Equator Initiative Case Studies
Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

UPLIFT THE RURAL POOR
Uganda

 Empowered lives. Resilient nations.
Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative. The Equator Initiative aims to fill that gap.

The Equator Prize 2014 was awarded to 35 outstanding local community and indigenous peoples initiatives working to meet climate and development challenges through the conservation and sustainable use of nature. Selected from 1,234 nomination from across 121 countries, the winners were recognized for their achievements at a prize ceremony held in conjunction with the UN Secretary General's Climate Summit and the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in New York City. Special emphasis was placed on forest and ecosystem restoration, food security and agriculture, and water and ocean management. The following case study is one in a growing series that describes vetted and peer-reviewed best practices intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to *The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize*, a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.

**Editors**

*Editor-in-Chief:* Joseph Corcoran  
*Contributing Editor:* Anne Virnig

**Contributing Writers**

Anthony von Arx, Tiffany Challe, Elle Chang, Joseph Corcoran, Lorena De La Parra Landa, Eva Gurria, Anthony Halley, Qiang Li, Kathryn McCann, John Mulqueen, Maryka Paquette, Deganit Perez, Alejandra Pero, Alan Pierce, Daina Ruback, Elizabeth Shaw, Martin Sommerschuh, Anne Virnig, Joshua Voges

**Design**

Kimberly Koserowski

**Acknowledgements**

The Equator Initiative acknowledges with gratitude the support of Uplift the Rural Poor, in particular the guidance and input of Beatrice Kabihogo. Photos courtesy of Uplift the Rural Poor. Maps courtesy of the CIA World Factbook and Wikipedia.

**Suggested Citation**

PROJECT SUMMARY

Uplift the Rural Poor was founded to improve the livelihoods of communities living adjacent to a series of three biodiversity-rich protected areas in Uganda: Bwindi Gorilla National Park, Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, and Echuya Forest Reserve. Uplift the Rural Poor works to reduce pressure on forest resources and an important gorilla habitat, while also creating alternative livelihood strategies. The organization focuses on capacity building, community-driven planning and monitoring, bamboo domestication, climate change adaptation, potato farming, and safe water access.

The organization’s primary achievement has been strengthening the relationship between rural communities and management authorities responsible for the three critical protected areas. The organization effectively supports community participation in natural resource management and local development plans, thus empowering forest-dependent communities. Rainwater harvesting tanks, owned and operated mostly by women, have been built in 20 water-stressed communities. A series of village savings and loans programmes has helped to create small-scale businesses, while also reducing debt and reliance on moneylenders.

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KEY FACTS

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2014
FOUNDED: 2001
LOCATION: Kisoro District, Uganda
BENEFICIARIES: 88 villages across 9 parishes
AREA OF FOCUS: Protected area management and alternative livelihood development
Uplift the Rural Poor is a community-based organization in Uganda’s Kisoro District. It was founded in 2001 to strengthen community engagement in the management of nearby protected areas that are host to high levels of animal and plant diversity. The initiative promotes community livelihoods through the sustainable management of the protected areas.

**Kisoro District: the people and the landscape**

Kisoro District is in southwestern Uganda, bordering Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It covers an area of approximately 701.4 square kilometres. About 3.88 percent of the district is covered by open water, another 2.95 percent by wetlands, and 1 percent by national forest reserves. The district is mountainous and hilly, with an average altitude of 1,980 metres above sea level. Due to the delicate nature of the environment and the pressure of a rapidly increasing population directly depending on natural resources for their livelihoods, the natural environment in Kisoro District is under severe threat of degradation.

