

# UHAI, a model for sustainable livelihood

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*UHAI in Kiswahili means livelihood. It is the name given to a “model” designed to empower people to manage their natural resources sustainably and to enhance their livelihood through dynamic people’s forums. The approach was developed in the early 1990s by KENGO (Kenya Energy and Environmental Organisation) as an alternative to failing conventional development. Conventional approaches tend to over-emphasise economic development at the expense of indigenous culture, wisdom, spirituality and social values, knowledge, technologies, experiences, skills and aspiration of the people. The UHAI model has been established in 15 Kenyan communities both in rural and urban settings and has proved to be an effective approach to regenerating the natural environment and to controlling desertification. This article discusses the main elements of UHAI and the experiences gained using this approach in the community of Wamburi.*

**T**he rural base of many Africans implies that their livelihoods are directly supported by natural resources. The availability, access to and control of those resources are critical if these livelihoods are to be sustained. Sustainable livelihoods, however, also involve the relationship between people and nature. In most African societies culture and the environment were closely linked. Sustainable livelihood, in the UHAI approach, is seen as having its roots in the unique culture of the people. It focuses on the past, present and the future of life and it draws its strength from internal justice, morality, and collective community spirit and responsibility.

## Culture central to development

The UHAI model argues that a people’s culture must be at the center of development efforts. It recognises that authentic development springs from the collective visions, experiences, decisions and practical actions of the community. It seeks to empower local communities to take charge of their natural resources by using their indigenous systems, knowledge, wisdom and skills.

The UHAI model asks: “Why have many communities in Africa, at regional as well as at national level abandoned or look down upon their indigenous foods, mode of dressing, systems of reward and honor, engineering, education, art and music?” With consciousness about their traditional culture and historic development people are better placed to sustain their livelihoods and conserve their natural resources responsibly. The UHAI model will work in situations where this has taken place.

## Guiding principles

To realise these ideals, the UHAI model offers certain guiding principles. These should form the basis of all relationships between people and the natural world. These principles include the recognition of:

- *The supremacy of nature:* Nature as the basis of life is supreme and all encompassing. All elements and beings must

therefore recognize and respect it as a sacred endowment that should be conserved and sustained.

- *Peoples cultural heritage:* Culture defines the identity, dignity, pride and cosmology of a particular people. Therefore, its disintegration and disruption threaten the very existence of society. The cultural diversity and uniqueness of each ethnic nationality is the most valuable endowment of people throughout the African continent.
- *Eldership and sagehood:* Elders and sages are the keepers and custodians of knowledge, wisdom and the ethical dignity of human societies in Africa. Their wise council and vision should form the principal basis of moral guidance, local governance and stewardship of the society as well as the natural resource base.
- *Negotiation:* Any being that is primarily dependant on a particular resource for survival shall not be deprived of this livelihood. Man must, therefore, not only negotiate with man, but also with other creatures by studying, understanding and fully appreciating their source of livelihood.

By providing these principles, the UHAI model makes it possible to develop a framework that can restore respect for the values of natural resources and local culture.

## The eco-cultural forum

The UHAI model seeks to restore and strengthen sustainable livelihood by reintroducing governance and decision making mechanisms. Through communal eco-cultural forums all stakeholders and resource-user groups within a community will have access to an open democratic space. Subsequently they will be able to directly influence decisions taken about the management of local natural resources. At the moment there is no such space at the level of community resource development.

The community eco-cultural forum consists of a council of elders, key resource-user groups (stakeholders), indigenous institutions and experts and representatives of facilitator (development) organisations.

The community eco-cultural forum takes on such activities as:

- Identifying and deliberating on issues, conflicts, opportunities and prospects relating to the utilisation, conservation and management of local eco-cultural resources.
- Defining, developing and evolving local solutions to the problems and conflicts that have been identified drawing on indigenous traditional knowledge as well as appropriate modern management systems and policies.
- Mobilising communities to undertake appropriate actions for the management of eco-cultural resources that can enhance their livelihood.
- Safeguarding the people’s rights and access to resources in their struggle and search for nature conservation and a dignified livelihood.
- Monitoring the use and abuse of natural resources and advocating appropriate policies and actions.
- Researching and documenting past and present indigenous knowledge, skills, and technologies in natural resource management.

As an empowering model, UHAI tries to promote and invigorate the creative and innovative energies of the members of each community. The community must be able to create, innovate and develop new knowledge, skills, and techniques within its own environment. There must also be room to work towards achieving sustainable livelihood and efficient resources management systems. This is probably the most critical challenge of the UHAI model.

## Wamburi community forum

Of the fifteen UHAI community forums, Wamburi is one of the best examples of a regenerated community and a regenerated environment. Wamburi is in the Nyika eco-cultural region. The community’s catchment area includes the 200 households of Wamburi and Kithumba. These two villages lie between the Muojonzwe and Nthilani rivers and draw water from the Kyangeto. These rivers are subterranean for most of the year.

## The natural resource base at stake

In the 1970s, villagers paid little attention to soil and water conservation. Their animals overgrazed the fields and bare, sun-baked soils were characteristic. Villagers ignored the importance of the sand basins along the rivers. These basins functioned as water reservoirs and prevented excessive evaporation. Soil erosion had silted up the only earth dam that had been dug in the late 1940s and had covered the water pipe and animal watering troughs. Lorry after lorry took sand away from these basins for hous-

ing projects in Nairobi and there was little understanding of the way they functioned in the local ecosystem.

Twenty years ago, villagers began to suffer food shortage, water was inaccessible and the number of livestock fell because there was little grazing. Rivers ran dry immediately after the rains ended and community life was out of balance.

