and open policy revision spaces for strengthening the enabling environment.

### 6.3 Lessons learned

EbA projects have experimented with several approaches to strengthening the enabling environment and the capacities of government counterparts – who,

under HRBA, are duty-bearers to development. This has included capabilities for implementing EbA as part of an integrated strategy, to address the underlying vulnerabilities, which very often go far beyond vulnerability to climate risk and include structural barriers such as gender inequality and entrenched poverty due to marginalization.

Projects that have seen a concerted focus on HRBA have reported uncomfortable discussions and reluctance on the part of duty-bearers to embrace this approach. UNEP's experience highlights the need for a strategic approach to consistently sensitize policymakers and government staff – and UNEP staff – to generate a positive cascade of awareness and commitment that can help overcome the challenges that arise from not prioritizing a HRBA. Implementing and executing agencies need to actively promote the realization of human rights in designing and implementing EbA projects and ensure that a sufficient budget and skilled resources are allocated for critical human rights provisions in safeguarding processes. Within countries, a progressive approach is needed that incrementally builds capacities for and commitment to integrating HRBA into EbA at different levels. In the context of climate adaptation programme design and implementation – where there is a discrepancy between national and international laws and between the policies of the international implementing entity and the national executing entity – the more stringent approach is followed during project design. This nonetheless necessitates ongoing sensitization and capacity development on the benefits and legal obligations of HRBA.

**The softer and higher-level skills needed to integrate human dimensions and adequately manage the process side of EbA are not always recognized, valued or developed on an ongoing basis** – especially by and for government counterparts. The EbA South project shows that this has time and cost implications that must be factored into the project budget to ensure that capacity development can be rigorous and iterative. While partnerships with both government and civil society are likely to be essential for sustainable and equitable adaptation, governments are frequently reluctant to work with CSOs in adaptation implementation. As international climate finance is channelled through national governments, this can present a structural barrier to harnessing the power of CSOs to assist with driving the transformation towards more equitable and effective adaptation. UNEP’s experience highlights the need for ongoing advocacy in this regard, based on evidence that demonstrates how the right partnerships with CSOs can unlock more inclusive and sustainable EbA.

#### **6.4 Good practices**

In the Gambia and Rwanda, involving policymakers in different ways – training, workshops, seminars, etc. – was found to lead to political buy-in and country ownership, and to the incorporation of EbA and climate change into policy processes. The participatory approach in Rwanda was also shown to influence national and local policies and planning. HRBA is supported if policies and plans acknowledge disaggregated adaptation needs, especially of marginalized groups, as is the case for the Nepal climate change policy, developed in 2019 under a UNEP-supported NAP process. Many UNEP-supported EbA projects initiate and/or develop subnational institutions to promote gender-responsive, participatory and accountable development. For example, in Nepal under the climate security project, 17 community-level, 11 ward-level and 3 rural/municipal-level institutional

mechanisms were formed to provide a platform for communities and stakeholders to discuss climate change fragility risk, disaster risk reduction and specific resource use competition issues. A potential good practice for building duty-bearers’ commitment to HRBA is to place a concerted and ongoing focus on raising awareness and training local government officials on the benefits of adopting a HRBA in EbA; this in turn could help generate further evidence for the benefits of this approach that could be used in national-level advocacy to drive a more progressive approach.

UNEP’s experience shows that learning-by-doing capacity development results in the ownership of project results and impact. The TE of the Gambia EWS project found that the major strategy adopted for adaptive capacity development was to implement demonstrations and a learning-by-doing approach. Training of technical staff, policymakers, practitioners, communities and media change agents engendered a strong sense of ownership by enabling them to be directly involved in delivering climate information and early warnings (UNEP 2015d).



Credit: UNEP/Hannah McNeish. A farmer in northwest Rwanda plows his fields, where erratic and heavy rains due to climate change are washing fertile top soils downhill. UNEP and partners are helping farmers adapt to climate change by providing better forecasting and climate information from the national to community level in Rwanda.

