

Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability

BACKGROUND PAPER 3

by

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THE UHAI MODEL: the search for a tool to negotiate with nature

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The year was 1989---I had spent 10 years at the head of an environmental organization called KENGO. We had gone literally everywhere in the country preaching tree planting, community afforestation, agroforestry, woodfuel conservation---and similar environmental techno-fixes purveyed by western development agencies in Africa.

There was little else left to do in the lexicon of environmentalism. I was terribly bored and fatigued from lack of challenge. I had made up my mind to quit the development sector by the year 1990. Until I asked the inevitable question: “after ten years of preaching environmental conservation, what had we as an environmental organization achieved?”. I could not get any meaningful answer from my team except for things like---“we have promoted the planting of so many trees” or “we have trained communities to make woodfuel conservation stoves” et cetera---BUT WHAT ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT? WHAT ABOUT NATURE? WHAT HAD WE DONE TO SAFEGUARD THE DIGNITY OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES?

To answer this question we decided to ask the communities we had been working with in the various regions country. We organized 5 regional forums and posed this question. The response was a resounding critique of modern “quick fix” environmentalism.

The West having lost whatever there was with nature---had taken a linear, sectoral approach to environmental issues. Hence it had to be the atmospheric pollution, water management, afforestation, desertification, wildlife, biodiversity, and so on. What happened to and nature people? Where are people, cultures, resources and livelihoods in the environmental lexicon?

In each regional of the five regional forum, we insisted on a special hearing from councils of elders of indigenous community institutions. In one instance in the Lake region the wazees, men and women in the Lake Victoria region asked: “How come since time immemorial, using our indigenous methods and systems---this lake was well taken care of and had plenty of fish---BUT YOU PEOPLE (the modern post independence generation) despite having all these fancy vehicles and running around talking about environment have

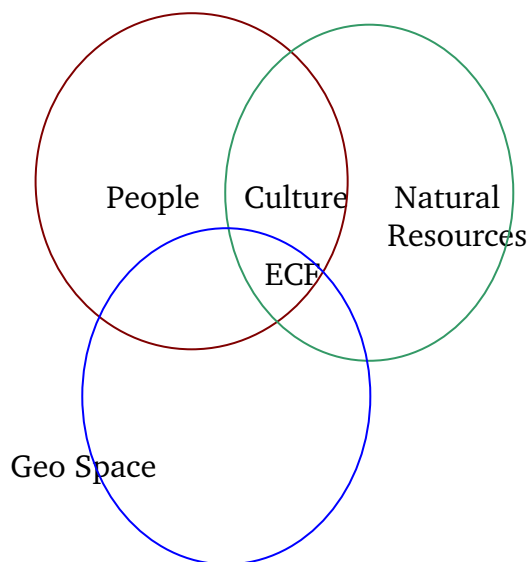
succeeded in destroying the lake environment within three decades of Kenya's independence?"

That query has never left my mind. It changed my entire world view about the environment and sent us back to drawing board. After four years of soul searching and researching African indigenous systems of resource governance---the result was the Uhai Model for Sustainable Livelihood and Natural Resource Governance published as a book in 1996.

The Uhai model is an attempt to understand and appreciate the African world view and cosmology on the environment, nature and natural resources. The relationship between people and the environment in indigenous African systems is holistic. The relationship are so interwoven that it is impossible to separate African spirituality, culture and livelihood from their natural environment. Thus most African indigenous holy shrines are in nature. The holy shrine is either a forest, river, lake, mountain. Well, that is not different from the Biblical shrines.

What has always attracted me to these systems is the holistic link between the governance of natural resources and livelihoods and the governance of social affairs in a community. It is this organic bond that forms the conceptual and philosophical basis of the Uhai model.

THE UHAI ECO-CULTURAL FORUM CONCEPT



ECF=Eco-cultural Forum

Examining this system quickly reveals to you that our current approaches to resource management and livelihood are suicidal and doomed to fail. As humans unsustainably exploit nature and natural resources so do they get culturally, spiritually and socially dis-oriented. This disorientation is occurring at the individual level in the form of increased social disorder, stress related illnesses; at the society level in form of extreme cultures, material worship and idolatry, religious extremism and conflicts; at the global level in the form of disordered global environmental systems, large scale environmental disasters, mass poverty, incurable disease epidemics such as HIV-AIDS, Bird Flu fever.

