



Farmers group mapping hillside plots for planning conservation trenches in Kabale, Uganda.

The African Highlands Initiative works to enhance livelihoods and reverse natural resource degradation through the development of innovative methods, practices, policies and approaches.

AHI Program Brief

Who are we?

The African Highlands Initiative (AHI) is a regional research program that brings together national and international research expertise, local government representatives, and development partners that strongly share a commitment to work with local communities to improve their livelihoods while reversing natural resource degradation.

AHI, a program of the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in East and Central Africa (ASARECA), was initiated in 1995 and is hosted by ICRAF as one of the CGIAR's ecoregional programs.

Who are we targeting and what is our aim?

AHI works with the people who manage landscapes that are under pressure in the densely populated highlands of Eastern Africa. We are faced with these major challenges:

- ✓ Under-utilized potential of local people to manage their resources sustainably and to articulate their demands
- ✓ Conventional research approaches that are not addressing the complexity of NRM and economic growth issues
- ✓ Limited capacity to work in an integrated, participatory manner to address the real demands arising from local, meso and macro perspectives.

AHI's core role as a "research-innovator" is to develop and integrate methods, practices, policies and approaches for *improving local communities' and support organizations' abilities* to better manage natural resources, to access markets, to advocate, to technically innovate, to improve information



Kabale District, Uganda, one of AHI's benchmark sites.

flows, and to collectively address issues. To do this, AHI aspires to *catalyze change* at all levels—through building capacity, encouraging development of new skills and methods, and facilitation of self-managed institutional change among actors at local, national and regional levels.

Our aim is foster sustainable livelihoods through improvements in both productivity and natural resource management.

Where do we work?

AHI works in highland areas that are densely populated, have poor or declining natural resource endowments and, due to unsuitable management practices and limited levels of investment, have reached the point where people and landscapes can no longer provide livelihood needs. Steep

slopes, degraded soils, unreliable rainfall and emerging pests and diseases, coupled with limited economic opportunities, lead to deforestation, soil erosion, water shortages, falling yields and increased poverty levels.

AHI works in “pilot” watershed sites and districts that have indicative signs of the *stress syndrome* in Uganda, Tanzania, Madagascar, Ethiopia and Kenya. These *learning sites* are places where technologies, methods, practices, policies and institutional arrangements to improve management of water, agricultural, grazing and forest lands in farms and landscapes are developed and tested. Results are analyzed regionally, leading to strategic regional and global goods for broad application and scaling up.

Who are our partners?

AHI is hosted by the national agricultural research institutes (NARIs) in pilot countries who are members of ASARECA. The agenda is implemented through collaborative arrangements involving:

- ✓ NARIs: the Department of Research and Development (DRD) in Tanzania, the Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organization (EARO), the National Agricultural Research Organization (NARO) in Uganda, the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) and FOFIFA and FIFAManor in Madagascar. They contribute Integrated Teams who direct the action research with communities, manage local partnerships, and contribute to regional public goods.
- ✓ Governmental extension and rural development departments provide community facilitation staff and work as members of the integrated teams.
- ✓ International and advanced research organization staff provide strategic research inputs, and lead the regional research and syntheses (CIAT-TSBF, ICRAF, CIP, IFPRI, IPGRI, ILRI, Wagenigen and Norway universities of agriculture, NRI, others).
- ✓ Local and international NGOs provide a “pro-poor” and development perspective, contribute to site team work and assist in community facilitation (CARE, Africa 2000 Network, Action Aid, Africare).

How do we work and what do we work on?

AHI promotes a “people-centered, community-based learning approach” where the agenda is driven by the needs and actions of farmer groups, communities and districts, but also aims at providing outputs that are

useful for those implementing development programs and policies. Scientific principles are applied in an integrated way through action and formal research to find “break-through” approaches for:

Strategies for systems intensification and watershed management

- ✓ Improving farmers’ and natural resource managers’ ability to innovate and integrate technology and management options at farm and landscape levels;
- ✓ Supporting combined science and farmer-led research on technology options to develop useful, adapted technologies that fit into local ecologies and social settings;
- ✓ Facilitating social dynamics at community level to solve technical issues, enable collective action and conflict resolution, and improve landscape management.

Institutional innovations for R&D

- ✓ Facilitating institutional arrangements and platforms at local, district and national levels for improved joint analysis and implementation of development plans to influence policy;
- ✓ Influencing policy-making and -makers using a grassroots approach;
- ✓ Pilot innovative ICT-D and promote more efficient service delivery and development communication strategies.

Developing and disseminating approaches for sustainable livelihoods

- ✓ Expanding strategies that link market and policy support and provide incentives for communities to improve investments in natural resource regeneration and maintenance;
- ✓ Improving methods for targeting development and NRM agendas and initiatives to be more inclusive of the resource poor, HIV-AIDS affected and other marginalized groups;
- ✓ Exploring and communicating local and broader impacts of technologies, methods and processes enabling development, and influencing policies on environment, equity and livelihoods.

Advancing impact

- ✓ Facilitating research organization managers to support research for development and increase impact through expanded agendas and partnerships;
- ✓ Influencing the agendas and methods used by support and service organizations that are aimed at development.



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Key partners in this work have been research specialists from AHI’s NARI collaborators (EARO, DRD, FOFIFA, FIFAManor, KARI, NARO), the IARCS (CIAT, TSBF, ICRAF, CIMMYT, CIP, IITA), and various NGOs and government extension officers.

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—Ann Stroud