## 7.

# The role of monitoring, evaluation, learning and adaptive management in avoiding maladaptation and human rights transgressions



### 7.1 Introduction to the issue

For EbA projects, as for all development interventions, it is unavoidable that several factors and uncertainties come into play during implementation. Even if ESS procedures have been developed and vulnerability assessment and stakeholder engagement have been comprehensive, some safeguard risks are very difficult to predict at the outset, such as highly contextualized and “hidden” risks. If not identified rapidly and mitigated, such risks can lead to maladaptation, leaving project participants worse off than at the outset. Such maladaptive processes may result in serious and substantive damage to human rights – for example, the rights to food, water, health, and a healthy environment.

### 7.2 Approaches to reach these HRBA aims


The above discussion highlights the importance of anticipating the risk of maladaptation during project design and developing strategies to reduce this risk. Adopting an adaptive management approach and an iterative, participatory and inclusive M&E system that encourages and deepens a learning approach to project implementation has been shown to have great value. Disaggregated M&E that tracks the impacts of project activities on different vulnerable groups is essential to enabling adaptive management, as project management staff can then monitor targets that are likely to be missed and, accordingly, adjust and approach project activities. They can also be alerted to likely challenges and unexpected impacts on different groups and ecosystems, which can then be addressed before they derail the success of the project. The collection of sex-disaggregated environmental data is recommended

as this supports the analysis of gender-differentiated environmental impacts and outcomes for policy formulation, thereby providing an essential ingredient for achieving environmental sustainability.

Assessing the effectiveness of adaptation responses in general is a well-acknowledged gap (Berrang-Ford et al. 2021), and not something that is limited to EbA initiatives. A systematic review of 1,682 peer-reviewed publications on adaptation in general found that less than 2 per cent of the projects provided empirical evidence that the adaptation actions had reduced climate risk. It must be noted that this analysis was restricted to projects documented in peer-reviewed publications, while most adaptation initiatives at different scales do not make their way into the academic literature. UNEP’s recent meta-analysis of the Midterm Reviews and TEs of adaptation projects, most of which entailed EbA, paints a more optimistic picture of the likelihood of ongoing effectiveness, although longer-term monitoring is needed to verify this.

### 7.3 Lessons learned

Lessons from UNEP’s experience indicate that flexibility in project design and adaptability in project implementation can reduce the risks of uncertainties (UNEP 2015d). Addressing this requires a realistic, open-minded and service-oriented approach on the part of project staff, as part of the adaptive management approach. This is substantiated by the recent IPCC Sixth Assessment Report finding that designing and implementing adaptation that has a long-term view and is flexible, multisectoral and inclusive can avert maladaptation (IPCC 2022a).



