

SEAL THE DEAL: UN lends a hand to community efforts to adapt to climate change



Eroded and deforested slopes in Jamaica's Blue Mountains

13 October 2009 – With small communities the least equipped to cope with climate change, a United Nations-backed pilot project is helping to boost their resistance to coastal erosion, sea-level rise, increasingly erratic rainfall, and other effects of global warming.

Ten countries are taking part in the Community-Based Adaptation (CBA) scheme, an initiative of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) which is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), a global partnership among 178 countries, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector to address global environmental issues.

“We provide the technical support to the communities who want to understand what climate change is and how they could potentially deal with it,” said Pradeep Kurukulasuriya, a UNDP technical advisor for GEF Adaptation Programming.

One of the CBA initiatives in Jamaica, a pilot country, seeks to help farmers in the Caribbean nation’s Blue Mountains, where high-value cool-climate crops such as coffee are grown and which also serves as a watershed to the country’s capital, Kingston.

Climate change is projected to increase the frequency and intensity of hurricanes and strong storms, while causing rainfall levels to decline, resulting in erosion and landslides in the region. This, coupled with unsustainable land management practices including slash and burn, which involves cutting and burning forests to create agricultural fields, is expected to make the area increasingly unsuited for farming crops requiring cool and moist climates.

The initiative aims to reforest slopes vulnerable to climate-driven erosion and landslides, as well as to promote soil conservation techniques and alternative livelihood practices.

“There is consultation with the communities at every level,” said Dale Rankine, National Coordinator of GEF’s Small Grants Programme (SGP).

“We engage and empower all communities,” he said, underscoring the importance of local-level engagement in adaptation projects.

Nations are expected to ‘seal the deal’ on a new climate change agreement – intended to go into effect after the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol ends in 2012 – this December in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Along with emissions reductions targets by industrialized nations, helping developing countries adapt to global warming’s effects is also a large component of the pact set to be reached in the Danish capital.

Mr. Rankine stressed the importance of the needs of local communities being taken into account in global treaties on climate change. “If we continue to develop projects at the international level and decrease at the local level, [a Copenhagen deal] is going to fail,” he said.

While many in Kazakhstan, another CBA pilot country, may not understand the global scale of climate change, they are well aware of declining precipitation and rising temperatures locally, said Stanislav Kim, Mr. Rankine’s counterpart in the Central Asian nation.

Last year was the driest in the past three decades, he said, and as temperatures creep up, vegetation typically found in Kazakhstan’s south has been increasingly spotted in the north.

With a large portion of the country’s population relying on agriculture as a primary source of income, changing rainfall patterns is “the most critical” issue, according to Mr. Kim.

The nine CBA projects in Kazakhstan seek to address climate-related threats, including increased risks of drought, soil salinization and erosion.

The sense of ‘community’ is slightly different in Kazakhstan than it is in other parts of the world, he said, since during the Soviet era, artificial settlements comprising people of disparate groups were forced to live together.

As a result, a community is oftentimes “not a real force,” Mr. Kim said, with people living within them “not feeling common unity.”

The CBA projects seek to highlight the importance of cooperation within communities in adapting to climate change, he noted.

Also opening the door to the possibility to change within communities are CBA projects in Samoa, where the seven projects that are part of the initiative are allowing the voices of more community members to be heard in determining how to protect the nation against encroaching climate change.

“Generally, in a highly structured and stratified society like Samoa, decisions are mainly made by the Matai or chiefly council,” according to Sala Pio Tagiilima, who serves as the Sub-Regional Coordinator for the SGP in the Pacific island nation.

With Samoans worried about the impact of climate change, ranging from coastal flooding to prolonged droughts, the CBA programme, he noted, “has given the opportunity for everyone to express their views and raise important issues to be incorporated” into it.

The nation’s leader, Prime Minister Tuila’epa Lupesoliai Sailele Malielegaoi, highlighted at the General Assembly’s annual high-level debate last month that reaching a climate change agreement in Copenhagen will be a “test of multilateral solidarity.”

Mr. Malielegaoi said time was already running out, especially for small island nations such as his own.

“Playing the ‘blame and shame’ tactics, or ‘waiting to be led but not willing to lead,’ are no longer options. For no single nation, no single group of nations, and no single organization on its own can win the war against climate change,” he said.

The other seven countries taking part in the CBA programme are Bangladesh, Bolivia, Guatemala, Morocco, Namibia, Niger and Viet Nam. Each nation is expected to develop, plan and implement up to 20 community-level schemes, and it is hoped that communities in other nations will be able to replicate their successes.