In 2014, the population of Kisoro District was estimated at approximately 287,179, with a growth rate of 2.21 percent. The area is inhabited primarily by Bafumbira ethnic group, comprised of the Bahuutu, Batutsi, and Batwa tribes. The Batwa are a minority pygmy indigenous group who traditionally lived in the Bwindi, Mgahinga, and Echuya forests before the forests were gazetted as National Parks and forest reserves. Despite the Batwa's strong dependence on the forest for their culture and livelihoods, they were evicted from the Bwindi, Mgahinga, and Echuya forests by the colonial administration in the 1930s in order to create 'pristine' conservation areas. Since then, government or non-governmental sectors have provided negligible support to the Batwa, leaving them economically marginalized and with some of the highest infant mortality rates and lowest life expectancies in the country. The society is patrilineal, with property ownership transferred through men, final decisions on land use typically made by men, and more than 80 percent of men exerting control over cash crops and income. Although it is the women who perform much of the hard labor of planting and harvesting crops, men have control over the sale and profits from these goods.

Agriculture forms the backbone of the economy of Kisoro District. Most of the agriculture is on a subsistence level, with prominent crops including maize, sorghum, potatoes, beans, cabbages, onions, and bananas. Livestock is a privilege of the wealthy. Traditionally, Bafumbira managed their land collectively and engaged in crop sharing. Population growth, however, has led to land fragmentation, individual land titling and ownership, and a resulting downturn in agricultural production due to decreased fallow time. As a result of inefficient agricultural practices, which return poor yields and lead to environmental degradation, local people are increasingly encroaching on nearby protected areas to access food, firewood, and other natural resources.
**Working at the confluence of three protected areas**

Uplift the Rural Poor works at the confluence of three different protected areas: Bwindi, Mgahinga, and Echuya. Bwindi Gorilla National Park is an impenetrable forest found in southwest Uganda that was upgraded to become a national park in 1992 due to its high biodiversity and its role as a habitat for one of the few remaining populations of mountain gorillas in the world. The park was declared a Natural World Heritage Site in December 1994, under UNESCO’s World Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Mgahinga is an important forest ecosystem that is, like Bwindi, home to threatened populations of mountain gorillas. Mgahinga and Bwindi are part of the Greater Virunga Landscape, a globally recognized biodiversity hotspot that spans three countries and includes three World Heritage Sites, a Ramsar Cite, and a Man and Biosphere Reserve. The third protected area in which Uplift the Rural Poor works is Echuya, a montane forest reserve also in southwestern Uganda that borders Rwanda. Echuya boasts high biodiversity and serves as an important source of ecosystem services and livelihoods for the communities living adjacent to the park. It is known to host the globally threatened bird species of Grauer’s Swamp-warbler (*Bradypterus graueri*) and is dominated by mature *Hagenia-Rapanea* trees, which comprise 80 percent of the forest cover.

**Threatened populations of mountain gorillas**

The region has high ecological importance as home to one of the last remaining populations of the critically threatened mountain gorilla (*Gorilla beringei beringei*). Bwindi alone is inhabited by a population of 340 individual mountain gorillas – commonly referred to as the Bwindi population – that is estimated to be roughly half of all the mountain gorillas remaining in the world. The rest of the remaining mountain gorilla population lives in the nearby Virunga Mountains, which are shared by Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Among the major threats to mountain gorillas are habitat loss and poaching, both of which are exacerbated by poverty, resource insecurity, and a lack of economic opportunity in communities surrounding the protected areas.

**Environmental and economic stresses**

Communities living adjacent to the parks traditionally have been highly dependent on the forests for their livelihoods, sourcing building materials, food, medicine, water, and fuel wood from local forest ecosystems. The initial gazetting of the Bwindi, Mgahinga, and Echuya protected areas, therefore, led to high pressure on the ecosystems surrounding the parks. This period also marked a spike in population growth, which put additional pressure on the area’s natural resources, often leading local communities to illegally enter the parks to harvest forest products. To this day, there remains a high demand for water, firewood, and various forest products with continued rates of illegal incursions into the park territories. These incursions, in the absence of an enforceable sustainable management system, put pressure on trees and non-timber forest products as well as globally important populations of endangered species, including the mountain gorilla. Forest loss has also led to soil erosion, which has left adjacent communities increasingly vulnerable to landslides, floods, and other severe weather events. Forest loss has thus translated to a diminished community capacity to adapt to climate change and to build resilience.