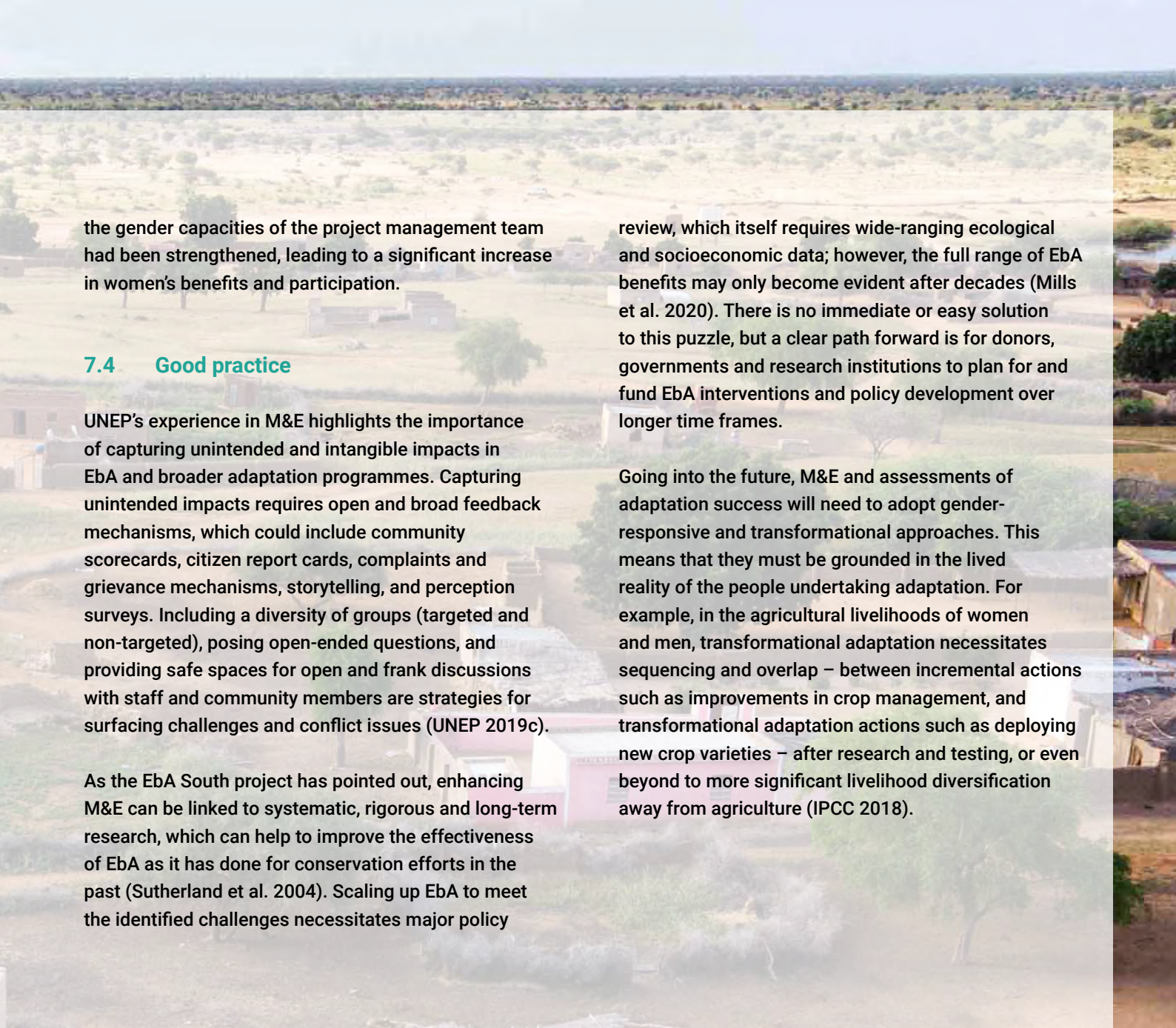
Moreover, as identified in the 2021 Adaptation Gap Report, adaptation planning and implementation may need to factor in more intense climate impacts and risks than those experienced to date (UNEP 2021). The focus on strengthening capabilities for adaptive management as an integral part of EbA implementation will support this new priority. UNEP's experience with EbA provides a motivation for monitoring, evaluation and research to be linked together into a continuous and iterative learning cycle. This must go beyond the internal project sphere to inform and build government ethos and systems for this, as EbA – and HRBA – time frames go beyond the project's lifespan. Monitoring the impact of awareness-raising activities through measuring behavioural change at the individual, group and community levels should be a primary source of information for assessing the overall impact of the project and the potential for its sustainability. However, this needs to be conducted iteratively to enable adaptive management.

Part of the challenge of assessing adaptation success arises from the complexity of the concept, which entails, inter alia, enhanced methods for compiling different forms of evidence. Since it would be difficult to attribute the desired impact of enhanced resilience solely to the actions of the project, outcome mapping needs not

only to focus on measuring the changes in behaviour of project beneficiaries, but also on attribution and contribution of other interventions on these behavioural changes. As Dilling et al. (2019) have pointed out, "Focusing on the capabilities of households and governments to pursue a range of adaptation futures provides a more robust foundation." There is indeed a "vast space that exists between success and failure in climate change adaptation," and so considering adaptation outcomes in a more nuanced way may help to throw light on the sociopolitical drivers and dimensions of adaptation, towards better outcomes for greater numbers of marginalized people (Tubi and Williams 2020). A Results Verification exercise carried out for the MTR of the Gambia EbA project found that, despite strong targets, benefits to women had been very limited to date – for example, in the Central River Division-South region, only 3 of 78 hectares planted with seedlings were owned by women. To remedy the lack of gender benefits, the project appointed a full-time National Gender and Stakeholder Engagement Officer, who has additional support from an International Gender Adviser, including for integration of gender into M&E. Prior to the MTR, the project had commissioned a risk re-assessment, which led to a new gender-related mitigation action plan. This could be implemented once

Credit: UNEP/Lisa Murray. A UNEP project is enhancing the climate resilience of communities living in the White Nile State of Sudan using ecosystem-based approaches.





the gender capacities of the project management team had been strengthened, leading to a significant increase in women's benefits and participation.

