BOTTOM-UP ADVOCACY FOR SUSTAINABILITY: COMMUNITY-LED CHANGES IN LOCAL BY-LAWS ON BUSSI AND JAGUZI ISLANDS, UGANDA

Communities in and around the Lake Victoria Basin experience a number of interconnected challenges, including dependence on diminishing natural resources, pervasive poverty, food insecurity, poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes, and inaccessible health services. At the same time, the ecosystem itself faces substantial degradation. To address these intertwined challenges and foster healthy, engaged communities, Pathfinder International is currently advancing an integrated population, health, and environment (PHE) initiative called Health of People and Environment–Lake Victoria Basin (HoPE–LVB) in partnership with several environmental and health sector partners in Uganda, Kenya, and the US. Funded primarily by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, with technical support from the USAID-funded Evidence to Action project, the HoPE-LVB project is implemented in a combination of island, lakeshore, and inland sites in Uganda and Kenya.
Applying ExpandNet’s systematic scaling-up approach of “beginning with the end in mind,” advocacy has been an important component for the HoPE-LVB project to ensure successful institutionalization and expansion. With this approach, the HoPE-LVB team has been able to foster innovative policies and guideline changes to accommodate integrated multi-sectoral programming in a predominantly vertically organized system. It is our mission to ensure sustainable capacity not only in project communities, but also nationally and internationally. The HoPE-LVB team is working closely with member governments of the East African Community, through the Lake Victoria Basin Commission, to ensure that the project’s advocacy efforts yield lasting changes. The HoPE-LVB experience differentiates itself from other PHE efforts around the world, which did not necessarily have this explicit focus. This brief discusses the project’s experience with advocacy and offers lessons for other implementers on how to lay the groundwork to sustain integrated PHE projects at the sub-national level.

Communities Working Together to Change Their Future

Since day one, HoPE-LVB has focused on meeting the needs of communities holistically. The HoPE-LVB team worked with project communities, other stakeholders, and baseline survey results to identify the interrelated challenges affecting the communities of Bussi and Jaguzi Islands. These ranged from a rapidly growing population and poor access to health services to unplanned land management, deforestation, and over fishing. All of these factors contributed to the depletion of natural resources and an uncertain future for the next generation. Intensive community dialogues showed the communities’ willingness to change and embrace appropriate practices that would improve their lives. However, communities felt they lacked technical skills and institutionalized guidance to sustain whatever corrective measures were adopted. Due to its strong focus on sustainability, the HoPE-LVB project team decided to support the communities to identify locally-driven solutions and adhere to self-established decrees to ensure sustainability. This brief describes the process of development and eventual adoption of sub-county by-laws in the project communities of Jaguzi and Bussi Islands, starting in 2011. Other project interventions and results are described in a separate technical publication and will not be described in this brief.

Community Dialogues

As an initial process to empower and build agency of communities to set and adopt local regulations, the project facilitated community dialogue sessions. The project team engaged community members in discussions to identify the issues they felt most affected their lives in the areas of health, environmental conservation, and livelihoods. During these meetings, community members were encouraged to share ideas freely, ask questions, and suggest possible solutions to a stated issue. This was vital to ensuring a sense of ownership and sustainability since the solutions came from the community. These meetings brought together community leaders, community members, and District officials. It was especially critical to involve District officials at this stage, as they are ultimately responsible for approving the by-laws. The District officials are also in an advantageous position to encourage similar by-law modifications in other sub-counties within their Districts.

Implementation to Address Challenges

The project sought to provide solutions to ensure healthy families and a thriving ecosystem, thereby improving the quality of life for impoverished and remote communities that depend on natural resources for sustenance and livelihoods. Capacity building for community members focused on understanding population dynamics, promoting public health and encouraging the means for environmental conservation. Sexual and reproductive health, including family planning, and environmental conservation practices were key areas of the training. Using this knowledge, community members identified improvements in interrelated health and environmental practices that would allow them to improve their
Selected By-Laws for Jaguzi Island

Health By-Laws

1. Every pregnant woman should go for antenatal care services accompanied by the husband, and deliver at the health facility.

2. All children under five must complete their immunization schedules. Any household found resisting immunization services will be handed over to police.

Environmental By-Laws

1. Every household must have a latrine, tippy tap, drying rack, and wash room. Any household without a pit latrine will be subject to arrest.