Safe water access has also been a pressing issue. Despite regular rainfall in the region, porous geology and volcanic activities have left water tables too deep to tap. Communities typically walk for three to eight hours in search of water. Some risk illegal entry into Mgahinga National Park, where they also illegally harvest forest resources under the cover of searching for water, whereas others risk leaving their homes at 3 a.m. to start a 25 kilometre journey to water sources such as the Chuho spring or Jinya ponds. Even these distant water sources are often contaminated, leading to high incidences of water-borne diseases, which disproportionately affect children. Only a staggering 1.8 percent of these protected area-adjacent communities have access to safe water.

**Catalysts: marginalization and insufficient community involvement**

The predominant land governance system in the Bwindi and Mgahinga Gorilla National Parks and the Echuya Forest Reserve can be described as collaborative forest management. This is a land tenure arrangement where forest user groups and a ‘Responsible Body (RB)’ share roles, responsibilities, rights, and returns in a forest reserve or part of it. This arrangement is codified in the Government of Uganda’s 2003 Guidelines for Collaborative Forest Management. According to the 1997 Local Government Act, moreover, the Government of Uganda is obligated to decentralize much of the responsibility for governance of natural resources to local governments and sub-county councils (Part IV Articles 31[2]).

Despite the presence of these policies, however, there has been a lack of implementation, leading to limited participation, involvement, and benefit sharing by the communities living around these protected areas. Commercial extraction and resource management activities carried out by the National Forest Authority have been more exploitative than conservation-oriented. Because of the exclusion of local communities and the gazetting approach, illegal entry and extraction activities in the forests have doubled, leading to a lack of trust between government authorities and communities living adjacent to the parks. Uplift the Rural Poor arose in response to this gap between policy and practice, which marginalized local communities by excluding them from the management and use of the region’s natural resources. The organization set out to develop participatory solutions that addressed both government goals and local needs by proposing community-based solutions to sustainable management of protected areas and natural resources across the region.

**Evolution of Uplift the Rural Poor**

In 2001, Uplift the Rural Poor was founded by five people who shared a common concern for reducing dependency on forest resources and improving the livelihoods of households adjacent to the protected areas. Motivated by high levels of poverty, illiteracy, and other challenges faced by local communities, these founding members sought to create sources of income for communities that did not
require the harvesting of natural resources from within protected areas. The organization's name, Uplift the Rural Poor, captured their hope and ambition for the local communities.

In the early stages of the initiative's evolution, the founding members had limited capacity to manage an organization and faced a number of challenges. The group had no office, no management board, no staff, and no form of transportation. The members also had no skills in project proposal writing and therefore struggled to mobilize funds and build partnerships that would advance their vision. They lacked computers or office equipment, and three of the founders were computer illiterate. There was also no internet connectivity in Kisoro District, making it hard to access and share information for even those who were computer literate. After three years of work, Uplift the Rural Poor continued to struggle, leading two of the founders to leave in pursuit of better jobs. In 2004, the three remaining founders carried out a self-evaluation to identify the factors that were hindering the achievement of their objectives.

A number of issues that needed to be addressed came up, among them establishing an office that would serve as a ‘home base’. The founders rallied to open an office and to reformulate the organization's objectives to focus more squarely on the issues directly affecting disadvantaged groups living adjacent to the protected areas. Another major weakness identified during the self-evaluation was the lack of a management board to which the remaining founders were accountable. In response, an Advisory Board of five members was appointed — including two conservationists, an economist, a researcher, and a social worker — to help guide the organization and to ensure transparency and accountability. Articles of association were drawn up to guide the organization's decision-making and a team of four staff was recruited. In the beginning, the highly committed board members and staff offered their services on a voluntary basis, until small contracts with local government and other organizations allowed URP to provide for modest remuneration.