In the search for alternatives to the management of the environment, it quickly dawned on us that indigenous livelihood and resource governance systems were always governed by a set of values and principles set by the society and orally transferred from one generation to another. The elders of lake Victoria region told us that in “our time the lake was allowed to rest at certain times of the year”. During that particular period of the year happened to be the breeding time for fish in the lake. This invaluable important rule was designed to protect fish hatching grounds and fish fingerlings from the vagaries of over fishing commonly witnessed today. After two years of soul searching intense debates and consultations, we came up with a set of ten guiding principles to the application and functioning of the Uhai model.

Principles of the Uhai Model

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 to be conserved and sustained.

The intrinsic value of nature

All nature’s elements have intrinsic value, unknown or known. Therefore exploitation and use must primarily be aimed at sustaining the livelihoods of all beings on earth. These elements of nature are variously distributed in geographical space, creating a unique biological diversity and habitats whose value must equally be recognized and respected.

Nature as a sacred shrine

In Africa, nature is a cultural and spiritual shrine as well as a museum of people’s histories. As a sacred shrine, home and a source of livelihood, nature should be treated with utmost reverence.

Sacredness of life and rights to livelihood

Every life is sacred, hence all beings have a basic right to enjoy the abundance of nature’s resources (clean air and water, space, lights and land) and to derive a decent livelihood from them.

Humans, being the only ones endowed with power and capacity to manipulate the elements of nature, have a moral obligation to do so in manner that does not threaten the survival and livelihood of other beings.

People's cultural heritage

Culture defines the identity, dignity, integrity, pride and cosmology of a particular people. Therefore, its disintegration and disruption threaten the very existence of society. Africa's cultural diversity and uniqueness, is the most valuable endowment of the continent. It must be valued, applied, researched, documented and advanced.

Stake holding and custodianship in nature

biological beings are by right universal stakeholders in nature. Equally, they are the key custodians to the planet's natural endowment. As stakeholders and custodians at their various levels (primary, secondary, tertiary) these beings have similar but relative rights of access, ownership and control of resources.

Negotiating stake holding rights

- I. Beings (primary stakeholders) whose survival is primarily dependent on the existence of a particular resource in nature, shall have the first right of access to that resource.
- II. Other beings (secondary and tertiary stake holders) whose livelihood and welfare is linked to that resource directly or indirectly, shall have their rights of access, limited to the proportion of the resource required to meet their essential livelihood needs.
- III. Any being whose survival and livelihood is primarily dependent on a particular resource, shall not only be deprived of it.
- IV. Humans must, therefore, not only negotiate with other humans but with other beings before interfering with nature's endowment.

The dignity of the African family

The fundamental unit of human life is the family. The African family is the cultural and spiritual web of the community. It gives value and sustains the dignity of the African society. It recognizes and maintains the dignity and the unique roles of man, woman and the child in the society. The unique bonding role of the African family, must be safeguarded to ensure the survival of the African society.

(Utu)Human dignity

Human dignity (Utu) and a dignified human life can only be attained, when fundamental rights and freedoms for all, including satisfaction of essential livelihood needs---food, clean and safe drinking water, shelter, peace and security, are guaranteed in a society.

Functional components of the Model

In applying the Uhai model, it is crucial that the guiding principles of the model be understood and internalized.

The Uhai Eco-Cultural Forum

The Uhai Eco-cultural Forum is the principal functional unit of the model. An eco- is defined as a distinct group of people deriving their livelihood directly or indirectly from a common pool of ecological and cultural resources within a defined geographical area.

