



**Self Help
Africa**

FUNCTIONAL LANDSCAPE APPROACH (FLA)



THE CHALLENGE

Farms in Africa have to deliver a wide range of services: food and income for farming households; food for rapidly growing urban populations; decent employment for the youth and landless; clean ground and surface water; carbon sequestration and reduced greenhouse gas emissions; biodiversity; timber, firewood, charcoal and non-timber forest products; and a safe environment for rural communities free from the risk of landslides and floods.

Farms have to deliver these services in the face of reductions in land holding size, high demand for good quality and sometimes irrigable land, pressure to cultivate land unsuitable for agriculture, new and unpredictable markets and changes to the climate.

Delivering many of these services requires coordinated action at the landscape level. While farming households are more or less free to decide how they use their land, subject to socio-economic, gender and cultural norms, managing how the landscape is used requires the cooperation of a range of stakeholders who hold different types of land adjacent to one another, have very different powers and may have conflicting interests.

Wetlands provide many ecosystem services: filtering and storing water, controlling floods, producing raw materials, providing sites for seasonal cultivation and grazing, as well as hosting biodiversity and even creating local rainfall. Cultivation of wetlands has increased in the face of population growth, climate and economic change, with major irrigation schemes and small-scale farming in these areas. While many countries have embraced more contemporary and progressive policies towards wetlands that recognise the links between ecosystem services and livelihood benefits, highlighted by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2005, for others entrenched and outdated notions of 'wetlands as wastelands' to be 'reclaimed' tend to persist and hinder progress towards sustainable development.

Maintaining cultivation in wetlands can be challenging, especially with eroding catchments, as wetland agricultural resources can be degraded. Converting wetlands into agricultural land reduces biodiversity; it reduces water storage capacity in the hydrological system, resulting in higher flood pulses and reduced surface and groundwater flows in the dry season. This can result in the increased emissions of greenhouse gas through the oxidation of organic matter and the release of methane. While some African countries have taken a strict conservation approach to wetlands, banning any further conversion of these areas, this conservationist approach can seriously undermine the livelihoods and food security of communities that live in wetland areas, or that rely on products

from wetlands. Managing wetlands has to take cognizance of their multiple roles in meeting Sustainable Development Goals.

Wetlands are a particularly challenging environment to manage sustainably as they are affected by activities taking place in the surrounding catchment, that may cover 100s of km.* Upstream users may be asked to make sacrifices in time and resources, such as reducing runoff from their cropland, that may ultimately benefit the downstream users more than the upstream users.

The Functional Landscape Approach (FLA) presented in this paper aims to reconcile the practices of wetland and catchment users so as to manage wetlands and their catchments in a manner that sustainably enhances livelihoods and the environment. The FLA is based on the premise that the long-term health of wetland ecosystems can only be guaranteed if communities using the wetlands and those in the surrounding catchments apply practices which ensure they are food secure and can enjoy decent and sustainable standards of living.

THE FUNCTIONAL LANDSCAPE APPROACH

A) THE APPROACH

The Functional Landscape Approach (FLA) was developed by Wetland Action, focusing on how wetland systems in rural sub-Saharan Africa can contribute to environmentally sensitive and climate resilient strategies for safeguarding essential ecosystem services, and improve livelihoods and well-being. In particular, the FLA stresses the ways in which land productivity can be improved through supporting, strengthening or re-establishing functional linkages - especially in terms of water, soil and nutrients, between different landscape units, such as wetlands and their catchments.

This provides a basis for local identification of specific interventions to improve the productivity and sustainability of land use. Crucially, it also emphasises the need for community-based institutional support and the importance of incentives through market linkages and value-chain development.

The functional landscape approach (FLA) is a way of thinking about the management of the total natural resource base of a community - the landscape - and how to use it in an innovative way to increase production in a sustainable manner, balancing economic and ecological considerations.