In 2005, Uplift the Rural Poor began looking for collaborators and partners that could provide support in marketing, fundraising, and community mobilization. Through this process, the organization formed connections with Nature Uganda and the Albertine Rift Conservation Society (ARCOS). These partnerships provided Uplift the Rural Poor with the opportunity to participate in capacity building that brought together different civil society organizations (CSOs) working in the Albertine Rift to share experiences and learn from each other. These trainings also brought the organization into contact with the USAID - LINKAGES Programme, which supported Uplift the Rural Poor to improve their working relationship with local government. With the support of these partners, Uplift the Rural Poor began participating in a wide range of training workshops that addressed issues such as gender mainstreaming, climate change adaptation, advocacy, on-farm management, and the sustainable management of bamboo. This helped to strengthen the organization's capacity to achieve its objectives and introduced it to a wide range of potential new collaborators.

Uplift the Rural Poor began to grow in confidence and credibility, leading the Kisoro District local government to select the organization to participate in the development of the district’s CSO accreditation policy. Uplift the Rural Poor is now a regular participant in district local government planning, budgeting, and sector coordination meetings. In collaboration with local communities, the district local government, and key government agencies such as Uganda Wildlife Authority and the National Forest Authority, the organization has formed partnerships with a wide range of national and international NGOs and donor programmes.

Uplift the Rural Poor has emerged as a leader in local best practices to improve rural livelihoods of the less fortunate communities living adjacent to the national parks by ensuring their access to and management of natural resources. It aims to reduce threats to the fragile protected areas and to enhance alternative livelihood options that can benefit the communities without destroying local forests. Its primary objectives are to increase household incomes through the sustainable use of natural resources, enhance opportunities of economically marginalized groups, and conserve the environment through awareness and the adoption of sustainable forest management and crop production methods.

**Governance and institutional structure**

The organization has a highly skilled and committed advisory board composed of five members and four implementing staff. The staff consists of a team leader, two field officers, and one accountant. This team is accountable to the advisory board as well as the Kisoro District Local Government. Through the organization, communities living adjacent to the national parks participate in project identification, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Uplift the Rural Poor implements community-driven projects and collaborates with local government at every step of the process. Roles and responsibilities are shared between the group and the local government during project implementation.
Community-based planning and monitoring

Local governments in Uganda have long emphasized the participation and involvement of local communities in planning processes, but have not always delivered. This failure to include community input in development projects is often justified because of the disjunct between national and local priorities. National development priorities include roads, schools, health centers, and other major infrastructure projects, whereas priorities for communities living adjacent to the protected areas include issues such as resource access, forest management, tenure security, and livelihood diversification. These differences have caused issues of local concern such as natural resource management to be pushed to the side in favor of projects that address national government priorities.

In 2009-2010, in partnership with CARE–Uganda and the USAID-Linkages Programme, Uplift the Rural Poor implemented a Community-Based Planning and Monitoring (CBPM) project to enable the communities of 88 villages in nine parishes adjacent to the protected areas of Kisoro to participate directly in local government planning. The project sought to feed community development priorities into local government development plans and to engage citizens in all stages of policy and planning, from project design to resource mobilization. A parallel goal of the project was to hold policymakers and service providers accountable to the local population. The programme covered a range of sectors including health and sanitation, agriculture, education, environmental conservation, and natural resource management. Within each of the 88 villages where the CBPM programme was launched, Uplift the Rural Poor worked with community members to appoint two village facilitators and to establish village-level profiles that included focused, realistic, and community-oriented objectives and strategies for implementation.

These village profiles have proven to be extremely valuable to articulate key challenges facing communities adjacent to protected areas and supporting the implementation of projects that address local needs. The profiles, for example, emphasized the importance of addressing human-wildlife conflict and the encroachment of animals into agricultural landscapes. As a result of strong local representation on this issue, renovations are underway to strengthen a buffer wall around the Bwindi and Mgahinga Gorilla National Parks. The local government is also addressing this issue by supporting the development of tea plantations. Due to the fact that most animals will not eat tea leaves, tea plantations serve a dual role as a highly effective natural buffer against wildlife incursions and as a source of alternative income for local communities.