### From reflection to action

In 1990, having gone through several preparatory meetings and resource assessments, villagers decided to take the initiative to regenerate their communities and natural resources. Their first action was to stop sand collection and they threatened to burn any lorry coming to collect sand. Villagers went to the District Commissioner and asked for reinforcement. As a result five lorries and their crews were grounded for a week and were eventually forced to return to Nairobi empty.

Having organised themselves in the Wamburi Eco-cultural Community Forum the community acquired an identity. Operating as a forum, it identified training in soil and water conservation, agroforestry, natural resources management and wood energy conservation as urgent priorities. They selected key individuals for training and asked KENGO to provide it. During training, participatory exercises in resource mapping, strengthening group solidarity, and analysing strengths and opportunities were carried out. Plans were developed to build terracing to control runoff and a tree nursery was established by the dam site to provide seedlings (multipurpose tree species) for reforestation. River-beds were rehabilitated, the earth dam desilted and the cattle watering troughs renovated.

A project proposal was developed to support the desilting of the earth dam and to establish an improved stove production unit. Seedling production was improved by seed purchase and support was given to further encourage training in empowerment and capacity building. After the forum had been assessed, its programme was accepted for UNDP-GEF funding.

### Impressive results

Within two years forum members constructed 10 kilometers of terraces, cut-off drains and bench-terraces in the catchment area. A tree nursery was established and members started to plant trees along the boundaries, terrace embankments and roadsides. Forum members made one of their experienced trainers a supervisor and bought him a bicycle to help him move around the area.

By 1996, the physical and human environment of the Wamburi catchment area had undergone a transformation. Members were heavily involved in food production,

tree planting and the adoption of energy saving stoves. Most of the households had planted more than 200 trees, riverbeds had been rehabilitated after the construction of concrete tie-ridges that held sand and retain water over the dry period. The water stored behind the earth dam was now able to support an enlarged tree nursery (150,000 seedlings). In general there was more water available for domestic use and for livestock. Twenty percent of the households in the area have bio-intensive kitchen gardens and are self-sufficient in wood-fuel. Zero grazing is now a common farming practice.

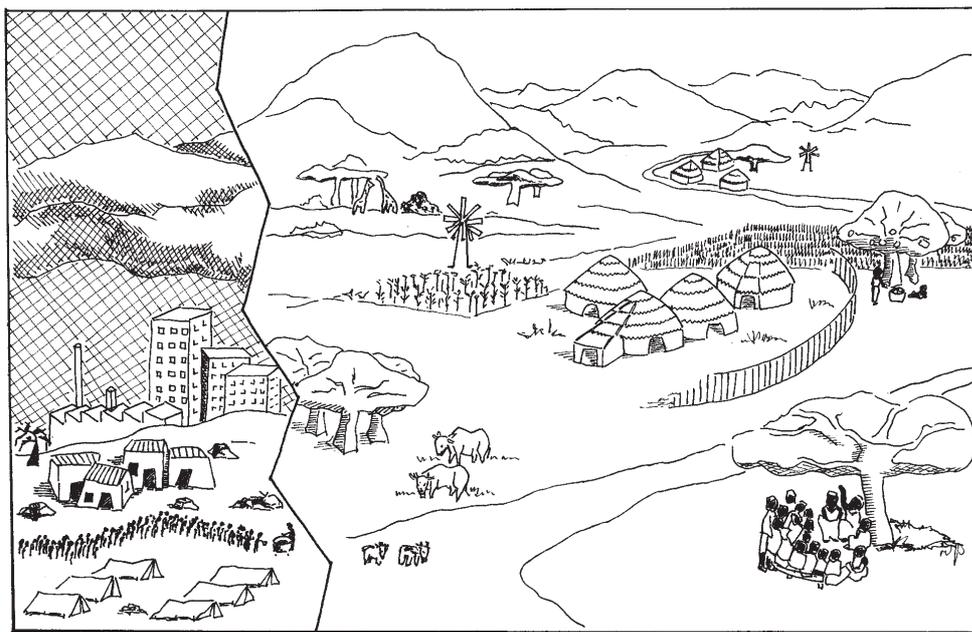
Wamburi eco-cultural community forum is a source of strength to farmers in the area. Its members include professionals, retired chiefs, and working civil servants. Eighty percent of the membership is female. This explains why there is so much diversity in the food available in the community.

*"Go and give these foods to your friends and tell them we have bid goodbye to relief food"* villagers told me during one of my many training visits and offered me

Promoting the participatory approach especially if it is being well articulated, is a time consuming business and makes the community preparation phase quite costly. In addition, cash benefit expectation in the short term can impair the implementation of the UHAI model. Donors for one reason or another, are not keen to give their support to community initiatives.

Patience and persistence are prerequisites for an effective facilitation of the UHAI model and for the participatory regeneration of the natural environment. Without a good facilitator participatory community development becomes impossible. This function, however, is not accepted by donors. Now the need for community participation is being recognised by the Convention to Combat Desertification and the National Action Plan, we hope the funding of participatory community development will become easier. ■

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maize, beans, pigeon peas, millet, sorghum, onions, cowpeas and sweet potatoes. A neighbouring catchment is currently trying to copy Wamburi community as they try to regenerate the sunbaked patches that were formerly shambas (gardens).

### Limitations

The UHAI model has its strengths and weaknesses. In Wamburi most of villagers were kinsmen and belonged to the same ethnic group. Trust was built up quite quickly. A common language and culture makes sharing and communication easier. If this is not the case it is much more difficult to create unity and agree upon a common action plan.

### Reference:

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