

MARCH 2012

OVERVIEW

IIED Drylands Team

Project name:

The Drylands Programme

Project leader:

Camilla Toulmin and Ced Hesse

Time frame:

1987 to 2009

Cost:

Annual budget ranged from £200,000 at the start to £1.8 million at the end

Objective:

To promote better and more sustainable livelihoods for people in Africa's drylands.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Drylands cover two-thirds of the Earth's surface and are home to 2.3 billion people. But by the 1980s, when ruinous droughts hit the African Sahel, these areas were commonly being written off as over-exploited wastelands. The Drylands Programme started in 1987 to bring together people with a different view, particularly anglophone and francophone researchers and NGOs in the drylands of sub-Saharan Africa. Through action research, targeted training and a wide range of publications, IIED and its partners gathered evidence and shaped policy, particularly around pastoralism, natural resource management, soil fertility and land tenure. Now concepts and tools from the programme have been widely adopted by national and regional institutions.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Initially, the Drylands Team sought to challenge received wisdom: the team's knowledge of reality did not coincide with the conventional storyline about degradation and hopelessness in the Sahel. We believed that evidence-based arguments would lead to better policy and therefore better practice in dryland development. Over time, because many governments became more democratic, the theory of change shifted towards a model based on building a demanding society and responsive state. Recognising

25 years in the drylands

Long-term action research in arid East and West Africa challenges common assumptions about poverty and desertification.

In Namarel, Senegal, at a training course launched in the 2000s during the second decade of IIED's Drylands Programme, local men and women were learning things that went to the core of how they saw themselves. "I'm no longer ashamed," one told the trainer; another agreed, "Finally, I'm happy to be the son of a herder."

The group made their living by mobile livestock herding, or pastoralism, and like other pastoralists and small-scale farmers in arid regions, they had long been blamed for a deteriorating environment. Many governments, and some international NGOs and donors, spoke of a slow-motion disaster — of sand dunes engulfing fields and pastures as poor, backward people overfarmed and overgrazed fragile drylands. Much of the research and dialogue around the UN Convention on Combating Desertification in the 1980s was premised on this narrative of scarce resources and degradation caused by poor people.

The 'Pastoralism and Policy Options' training course elicited an alternative story, drawing on participants' personal experiences as well as new research from around the world. The sources included pioneering participatory action-research projects from East and West Africa, where NGOs and researchers had partnered with the Drylands Programme to look at how local communities interact with their natural environment — and their policy environment. This work affirmed that pastoralism could be sustainable and richly productive, but it needed to tap traditional knowledge,

technologies and institutions. Through this fresh view of the drylands, the pastoralists gained faith in the value of their cultural identity, and confidence to speak up for their rights.

Traditional wisdom

Indigenous communities prosper by harnessing the variable, uncertain conditions of the drylands — for example, through specialised cattle breeds in Africa that eat only the most nutritious pastures while wandering a varied landscape. Damage and desertification follow in the wake of government interventions that ignore these dynamics, say studies. But it has sometimes been politically expedient to blame farmers and pastoralists, and turn their land over to foreign investors queuing up to acquire these resources.

Over 25 years, IIED's Drylands Team worked to make these findings heard and to influence national, regional and international policy. We documented the evidence in the journal *Haramata*, in a popular Issue Paper series, and in a host of other publications — including many papers written by our African colleagues. We brought the arguments to many meetings, from UN negotiations to farmers' participatory analysis groups and field visits, to donor evaluations where we helped review the past and offered insights into new strategies.

The work went beyond generating knowledge, with participatory learning projects helping dryland communities to organise and demand policy change. Many of these strands were woven together in the training course, which

that dryland development was impeded by policymakers' lack of knowledge about local livelihoods and the power imbalance between policymakers and local people, the programme focused on two strategies: increasing policymakers' understanding of dryland livelihood systems, and strengthening local capacities to challenge misconceptions and influence policymakers.

KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- We sharply disputed the mainstream view that only top-down, technically driven interventions can save the drylands. IIED and its partners showed that traditional knowledge and locally controlled institutions can support productive, sustainable farms, herds and communities – a perspective now lodged in high-level policy.
- Working in two languages brought together distinct intellectual cultures. Bridging English- and French-speaking countries led to cross-fertilisation of tools and policy models that otherwise seldom happens.
- Long term activities mainly focused in seven countries allowed the drylands team and partners to deepen relationships, act and learn iteratively, and seize evolving opportunities. Staying put and not spreading ourselves too thinly was crucial for achieving real change.

PARTNERS' VIEWS

The research on total economic value of pastoralism, in terms of generating empirical evidence, was the first of its kind in Ethiopia.

IIED was the first institution to popularise participatory rural appraisal.

The Drylands Programme is the only institution that managed to link multilevel work ranging from the local dryland inhabitants to the global policymakers.

Anonymous comments from a review of the Drylands Programme

IIED DRYLANDS TEAM

Through research, training and advocacy, IIED's Drylands Team aims to improve institutional frameworks for the development and governance of the drylands.



Photo: Stephen Anderson

IIED's Drylands Programme has shown that traditional knowledge and locally controlled institutions can support productive, sustainable farms, herds and communities.

put pastoralists and government officials in the same classrooms.

Bridging boundaries

As well as linking marginalised people with policymakers, the programme sought to bridge other gaps: between stakeholders, disciplines, policy sectors, East and West Africa, capital cities and rural areas. One successful strategy for forming new connections was investing in a bilingual programme. Through translated publications and workshops, and visits between groups in the English-speaking East and French-speaking West, two distinct intellectual cultures mingled. French-speaking colleagues valued the links to the anglophone literature and development approaches, such as methodology for participatory learning and action introduced to the Sahel in the 1990s. Valuable knowledge and tools also flowed in the other direction with the adaptation of the French-language training on pastoralism to East Africa, and with East African interest in the Sahel's pastoral legislation.

The programme's long timeline and tight geographic scope boosted its impact. We made long-term investments in just seven core countries: Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Tanzania. There, partnerships formed and deepened between customary institutions, government departments, researchers and civil society. Partner organisations came to understand their national policy environments and how to affect them; iterative action research allowed dryland communities to build on achievements and learn from failures; and we maintained steady support on key issues such as pastoralism and land tenure, which eventually led to changes in ideas, policy and practice.

We navigated these drawn-out processes with flexible management and genuine participation. In an independent review of the programme, partners described a relationship of equality and transparency. One praised IIED's responsive planning as 'very pastoralist': the programme knew what it wanted to achieve and relied on colleagues in-country to react quickly to changing contexts and opportunities.

Concepts that IIED and its partners began promoting 10 or 20 years ago are today finding more footholds among donors, governments and civil society. The new Africa Union framework on pastoralism borrows text from the training course, and Senegal's new forest legislation recognises one of the programme's participatory tools as a valid method for natural resource management.

Within IIED, ongoing drylands research projects recently moved into the newer Climate Change Group. In this new home, IIED's 25 years in the drylands can now shape our work on climate issues. This is fitting, as drylands communities have much to teach about thriving in a changing and unpredictable environment. With the closing of the separate drylands desk, IIED is also looking at how to pull together related research from across departments. By continuing the links and networks, we will shed more light on the evolving story of the drylands and its people.

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