One of the main benefits of the community-based planning exercise has been a village-by-village needs assessment, bringing priority issues and challenges to the fore. This approach has highlighted needs such as safe water access, bamboo domestication, better supply chains for potato marketing, and wetland conservation. In response, Uplift the Rural Poor has developed a series of projects that have had sustained impacts for local communities and natural ecosystems across the district.

Improving access to safe water

Among the most important issues identified by local communities was access to safe drinking water. In almost all protected area-adjacent communities, people were walking very long distances to access clean drinking water. The time invested in searching for water takes time away from agriculture and other income generating activities, leading parents to pull children out of school to collect water. This has created high dropout rates that tend to enforce multigenerational cycles of poverty.

Uplift the Rural Poor has prioritized the installation of rainwater harvesting tanks to facilitate community-level access to safe drinking water. In partnership with the Great Virunga Trans-boundary Collaboration, the Embassy of Japan in Uganda, the Uganda Wild Life Authority, and the Kisoro District Local Government, the
initiative has built 27 community rainwater harvesting tanks, each of which is capable of storing 30,000 litres of water. For each tank, an 11-member water user committee has been established. Women have been empowered to assume leadership positions on the water user committees. Communities covered by this project include Gitenderi, Rukongi, Gisozi and Bunagana, all on the periphery of Mgahinga Gorilla National Park. Each community has an average of 250 households, meaning that over 6,250 households have been served by this project.

Each water user committee has an associated village savings and loans association (VSLA), which directs a community savings programme. All of the households in a given village contribute an average of US$0.30 per month to the programme, leading to an annual savings of ca. US$909. The money generated is initially used to upscale the construction of rainwater harvesting tanks throughout a given community. In subsequent years, the VSLA savings are often used to build 10 cubic metre water tanks for each household in the community.

The organization has used a participatory approach in order to ensure the involvement of marginalized groups in water access planning and to create a sense of local ownership over water facilities. While the progress in this area has been substantial, demand for rainwater harvesting tanks and for access to clean water far overwhelms available resources. The desire for increased access to rainwater harvesting tanks affirms the central role URP is playing to meet community needs and points towards a need for water management projects for years to come.

Bamboo domestication

In the Kabale and Kisoro districts, bamboo has traditionally provided building materials, firewood, and craft materials to nearly every household in forest communities. As a consequence, there is a high demand for bamboo within the district and in neighboring counties. The only source of bamboo in Kisoro District, however, is from Echuya Forest Reserve and Mgahinga National Park. Harvesting bamboo stems from Echuya Forest Reserve is regulated by National Forest Authority and strictly restricted to one head load per person per week, with illegal harvesters of bamboo apprehended. The demand for bamboo has caused the Afromontane bamboo forest to decrease by nearly 50 percent in the last 50 years, according to residents of the adjacent communities Banana and Tweheyo. The area occupied by pure bamboo stands in the protected areas has decreased from 20.5 percent to 12.5 percent, and the area of mixed bamboo–hardwood stands has decreased from 48.2 percent to 26.2 percent between 1954 and 2001. As bamboo populations dwindle in protected areas, restrictions on harvesting bamboo are likely to increase, leading to the multiplication of conflicts around access to the resource.

To address this issue, Uplift the Rural Poor in partnership with Nature Uganda, the Nile Basin Transboundary Environmental Action Programme, USAID, ARCoS, the National Forest Authority, and the Kisoro District Directorate of Natural Resources and Community Forest Management Groups, has supported communities around Echuya Forest Reserve to domesticate bamboo on local farms. An essential and integral part of the programme has been to raise awareness of the importance and benefits of biodiversity conservation through television dramas, radio programmes, and community meetings. As a result of this project, two Bamboo Farmer Associations with 240 members have been formed. The associations have focused on planting bamboo to act as a seed source. Demand for bamboo planting material outstrips supply, providing an indication of the importance of this project and of the need for further investment to ensure long-term sustainable use.