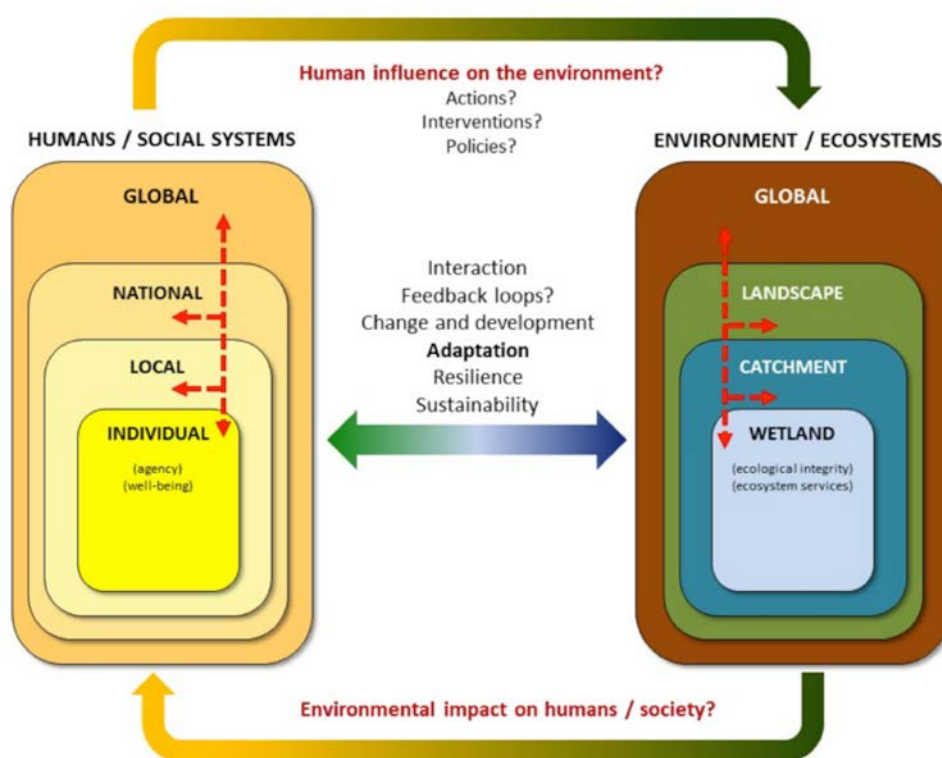
* In 1961 each hectare of arable land in SSA supported 2 people but by 2016 each hectare had to support 4.7 people (World Bank, FAO Stat <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.ARBL.HA.PC?locations=ZF&view=chart>).

It stresses that the landscape is made up of different units, from the uplands to valleys, which function in different, but inter-connected, ways. In order to effectively achieve increased food production and enhanced ecosystem service provision across the landscape it is necessary to understand how those landscape units function and are interlinked.

The FLA takes a social-ecological approach, recognising that it is the management of the land by people, combining external and local knowledge, which is central to enhancing the natural resource base and achieving sustainable improvements in food production. It also stresses that in order to motivate efforts to ensure sustainable use and enhanced production, there must be economic benefits for farmers resulting from applying the FLA.

This not only means understanding farm household economic resources and constraints, but also communities' social networks and governance institutions and the policy environment within which communities and households make decisions. The approach seeks to achieve win-win outcomes for environment and society, placing particular emphasis on embedding such thinking within and across government, local and community-based institutions.

SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS AND THE FUNCTIONAL LANDSCAPE APPROACH



The application of the FLA should help achieve:

- Improved livelihoods of households** through increased income or higher yields from a given area due to technical innovations in land management practices, especially managing water and nutrient flows, new crop opportunities and better marketing and processing of crops.
- Maintenance and improvement of the natural resource base** in a sustainable manner to provide ecosystem services and public goods.
- Enhanced reliability and resilience of harvests** in the face of challenges from climate change, economic developments and population growth, with benefits in terms of food security and improved nutrition.
- Strengthened community action** in addressing poverty and improving livelihoods, with community institutions coordinating community actions and responses to challenges – such as disaster risk reduction.
- Accumulation of assets** by farmers from their increased incomes, providing a buffer against poor harvests and enabling investment in enterprise diversification through on-farm and off-farm activities that would spread risks.
- Poverty reduction and gender empowerment** through the development of savings and loans groups as the benefits of increased incomes are spread around the community.