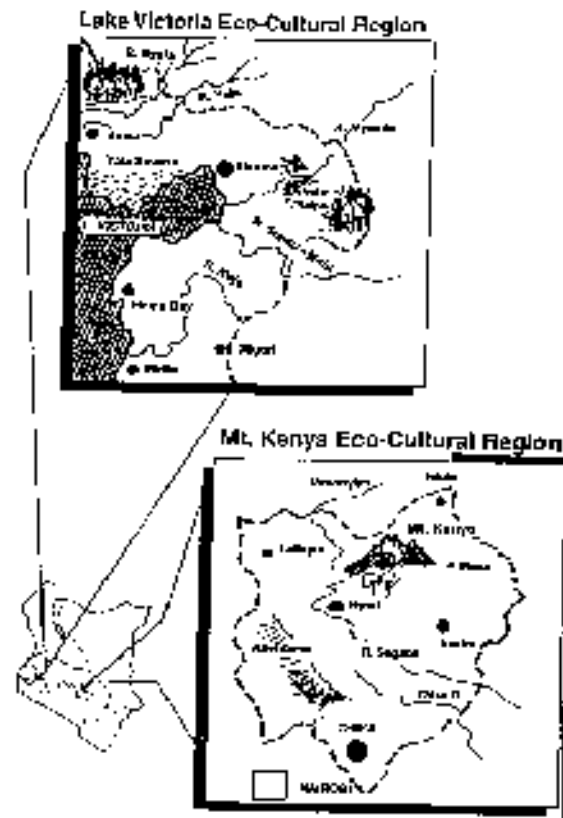
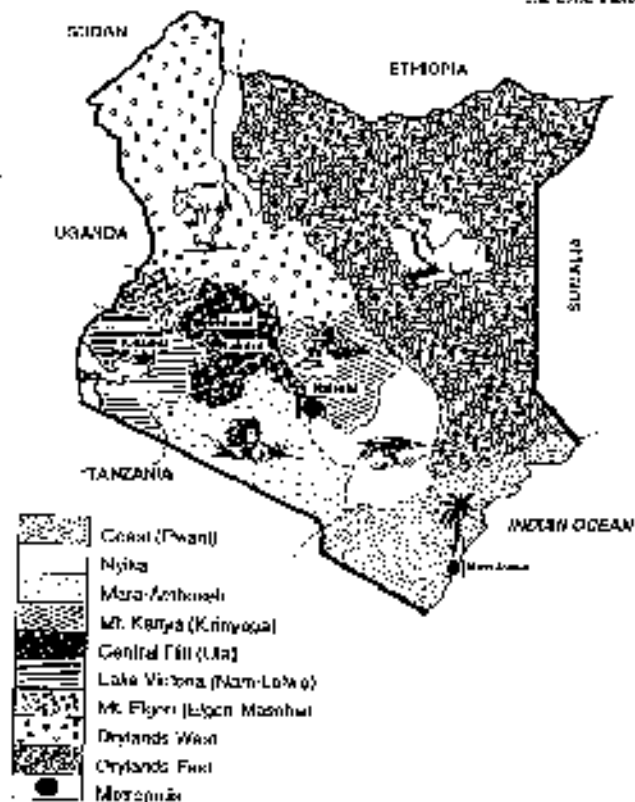
The mutually exploited pool of eco- cultural resources could be water sources such as a river, desert oasis, pasture land, lake, wetland or a natural forest.

A community ECF could be a village, or Manyatta (a temporary habitat for nomadic communities in Kenya) that shares and relies on a common pool of resources such as a natural spring, or grazing range for its livelihood.

A sub- regional ECF could geographically comprise a mountain range, lake region, a a large forest zone or a dryland belt, inhabited by people of similar socio- cultural norms.

In urban areas, such a pool of mutually shared resources could be in the form of social amenities like public parks, sports facilities, community halls, places of worship, common car parks, or public transport, markets, among others.

In the context of the model Kenya is divided into 10 Uhai Eco-cultural regions:



Adapted from: Uhai a Model for Sustainable livelihood in Africa (1996)

The Model functions through dynamic interaction between community forums Uhai at grassroots level, which organically mesh into sub- regional and eventually, regional forums.

Through the Uhai eco-cultural forum framework, each level influences the other in a manner that non dominates the other politically or ideologically. It could, however, be argued that in an ideal state, the community forums, due to their great numbers and depth of understanding of local issues, would determine the ideological direction and content of sub-regional and regional policy directions.

Stakeholders

In the context of the Uhai model, this term means any living being that has a vested livelihood interest in a particular natural resource. Stakeholders may be primary, secondary or tertiary, depending on their relationship to a specific natural resource.

Primary stakeholder is an individual or any living being that relies on a natural resource to meet its basic survival needs. The resource in question need not necessarily be primary. If

man- made water reservoir, for example, is a source of primary livelihood for a community, then that community has a primary stake in the resource in question

Resource Users

A resource user, is an individual or being that utilizes a particular natural resource or its secondary products, to meet basic livelihood needs and or to satisfy other material wants. In this context, all living beings are resource users.

Governance of the Uhai Forum

Using the principle of indigenous African resource governance institution, Each forum is expected to be governed by a Council of respected community leaders, men, women and youth—elected by the community. In this regard the principle of eldership refers to enlightened, respected, wise and visionary members of the society and NOT AGE..

Membership to the forum is by right NOT by choice. All those members of a community who exploit and use resources within the community, are by right members of the Uhai Eco-Cultural Forum and will be bound by codes, rules, principles of resource use and management laid down by the forum.

All of us are users of nature's resources. Every moment of OUR survival is dependent and governed by nature and nature's codes. We must evolve means of NEGOTIATING our livelihood with nature and other beings in nature. The Uhai Model is an attempt to develop a tool that will enable us to do that---knowing that, We can only act and live within the limits, and boundaries set by the forces of nature.

Thank you all.

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http://www.ymparistojakehitys.fi/sustainable_societies.html