Innovation on potato marketing in Kisoro

The potato industry has great, untapped potential in Kisoro due to highly favorable climate and soil conditions. Potato farmers, however, have poor storage practices, leading to the loss of more than 40 percent of their crops. Most farmers also lack links to lucrative markets and do not have the necessary support for packaging, accreditation, and marketing. The gunny bags that are used to store potatoes keep moisture in, which accelerates rotting and leads to heavy losses. The majority of farmers also lack basic skills in harvesting and marketing. As such, they are not able to obtain an adequate price for their produce. To address this, Uplift the Rural Poor, with support from the International Fertilizer Development Center, has provided trainings on proper sanitation, sorting, grading, packaging, and branding for potato farmers. One of the innovations has been the use of environmentally friendly packaging made of bamboo baskets and boxes. The organization continues to work on this initiative with six farming cooperatives in the counties of Muramba, Nyarusiza, Chahi, Kanaba, Murora, and Nyakabande.

Wetland buffer zone management

Agriculture is classified as one of the main land uses in Kisoro District and employs 93.4 percent of the population. The lands of Kisoro are intensively cultivated and highly fragmented due to traditional practices of inheritance and high population density, with an average land holding of just 0.8 hectares. This high demand for land means that cultivation around the ecologically important Lake Mulehe wetland extends up to the edge of the wetland, which is in direct disregard of the national guidelines on the management of lakeshores and river banks.

In response, from 2002 to 2004, IUCN assisted communities around Lake Mulehe in Kisoro District to develop a management plan for the surrounding wetlands. The Lake Mulehe Wetland Management Plan mandates the creation of a buffer of the natural vegetation within seven to ten metres of the wetland edge to ensure healthy ecosystem functioning. Uplift the Rural Poor was selected and funded by IUCN to implement the process of mobilizing landowners and farmers to create this buffer zone. URP focused on species able to perform critical ecosystem services as well as species such as fruit trees and other locally useful plants with the potential to generate income. This approach enabled the organization to minimize the perceived or real losses to households that previously cultivated this land. Uplift the Rural Poor procured all the required trees, supplied them to a total of 267 farmers, and provided technical support and training. This short-term project has provided a strong initial response to wetland degradation. In order to ensure sustainability in the long-term, however, the organization will need to acquire funding to develop consistent monitoring and community engagement programmes.
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Uplift the Rural Poor works around the protected areas of Bwindi and Mgahinga Gorilla National Parks and the Echuya Forest Reserves. The protected areas are conservation hotspots due to their globally important biodiversity. Echuya Forest Reserve is a conservation priority due to its high numbers of species that are endemic, rare, or globally threatened including 127 plant species, 85 bird species, 20 mammal species, 54 butterfly species, and 43 moth species. Of these, eight species of birds are endemic to the Albertine Rift, including Grauer’s Swamp-warbler (Bradypterus graueri), a globally threatened species that occurs in sizeable numbers only in Muchuya swamp and some swamps of Bwindi. Other important species include the Handsome Francolin (Pternistis nobilis), Regal Sunbird (Nectarinia regia), Dusky Crimson-wing (Cryptospiza jacksoni), Stripe-breasted Tit (Parus fasciventer), Collared Apalis (Apalis ruwenzorii), Red-faced Woodland-warbler (Phylloscopus laetus), and Ruwenzori Batis (Batis diops). Bwindi National Park, also known as the Impenetrable Forest, is also known for its high biodiversity, including an important population of mountain gorillas (Gorilla beringei beringei). Both Bwindi and Mgahinga National Park are part of the Greater Virunga Landscape, a global biodiversity hotspot that contains extremely high plant and animal diversity and is highly valued as one of the last remaining areas host to mountain gorillas.

Uplift the Rural Poor has played an important role in working with communities living adjacent to these biodiversity rich parks to ensure that livelihood needs are met without depleting local forests and biodiversity. Livelihood enhancement activities have included rainwater harvesting, bamboo cultivation, village savings groups, and capacity building on sustainable natural resource management and small business development. The organization has also worked on ecosystem management strategies that reduce human-wildlife conflict and ensure that local farmers can grow crops without incursions by wild animals.