B) FLA INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE RESILIENCE AND FUNCTIONAL LINKAGES

There are a number of measures which can be used to implement the FLA. These can be grouped in terms of their contribution to adaptive, absorptive or transformative aspects of resilience, while some are more generic to the approach as a whole. Together they form the FLA toolbox.

- **Adaptive interventions:** These specifically involve the adaptation of existing natural resource management practices with measures such as conservation agriculture practices in rainfed farming, agro-forestry, new varieties of crops, high efficiency irrigation systems, soil and water conservation measures, etc.
- **Absorptive interventions:** Such measures are the result of the successful introduction of adaptive measures which enable households to build up their assets, in terms of nutrition, health, money, livestock, insurance and social capital, creating a cushion with which to cope with / absorb climatic, economic or other shocks.
- **Transformative interventions:** These include the way in which both adaptive and absorptive measures allow households to diversify the enterprises they undertake to build their livelihoods. Interventions can include growing specialist crops for long-distance trade, or investing accumulated assets into new enterprises such as village shops or construction of urban houses for rent. Transformative interventions also change traditional power dynamics to provide equitable control over resources for all resource users.

A key element throughout these interventions is diversification, whether it be of farming practices and crops, or in the range of enterprises, knowledge, and socio-economic linkages. These are all based on the improved functioning of the landscape units and the resulting enhanced production. This is the way to build a resilient and sustainable pathway for improved livelihoods.

C) FLA TOOLBOX

A number of toolkits have also been developed to help address specific aspects. These cover areas such as:

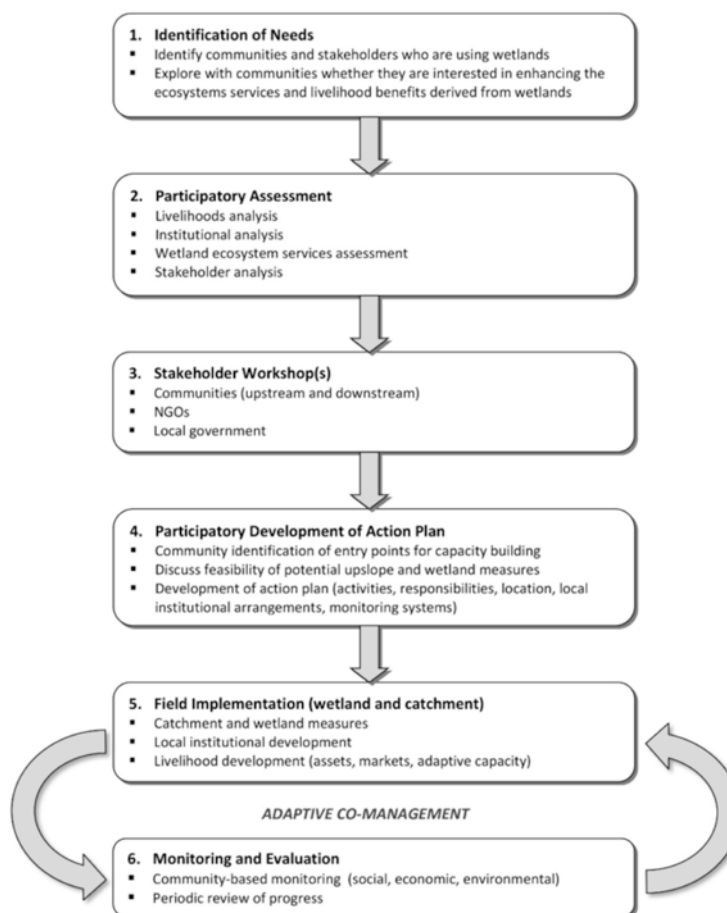
- Participatory methods for landscape and socio-economic resource assessment, problem analysis and problem-solving.
- Local and external knowledge for wetland and catchment management.
- Community institutions for the FLA.
- By-law development for guiding landscape management.

- Community-led monitoring of environmental and socio-economic change.
- Making money from wetlands and the FLA, using market analysis and development.
- In addition, SHA has developed tools to understand and address gender and nutrition issues in wetland and catchment management.