#### 7.4 Good practice

UNEP's experience in M&E highlights the importance of capturing unintended and intangible impacts in EbA and broader adaptation programmes. Capturing unintended impacts requires open and broad feedback mechanisms, which could include community scorecards, citizen report cards, complaints and grievance mechanisms, storytelling, and perception surveys. Including a diversity of groups (targeted and non-targeted), posing open-ended questions, and providing safe spaces for open and frank discussions with staff and community members are strategies for surfacing challenges and conflict issues (UNEP 2019c).

As the EbA South project has pointed out, enhancing M&E can be linked to systematic, rigorous and long-term research, which can help to improve the effectiveness of EbA as it has done for conservation efforts in the past (Sutherland et al. 2004). Scaling up EbA to meet the identified challenges necessitates major policy

review, which itself requires wide-ranging ecological and socioeconomic data; however, the full range of EbA benefits may only become evident after decades (Mills et al. 2020). There is no immediate or easy solution to this puzzle, but a clear path forward is for donors, governments and research institutions to plan for and fund EbA interventions and policy development over longer time frames.

Going into the future, M&E and assessments of adaptation success will need to adopt gender-responsive and transformational approaches. This means that they must be grounded in the lived reality of the people undertaking adaptation. For example, in the agricultural livelihoods of women and men, transformational adaptation necessitates sequencing and overlap – between incremental actions such as improvements in crop management, and transformational adaptation actions such as deploying new crop varieties – after research and testing, or even beyond to more significant livelihood diversification away from agriculture (IPCC 2018).

# 4. Conclusion and recommendations: bolstering EbA and HRBA synergies for multiple benefits



## 4. Bolstering EbA and HRBA synergies for multiple benefits

The growing gap between the adaptation required and the actions taken are largest among lower-income populations and are expected to grow. Natural systems still present significant untapped potential to help meet these adaptation gaps. This is good news for the ongoing and increasing effectiveness of EbA. However, above 1.5°C temperature increase, some natural solutions may no longer work (IPCC 2022a). Therefore, UNEP's support for EbA must be accompanied by rapid, deep cuts in greenhouse gas emissions to keep the maximum number of adaptation options open.

EbA interventions can be transformative. That is, they can lead to fundamental shifts in States and interactions between people and nature that address the fundamental factors driving vulnerability, and lead to long-term solutions – when they are implemented as part of an integrated approach that aligns best practices with the range of potential future changes. The goal of transformative adaptation is to lead to a reshaping of unsustainable human-nature interactions that transcends current development pathways (Fedele et al. 2019b). Transformative adaptation is more preventative than incremental or coping responses to climate change (Fedele et al. 2019a). It is also a value-laden concept, which can only be defined on a case-by-case basis by the primary adaptation actors themselves – individuals, groups and local communities.

In the sense that EbA focuses on landscape-wide approaches and reframes the protection of nature from being perceived as a “burden” to being valued as an investment, it is inherently positioned to be

transformative. Moreover, if implemented in a coherent and inclusive manner, EbA is well positioned to advance the realization of human rights and climate justice due to its cross-cutting, multidimensional and systems-focused mechanisms, as well as its inherent benefits to the climate, biodiversity, and livelihoods and poverty reduction. EbA also supports the eradication of gender inequality in the environmental context, further contributing to gender-transformative actions to achieve the SDGs.

However, the term is not always fully understood in adaptation design and implementation. This can be addressed by more explicit integration of HRBA into EbA and valuing the two approaches as being complementary. Key elements that bring together HRBA and transformative approaches that have been missing or inadequately implemented in the past include: (i) an incomplete understanding of the vulnerability context; (ii) a systematic approach to addressing the root causes of vulnerability; and (iii) insufficient attention to identifying and addressing barriers to the equitable and effective participation and benefit of marginalized groups. These are areas that are fully aligned with adopting a HRBA, and thus better integration of HRBA into the planning and implementation of EbA can deliver more effective and transformative EbA.

This publication has identified several ways in which EbA programming underpins and supports sustainable development and HRBA and can make a significant contribution to the rights of present and future generations to a healthy environment. The following key recommendations stem from UNEP's experience on optimizing EbA so that it promotes equity and contributes to sustainable development.