Among the main contributions by the organization to sound environmental management has been the negotiation of community forest management plans. These plans have created a reliable source of fuel wood through bamboo domestication and helped to ensure land tenure security and resource access for local communities, however, challenges remain. While the National Forestry Authority has the ability to sell forest resources, communities are still largely prohibited from doing so, creating a double standard and creating tension between resident communities and government authorities.

Uplift the Rural Poor uses different media to spread environmental education and to raise awareness in the local population about the need to protect forests, wildlife, and biodiversity. Drama shows, radio programmes, fact sheets, and brochures in local languages have all been used to reach the local population.

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

Uplift the Rural Poor’s most important contribution toward improving socioeconomic conditions has been its work on community-based planning. The organization has carried out community-based planning strategies in 88 different villages. Each village has produced a village profile that outlines priority issues faced by the community that need to be addressed in order to meet conservation and development needs. Community members in each of the 88 villages have also chosen village facilitators who serve as formal representatives in policymaking processes. Uplift the Rural Poor has trained village facilitators in data aggregation – which enables the use of village-level information in the formation of parish development plans – and in monitoring and evaluation to track the progress of development initiatives.

Access to clean, safe drinking water emerged from the planning process as a clear local priority. Uplift the Rural Poor was able to establish 27 rainwater-harvesting tanks to service 20 different villages and over 6,250 households. This has substantially reduced the amount of time and energy invested by women and children in the collection of water. Similar programmes have been developed
The organization has also been active in promoting alternative income generating activities and improving the efficiency of existing trades. As one example, Uplift the Rural Poor has worked with local potato farmers to help them avoid crop losses – which were sometimes upwards of 40 percent – by packaging and storing their potatoes more efficiently. The group has helped provide capacity building support to improve packaging, sanitation standards, and sorting and grading in order to reach more lucrative markets. Uplift the Rural Poor also connected local potato cooperatives with local artisan associations to replace gunny bags – which accelerated potato rot – with bamboo baskets and boxes.

In partnership with Nature Uganda, Uplift the Rural Poor further developed a capacity-building initiative around Echuya Forest Reserve that supported communities to implement viable income-generating projects and businesses. The initiative emphasized the strong role of local communities in the forest management process and helped communities to select environmentally friendly enterprises. Training provided by Uplift the Rural Poor to these local communities prioritized skills in group dynamics and conflict management in addition to highlighting the importance of participatory objectives for their businesses, keeping records, writing organizational by-laws to manage and guide business activities, and legal registration.

Uplift the Rural Poor has focused a good amount of its programming on empowering women in order to ensure their voices are part of decision-making processes around sustainable livelihoods and natural resource management. The organization is empowering disadvantaged groups in communities to take leadership roles in community activities. In one small but prominent step towards developing gender equality across the region, women have been selected as the chairpersons of the water user committees for all 27 rainwater harvesting tanks installed by the organization.

**POLICY IMPACTS**

Uplift the Rural Poor has concentrated much of its work around three protected areas in Kisoro District. These protected areas all have arrangements in place for shared governance and benefit sharing. Benefit sharing is designed to distribute the benefits that accrue from protected areas between the protected area authority and the communities. The actual benefit sharing mechanism is site-specific and is detailed in agreements tailored to individual protected areas. For example, at the Echuya Forest Reserve a community forest management process was initiated in 1994, supported by Nature Uganda in collaboration with local communities, the leadership of sub-county local governments, Uplift the Rural Poor, and the National Forest Authority. As a result, in October 2007, four community forest management agreements were signed between the National Forestry Authority, communities, and local governments. Four Community Forest Management Associations were formed and participatory management plans were developed with the objective of sustainable management of the forest reserve and improving the livelihoods of the forest dependent communities, especially Batwa women and youth.