For more information, please visit www.wetlandaction.org

D) STEPS IN IMPLEMENTATION – WHERE TO START

Using the FLA must involve discussions with the communities to explore their situation, identify problems they prioritise and also consider possible areas for action. Building on community-based needs assessment and analysis of the field situation through a participatory process, usually including transect walks, different communities and interest groups in the project area can be engaged in a workshop to review current understanding, drawing on local knowledge and external assessments. From this action planning can be developed, identifying specific measures for each different landscape unit to improve their functioning, productivity and sustainability, as well as linkages across the landscape. Implementing the FLA Action Plan requires community capacity development and organisation with institutional arrangements to support farmers, and groups of farmers, so as to coordinate their interventions and then to monitor and evaluate their impacts. This process is summarised in the following diagram.



FLA IN SELF HELP AFRICA

WHY SHOULD SELF-HELP AFRICA USE THE FUNCTIONAL LANDSCAPE APPROACH?

The FLA provides a key contribution to adaptation and resilience in wetlands and their catchments, and is a key component of SHA Resilience Programming Framework.

A) CONTEXT OF THE FLA WITHIN THE RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK OF SHA

SHA defines Resilience as: *The ability of a system (countries, communities, and households) to anticipate, adapt to, and/or recover from the effects of shocks and stresses in a manner that protects livelihoods, accelerates and sustains recovery, and supports economic and social development.*

Our resilience programming framework is based on three integrated and complementary resilience outcomes:

- 1. Food and Economic** - works with smallholders to enhance and secure their production and increase their income through value-addition; promoting 'off-farm' income generating opportunities; nutrition-sensitive programmes; behavioural change approach and gender-equality focused activities;
- 2. Ecological** - enhanced management and conservation of water resources, water harvesting and the adoption of land management practices that reduce soil and water loss; Agroforestry systems that make use of trees and shrubs for multiple benefits, including soil fertility; Conservation Agriculture which uses minimal soil disturbance, permanent soil cover and crop rotations, thereby contributing to crop diversification, and high water infiltration for reduced surface soil runoff and erosion; promoting the functional landscape approach (FLA) to restore and maintain the functioning of natural resource linkages; and
- 3. Organisational** - strong farmer organisations; local resource management structures; and promoting linkages with higher levels of government structures, to support enhanced management practices.

SHA's framework for resilience programming provided below is consistent with and supports recent conceptual studies aimed at defining the temporal (time) scales of three distinct adaptation responses that should result from effective resilience programming, shown in the middle of the framework (absorptive, adaptive and transformative). The FLA has a key role to play in all three (as outlined in part (b) in the previous section).

Absorptive Capacity: is exercised both during and after a disturbance, to reduce the immediate impact on livelihoods and basic needs, and recover quickly.

FLA interventions:

- i) Building households' asset base, including food, savings, and access to loans and humanitarian support, so that the impact of shocks is lessened and households recover more quickly.
- ii) Construction of soil and water conservation structures to stabilise slopes, improve infiltration and slow water run-off so as to reduce the risks of flooding and landslides.
- iii) Strengthening Early Warning Systems to enable communities to take appropriate action before a shock occurs: planting sorghum instead of maize when an El Nino drought is forecast, evacuating households from flood plains when flooding is expected.