# Key recommendations

1



## **Increase sensitization on why stronger participation and access to information promotes more effective EbA.**

Evidence from past HRBA processes shows us that procedural rights, such as access to information and to legal remedies, often comprise the means through which the substantive rights – such as safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, and healthy and sustainably produced food – can be achieved and maintained. Women's exclusion from procedural rights through low political representation and from land ownership further inhibits their freedoms and economic empowerment, contributing to estimates that it will take another century to achieve gender equality globally (United Nations, Commission on the Status of Women 2020). UNEP's experience with EbA underlines the necessity of procedural rights for achieving substantive rights. Analysis has highlighted the importance for staff and government duty-bearers to collectively recognize the adoption of a HRBA to EbA programming as a make-or-break issue for sustainability, not only so EbA furthers human rights, but also that it maintains equity and effectiveness and delivers on the substantive rights like the right to life and to a healthy environment. Ongoing capacity-strengthening is needed to generate a positive cascade of awareness and commitment that can help overcome the challenges that emerge from the non-prioritization of an HRBA.

Awareness-raising can be framed as a way of empowering marginalized groups to make claims to exercise their human rights and hold duty-bearers to account. Ongoing conversations are required at different levels to deliver a consistent message. Depending on the country and project context, partnerships can be developed with other United Nations agencies to further these essential and system-wide values, including through the implementation of the United Nations Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights.

2



## **Continue to deepen and disaggregate climate change vulnerability assessments to identify multiple, hidden, or intersecting vulnerabilities among marginalized groups.**

UNEP and its partners have contributed important innovations regarding vulnerability assessment, such as its use in climate-fragility settings and the call for contextualizing assessment procedures for greater inclusivity and to surface hidden or contested vulnerabilities. Guidelines have been developed for specific lines of enquiry to include in vulnerability assessments as well as gender analyses for this purpose, and the importance of open-ended questions for identifying nuanced vulnerability and potential red flags have been demonstrated and can be further developed. It is recommended that climate vulnerability assessments be designed to integrate human rights impact assessments, and that duty-bearers are trained to make use of such tools. To measure project impacts, vulnerability assessment should also be conducted at the end of a project.

**3**

**Place equal emphasis on the higher-level and softer skills needed to integrate human dimensions and adequately manage the process side of EbA.**

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EbA programming has gained an important improvement from inclusive and participatory approaches and has revealed the need to allocate greater time and resources to these approaches. However, further action must be taken to engage communities, instead of using a weaker form of consultation during the project design process, and to better integrate the human with the technical dimensions of EbA. The skill set required for managing the process side of EbA, which includes vulnerability assessment, gender analysis, stakeholder engagement and conflict resolution – and for integrating the human dimensions, which includes health impacts, poverty co-benefits, social capital and cultural assets as opposed to the more technical skills – is not always recognized, valued or developed on an ongoing basis. It is recommended to build skills and allocate sufficient resources to address this.

**4**

**Build on lessons learned for project design and implementation, for holistic and effective EbA.**

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UNEP's experience signals the need to design EbA for multiple benefit actions at different time scales and levels and has also highlighted the risks of maladaptation and/or inequitable outcomes when insufficient time and resources are allocated to project design. As the design stage may often be constrained, this can seem like an insurmountable challenge. However, many good practice examples have been identified, including the phasing and sequencing of activities to build momentum and generate the evidence base for future actions, and finding a good balance between focus and a holistic and integrated intervention. Adaptation strategies based on disaggregated vulnerability analysis enable the development of equitable adaptation in the short term, but effective long-term adaptation requires good projections of future possible climate scenarios. Careful consideration of these, along with the range of gender equality and socioeconomic issues and contextualized trade-offs, must be made during project design. HRBA provides a valuable reminder to place the most marginalized and vulnerable individuals and groups at the centre of EbA planning and implementation, and to strengthen their agency in project design.

5



Deploy participatory and inclusive monitoring, evaluation, research and learning activities in a continuous and iterative learning cycle, enabled through adaptive management, to avoid maladaptation and human rights transgressions.

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Sufficient budget and time as well as dedicated human resources needs to be allocated to this. Building governments' ethos and systems for this is critical, as both EbA and HRBA time frames go beyond the lifespan of the project. The requisite skills and resources for monitoring, evaluation, research and learning activities, which need to be deployed together with adaptive management to enable effective, equitable and evidence-based EbA, are not fully valued and resourced. From the vantage point of considerable experience, UNEP and partners can play a strong role in advocating for this. UNEP advocates for setting aside a specific amount of funds for gender-related activities for all its projects, which is monitored using the gender marker tool.