Uplift the Rural Poor has been able to build a foundation of interest and understanding about conservation and natural resource management that connects local communities, civil society organizations, and government. Uganda’s national policies supporting decentralization and public-private partnerships have helped to establish a mandate for community participation in the planning and implementation of conservation and development projects. This has provided a framework through which Uplift the Rural Poor has been accepted and embraced as a key linkage between national actors and local community members. Existing government structures have acted as a stepping stone for Uplift the Rural Poor activities, effectively linking the national, district, and grassroots levels and enabling Uplift the Rural Poor to connect with councils at the village, parish, sub-county, district, and, where necessary, national levels. This has been important in bridging the gap between national and local priorities in relation to issues such as advocacy, community mobilization, funding, accountability, consultation, facilitation and monitoring.

“Through Uplift the Rural Poor’s knowledge sharing, other development partners have been able to learn from us at the same time as we learn from them. Together, we are able to create big change in the livelihoods of communities living adjacent to nearby protected areas.”

Beatrice Kabihogo, Team Leader, Uplift the Rural Poor
Sustainability and Replication

SUSTAINABILITY

Among the key factors that have contributed to the longevity and positive impact of the organization are its transparency and accountability through financial records and narrative reports to both partners and local communities, its investments in staff capacity building, the high levels of community participation in all activities, and the deep involvement of local government authorities in all activities. Uplift the Rural Poor employs a rights-based approach, which means that its activities focus squarely on community needs and benefits. Participating villages have responded with a willingness and openness to learn and to invest their time into making organization activities successful. The Kisoro District Local Government has also been highly supportive of Uplift the Rural Poor’s activities and work and has assisted with efforts to ensure full village participation, involvement, and ownership of decision-making processes.

REPLICATION

Uplift the Rural Poor pursues knowledge sharing and replication activities through local government. It also hosts other community-based organizations through field visits, so that interested groups can receive hands-on experience with URP programmes. Networks such as ARCOS and the Uganda Poverty Conservation Learning Group are used to disseminate best practices. These networks have enabled organizations like the International Gorilla Conservation Programme to collaborate with URP to replicate the community-based planning processes in villages in and around the Virunga Mountains.

PARTNERS

- **Great Virunga Transboundary Collaboration (GVTC):** Contributed to safe water access by funding the construction of 17 rain water harvesting tanks in the parishes of Rukongi, Gisozi, Gitenderi that are adjacent to Mgahinga Gorilla National park.

- **Embassy of Japan in Uganda:** Granted funding for safe water access in Bunagana Parish, leading to construction of eight community rain water harvesting tanks.

- **International Fertilizer Development Center-CATALIST Uganda:** Contributed funding and provided support for promoting sanitation, sorting, grading and standardized packaging of potatoes using environmentally friendly packaging materials such as bamboo baskets and boxes.

- **CARE International:** Helped facilitate community-based plans in villages adjacent to Mgahinga and Bwindi national parks in the sub-counties of Bukimbiri, Kirundo, Muramba, Nyabwishenya, and Nyarusiza.

- **USAID-Linkages:** Scaled up to community-based plans in Murora Sub-county.

- **Albertine Rift Conservation Society (ARCOS):** Supported bamboo domestication projects in communities around Echuya Forest to reduce pressure on bamboo in protected areas. ARCOS also provided capacity building for Uplift the Rural Poor in marketing, strategic planning, proposal writing, advocacy, and fundraising.

- **IUCN:** Providing funding for buffer zone management and community capacity building around Lake Mulehe to promote better land use and wetlands conservation.

- **Nile Basin Transboundary Environmental Action Programme (NTEAP):** Supported bamboo conservation.

- **Nature Uganda:** Partnered on community capacity building projects in villages around Echuya Forest, including support for group/business formation, savings and loan programmes, record keeping, participatory planning, and monitoring.

- **Kisoro District Local Government:** Helped to ensure full participation and project ownership by both local communities; contributed access to government services that helped to ensure organizational continuity and sustainability.
FURTHER REFERENCE