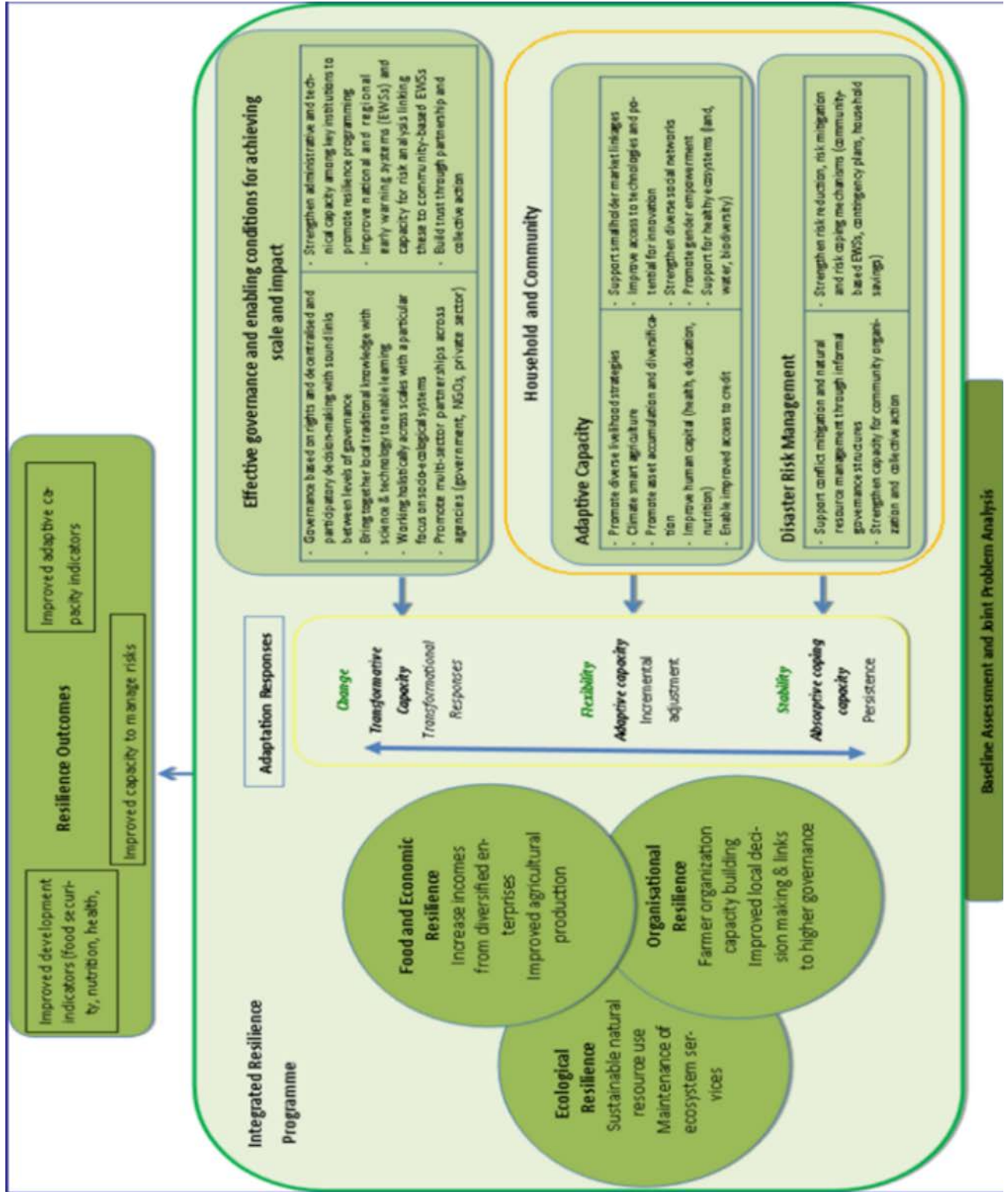
Adaptive Capacity: ability to effectively respond to changing conditions and take advantage of opportunities. Reducing vulnerability to future events

FLA intervention: Providing training in **new livelihood methods and enterprises** so that households can alter existing livelihood strategies to better exploit changing current and future conditions.

Transformative Capacity: systemic changes that improve governance and enabling conditions in crisis management

FLA intervention:

- i) Supporting households to develop more diverse livelihood **enterprises**, some of which are less weather dependent and liable to other shocks, and which make use of new opportunities, especially in activities linked to local and distant markets.
- ii) Addressing gender constraints that prevent women from actively managing catchments.



B) FLA IN PRACTICE

Some of our work mentioned in this table is featured in FAO's publication *Watershed Management in Action, Lessons Learned from FAO Field Projects (2017)*, where Self Help Africa's project in Zambia Integrated Watershed Management was cited as a best practice example.