6



Advocate for, build on and deepen gender-responsive, inclusive multi-stakeholder partnerships, including with CSOs, to progress the social dimension of EbA programming.

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Partnerships with other United Nations agencies and with CSOs are critical to addressing the root causes of vulnerability, which are likely to exceed the mandate of UNEP or indeed any individual United Nations agency or development organization. In general, EbA calls for intensified collaboration within organizations and across agencies. UNEP's considerable normative and convening power can be harnessed to advocate nationally and internationally for a changed perception on the part of governments to partnerships with CSOs in adaptation implementation. This may require additional emphasis to be placed on consolidating the evidence from UNEP's experience in this regard. At the programme and project level, UNEP can continue to build on and deepen effective partnerships with CSOs and monitor and report on their outcomes. UNEP will continue to develop the capabilities of its staff as well as key partners to deliver gender-responsive projects and programmes, with the ultimate aim of gender-transformative actions in EbA (UNEP 2021c).



# Annexes

## Annex 1:

### **The United Nations system, UNEP and the evolution of sustainable development discourse**

The Charter of the United Nations, signed in San Francisco on 26 June 1945 at the close of World War II, enshrines the values of peace, justice, respect, human rights, tolerance and solidarity. The Charter's preamble movingly reaffirms faith in the dignity and worth of all people and the equal rights of small and large nations as a necessary step to prevent the scourge of war and assure economic and social development for all. Since these beginnings, the integral and interdependent nature of the Earth has seen growing recognition internationally. The Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, adopted at Stockholm on 16 June 1972, introduced the concept of sustainable development, which continued through the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (A/CONF.151/26), and the Rio+20 Conference and its outcome document, The Future We Want (United Nations 2012). In September 2015, in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, all United Nations Member States confirmed the United Nations Charter's values and the need to eradicate extreme poverty through 17 SDGs. The SDGs cut across and connect economic, social and environmental dimensions, and acknowledge the integrated nature of challenges such as gender inequality, unemployment, income inequality, social exclusion and the lack of environmental safeguards. UNEP's 2018–2021 MTS embodied the new paradigm in which the environment is treated as an integrated component rather than a stand-alone silo. UNEP's 2022–2025 MTS, For People and Planet (UNEP 2021c), further defines the need for a strategic shift towards a truly universal and transformational course.

## Annex 2:

### **Additional examples of the cost-effectiveness of EbA**

EbA has also been shown to provide a cost-effective alternative to concrete-heavy infrastructure deployed for adaptation. EbA projects often include using plants and ecosystems to develop green infrastructure for functions such as flood control, dampening storm surges and tamping down coastal erosion – for instance, planting mangroves to help stem rising sea levels. A recent evaluation shows that replacing concrete-heavy infrastructure with such green alternatives is a cost-effective strategy that could save US\$248 billion a year while combating climate change (Nature-Based Infrastructure Global Resource Centre 2021). The study found that nature-based infrastructure is up to 50 per cent less expensive than the more “usual” built infrastructure. Moreover, nature-based infrastructure provides 28 per cent better value for money than “concrete-based” infrastructure when numerous co-benefits, including jobs, a healthier, cleaner environment, and enhanced well-being, are factored in.<sup>26</sup> A cost-benefit analysis for Lami Town in Fiji – an area notably susceptible to flooding and storm surges, projected to increase due to climate change and related sea level rise – found that an EbA storm protection scenario yielded the highest benefit per dollar spent on implementation than engineering or hybrid scenarios, having considered uncertainties with respect to effectiveness for all of the scenarios<sup>27</sup> (Rao et al. 2013).

26 These numbers are based on the International Institute for Sustainable Development's Sustainable Asset Valuation (<https://www.iisd.org/savi/>) assessments of various nature-based infrastructure projects.

27 It also found that the highest benefit-cost ratio was for ecosystem-based options, which yielded 19.50 Fijian dollars' benefit for every 1 Fijian dollar spent (US\$1 = ~ 2.20 Fijian dollars).