2. Every Thursday each member of the community must contribute to community services such as cleaning the health facility, landing sites, and water collection points. Anyone who does not abide by this will be fined USh 10,000/=.

3. No one is allowed to wash clothes, bathe, or defecate at the landing sites, in the lake, or any open space. Anyone found doing so will be fined USh 20,000/= or one week of community service.

4. No trespassing in the protected fish breeding zones area. Anyone doing so will be fined USh 10,000/= or one week community services or both.

5. No one is allowed to cut trees around the breeding zone. Anyone doing so will be charged under the NEMA laws.

Fisheries By-Laws

1. Beach Management Unit (BMU) members involved in or supporting illegal fishing will be fired from holding any position on a BMU committee or any other community committee and handed over to police.

2. No one is allowed to fish in the fish breeding zones. Anyone found doing so will be fined USh 500,000=.

Formulating and Amending the By-Laws

HoPE-LVB team's conviction that an integrated approach held promise for sustainable development in project sites created an opportunity to engage with communities in identifying means of ensuring continued and sustainable progress. In these follow-up meetings it was noted that while there are structures in place to govern the communities, there were either no local by-laws, or if any, they were weak and in need of revision. To counter this, HoPE-LVB staff worked with community members and leaders, and District officials to formulate localized by-laws, which were uniquely designed for the administrative areas where the project is implemented. The group reviewed and amended the existing community by-laws and added new by-laws where gaps existed. They further deliberated on how to best operationalize these community by-laws.

The proposed by-laws focused on key issues related to population, health, and the environment. They were discussed at the village level and approved by the Sub-County through a process guided by the technical leaders, such as the local health officer, the forestry officer, and the head of the Beach Management Unit, who oversees fisheries.

Public Hearings and Participation

The by-laws drafted by representatives of various interest groups were then vetted by community members. The HoPE-LVB team, the Sub-County councilors and local village leaders took the lead in organizing these meetings. They leveraged existing meetings of beach management units and women’s groups to engage members of key community groups. These leaders discussed in detail what the by-laws mean to everyone in the community. In these consultative meetings, community members committed themselves to observing the by-laws and popularizing them using their different platforms. This process helps to ensure ownership once the by-laws are passed.
Final Documentation

Sub-County executives, local leaders, and the Council met to discuss the new ideas brought in after the public debate. The proposed laws were also cross-checked to ensure they do not contradict any existing local laws. Following a rigorous review, the team of local officials compiled and validated the final document.

Approvals

With the approval of the Sub-County Council, the by-laws were ready to take effect immediately, and will become official once the District level provides the required stamp. Unfortunately, the prior District Administration was unable to provide the required stamp before they had to leave office, so the HoPE team, sub-County councilors and leaders are working with the new District leadership to secure the required stamp.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Challenges

- Effective execution of the fishing-related by-laws was sometimes obstructed, as violators had informants within the Council, who in most cases would alert them of a planned patrol, allowing them to hide any illegal activities. Discussion continues on ways to improve the by-laws, as some have been criticized as being too harsh, or even viewed as infringing on individual rights. Some influential community leaders who were party to the illegal activities and felt that the amended by-laws would affect them, voiced strong opposition. Their contradictory views confused community members, some of whom joined the opposing team, but were later converted after a massive sensitization effort.

- Changing cultural norms and traditional beliefs around health facility-based antenatal care and delivery presents many challenges. HoPE-LVB is addressing these challenges by training young mothers to lead groups of their peers and provide them with new information on topics that affect their lives, including family planning, maternal care, and child health. The project is also upgrading health facilities and providing refresher training for health staff to improve the quality of services and support the behavior change initiatives.

Lessons Learned

- The project and the communities themselves recognized that adopting and enforcing local policies, by-laws, and ordinances was fundamental to creating sustainable change. Providing inclusive platforms for the entire community to deliberate on issues affecting their health, environment, and livelihoods empowered community members to identify critical issues and develop by-laws.

- Communication and information-sharing among all stakeholders was a key element in the successful adoption of these by-laws.

Next Steps

The HoPE-LVB team is leveraging this experience by sharing the benefits of community-led by-laws with other Sub-Counties, both in the project Districts and beyond. We envision that this participatory process in local governance will support and encourage community ownership and stewardship over their health and environment. The HoPE-LVB experience should be reflected upon more widely as a means to advocate for a community-led sustainable development process. At scale, this process will contribute to Uganda’s success in meeting its own national development priorities and to progress towards the global Sustainable Development Goals.

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