In this project, the planning process involved representatives of farmers' associations, cooperatives, traditional rulers and local government and line ministries from the start, through meetings and in a participatory manner.

Local people were involved up front in planning, implementation, follow-up and maintenance of watershed activities.

Government extension officers in charge of agriculture camps within the watershed worked in collaboration with the community to implement the watershed plan.

With a view to impacting to scale there was in addition active involvement of provincial government officials in the

Activity	Zambia	Malawi	Uganda	Burkina Faso
Village Natural Resource Management Committee	X	X	X	X
Village Land Use Plan / Zoning	X	X	X	
Catchment afforestation	x	x	X	X
Village fuelwood lots	X	X		
Contour ridges / terraces for soil and water conservation	X	X	X	X
Climate Smart Agriculture	X	X	X	X
Agroforestry			X	
Controlled grazing/ rotational grazing	x	x		X
Creation of Buffer Zones of Natural Vegetation at the edge of wetlands to filter silt, create fish and bird breeding sites and reduce riverbank erosion.	X	X	x	
Natural vegetation zones at the centre of wetlands to provide wildlife and biodiversity refuges.	X	X		
Structures to manage overland water flows	X	X		X
Raised and basin beds for water management	X	X		X
Use of organic compost to improve water infiltration and nutrient retention.	X	X	X	
Excavation of Shallow wells in wetland margins	X	X		
New market linkages	X	X	X	X
Farm enterprise diversification	X	X	X	X
Off-farm diversification	X	X	X	X

Table 1: Countries where SHA is applying FLA principles and practices

ministries of agriculture, livestock, water and energy, forestry, community development and social welfare.

C) KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND BEST PRACTICES IN FLA

Drawing on the lessons learned from project examples recommended best practices of the FLA approach can be identified. These include:

- **Scale** – consider the whole landscape when defining an intervention area.
- **Landscape units** – identify the different units in the landscape and consider how they function and interact.
- **Participatory approach** – ensure the community leads the change process by engaging and empowering it in the process of reviewing its needs and challenges, and selecting possible solutions.
- **Local knowledge** - respect and build on local knowledge with external knowledge reviewed by communities and assessed as to its relevance.
- **Social-ecological perspective** – use a holistic perspective which considers all ecosystem services, farmers' economic situation, social and institutional factors, land ownership and inheritance, market opportunities and policies; and how traditional structures co-exist with formal government structures,
- **Inclusion in FLA planning** – *horizontal*: ensure representation of all affected members of these communities, including marginalised ethnicities, women, youth, landless sharecroppers, and day/casual labourers (ganyu); use innovative approaches to record and address the concerns of stakeholders who may be technically illegal (hunters, charcoal burners, artisanal miners), or seasonal users (nomadic pastoralists); apply liaison and dispute resolution methods between upstream/upslope and downstream/downslope committees; integrate with governance structures, and *vertical*: ensure linkages from lowest community levels through various government levels.
- **Coordination** – across the landscape units, especially upstream/upslope (dryland) and downstream (wetland) units, watershed and catchment management and production and marketing advice.
- **Exploratory testing of innovations** – engage community members in testing innovations to ensure they are appropriate to ecological, economic and social realities before they are scaled up.
- **Community-based extension** and monitoring approaches - use of lead farmers and farmer to farmer extension and monitoring responsibilities.

The Functional Landscape Approach is a holistic and trans-disciplinary methodology that contributes to and enhances the implementation of SHA's resilience framework. From the range of actions and outcomes in the SHA projects which have applied the FLA, and the on-going monitoring and evaluation with verifiable and measurable indicators, it is evident that this approach helps build absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacity and contributes to development which is sustainable in ecological, economic and social terms.

An example of the contribution this approach can make to long term sustainable development comes from an ex post evaluation conducted in July 2019 on a selection of four dambos in Zambia and Malawi where the Striking a Balance (SAB) project had been implemented some ten years previously. It was found that cultivation in the dambos continued and many of the management by-laws and institutional mechanisms established by the project were still being adhered to and monitored, such that the ecological impact of the cultivation was small or moderate. After ten years of practice, local livelihoods had been enhanced: this suggests that adoption of dambo cultivation, when undertaken along with the guidance generated by the SAB project, appears to have promoted a sustainable route for livelihood development (including food security in the face of climate change and enterprise diversification) which does not have serious environmental impacts and can be continued.