## Annex 3:

### Protecting environmental human rights defenders

Successful long-term adaptation that integrates human rights requires also recognizing and protecting environmental defenders. Environmental human rights defenders are important allies in the fight against climate change and environmental degradation, but are often subjected to reprisals and intimidation amid a growing wave of violence committed with impunity (UNEP 2018b). Of the environmental defenders who are killed, 40–50 per cent hail from local communities and Indigenous peoples who are defending their lands and natural resources required for their survival and livelihoods; women defenders are particularly vulnerable (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2017).

UNEP has developed a Defenders Policy, which promotes greater protection for individuals and groups defending their environmental rights and identifies solutions to mitigate the increasing abuse of environmental rights in many parts of the world. Under this policy, UNEP is committed to assisting States in addressing crucial issues related to human rights and the environment, and to encouraging States to recognize and support the role of ordinary citizens, Indigenous peoples and local communities in environmental protection.

For United Nations system-wide action, UNEP is implementing the United Nations Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights which requests all United Nations actors, inter alia, to "increase United Nations support to Member States at field level for the development of protection mechanisms for human rights defenders and environmental activists." UNEP is also promoting and implementing the United Nations Guidance Note on Promotion and Protection of Civic Space (United Nations 2020b) as part of UNEP's work on environmental defenders.

In March 2019, the HRC affirmed the essential role of environmental activists and human rights defenders in protecting irreplaceable ecosystems, responding to climate change, ensuring that no one is left behind and realizing the SDGs (A/HRC/RES/40/11). The Council also welcomed UNEP's Defenders Policy.

## Annex 4:

### Enhancing climate information and knowledge services for resilience in five island countries of the Pacific Ocean

This regional GCF-funded programme will improve climate observations and services and multi-hazard EWS in five Pacific SIDS with high levels of vulnerability to tropical cyclones, flooding and drought. Launched in September 2021, the programme covers countries with some of the smallest and most dispersed populations located within huge expanses of ocean: the Cook Islands, Niue, Palau, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu. It will introduce forecast-based financing to pre-plan – based on credible forecasts – for early actions at community and government levels that are implemented before a climate shock to reduce impacts and losses, as well as reduce the emergency response burden. The consultation process refined the initial range of potential activities to align with each country's highest priorities and most practicable inputs. The M&E plan will be refined after an inception phase study to design gender-specific indicators and collect the relevant sex-disaggregated data to monitor project gender responsiveness – including in attaining the targets in the Gender Action Plan and Environment and Social Action Plan, and to enable adaptive management where necessary. Activities will be developed to counter GBV, which is experienced by about 37 per cent of women in the countries during their lifetime, as well as the time poverty of women.

## Annex 5:

### Pioneering South-South collaboration through the EbA South project

EbA South is recognized as a flagship initiative for South-South cooperation, enabling technology transfer and the exchange of skills and experience on capacity development, policy support and fundraising between countries. Funded by the GEF's Special Climate Change Fund, the project piloted EbA in key vulnerable ecosystems between 2013 and 2019: deserts in Mauritania, mountains in Nepal and coasts in Seychelles. The project generated global and regional collaboration on EbA and demonstrated a range of best practices such as collaborating with local universities on long-term research. Project results included planting 840,000 seedlings in watersheds in Nepal to limit soil erosion and increase water supplies; planting 450 hectares of multi-use greenbelts in Mauritania to restore degraded desert, dune and savannah systems; and restoring 20 hectares of mangroves in Seychelles; developing 34 technical reports and research papers; and reaching nearly 4,900 people through awareness-raising activities.<sup>28</sup> While the total area of land restored was less than 1,000 hectares, the long-term effects of the project could be considerable through catalysing EbA upscaling. Two valuable lessons learned are (i) sufficient time and budget must be allocated to manage socioeconomic and ecological complexities such as land-use conflict, ineffective government institutions, disagreements on intervention options and challenging environmental conditions; and (ii) long-term research is vital for adaptive management and recording the project's successes. Moreover, the project demonstrated that exit strategies to ensure ongoing post-project maintenance of the EbA landscapes need to be regularly revised in response to changing contexts.

28 A dedicated website provides a range of lessons, toolkits and best practices on EbA for a broad audience: <http://www.ebasouth.org/>.



Credit: UNEP/CityAdapt. Building climate resilience of urban systems through Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA) in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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