D) HOW CAN RESEARCH CONTRIBUTE TO FLA?

SHA works with communities, government research agencies and universities to encourage adaptive co-management of the Functional Landscape Approach so that there is continual learning and improvement, as well as the generation of further evidence to back the scaling up of the approach in the future. Research focuses on the following issues:

Adapting FLA to new socio-economic challenges and opportunities

While there have been studies in Zambia and Malawi on the impact of the FLA over ten years in four sites, new field evidence is required to adapt FLA to the continually changing socio-economic and climatic environment. Growing urban populations require water and land, and as poverty levels reduce across Africa, consumers adopt more water intensive diets that will create new economic opportunities for farmers but will require irrigation. The demand for food by the urban centres has encouraged investment in agriculture by city-based businesses, who are buying and consolidating farms. Some wetland users may now be "telephone farmers", no longer living within the catchments and not part of community management

structures (Jayne et al., 2016). Where wetlands have been traditionally owned and managed by older men, women and youth are demanding a fair share of land and resources.

Delivery of Nutritious Diets

Many of the areas where SHA works have stubbornly high levels of chronic malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. As well as delivering environmental and economic services, wetlands need to deliver nutritious diets. Research is required on the integration of crops, livestock and agroforestry within the FLA to diversify diets, and on the flow of nutrients through catchments, and how this effects micronutrient levels in crops, livestock and the diet.

Remote Sensing

Donavan Kotze and Adrian Wood's work has demonstrated the viability of rapid appraisal techniques for assessing wetland health and productivity. These techniques can be used to build, train and test artificial intelligence, and machine learning algorithms to classify the health of wetland ecosystems using remote sensing imagery from satellites and drones. These algorithms can then be used to identify wetlands in poor health for targeting by FLA projects, for tracking and conducting ex-post evaluations. Remote sensing approaches are also under development to assess the carbon stocks of wetlands and greenhouse gas emissions that can be integrated into the FLA.

Sustainable land management

The Functional Landscape Approach (FLA) was developed to safeguard wetland systems in rural sub-Saharan Africa. There is considerable potential to apply FLA principles to other ecosystems and landscapes, such as forests and rangelands, and to address specific problems, like river siltation, eutrophication of water bodies and declining fish populations. Expanding the application of FLA will require action research to integrate tools, approaches and learning from other disciplines, including forestry, fisheries, rangeland management, wildlife ecology and social science.

Economics of FLA

A key principle of FLA is the provision of sustainable livelihoods for the communities across the landscape. Achieving this requires economic assessments of FLA interventions that cover both the direct economic returns to the producers (Gross Margins, NPV and Returns on Investment) and the full economic impact, including externalities, such as greenhouse gas emissions, and public goods, such as water storage. The rapidly changing economies in Africa are creating new market opportunities for producers; however new products will not sell themselves and FLA interventions need to be linked to value chains. Developments in Payments for Economic Services

and catchment users but, if poorly managed, may also result in the “elite capture” of wetland resources.

Sustainability of community institutions

FLA is based on community action managed by community institutions. Community institutions have been a core part of rural development practice for many years, resulting in the formation of a plethora of local committees, often with overlapping membership and mandates, few of which survive once the project ends. Working with social scientists SHA will conduct ex post studies to determine the factors that make community institutions sustainable and give them long term respect and legitimacy (see for example, Dixon and Carrie, 2015) This is particularly challenging for FLA as community institutions have to work across landscapes and between communities to address the conflicting needs of upstream and downstream users.



SOME USEFUL RESOURCES

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World Bank Open Data: <https://data.worldbank.org/>

FAO has some information on wetlands at <http://www.fao.org/tc/exact/sustainable-agriculture-platform-pilot-website/wetlands-management/en/>. Data on wetlands can be found at <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#home>, and <http://www.fao.org/nr/water/aquastat/data/query/index.html?lang=en>



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