

Makerere scientists assist Mt Elgon residents to avoid floods

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Bududa residents are helpless against floods

Recently, Health State Minister Dr Chris Baryomunsi was on hand at Makerere University to launch the annual research report by the University's Resilience Africa Network (Ran).

The Ran report provides a highlight of innovations by Ran's scientists and an insight into how Ugandan communities are dealing with the effects of climate variability and post-conflict recovery. MOSES TALEMWA has been looking at one of the reports, which looked at resolving problems of residents living around Mt Elgon.

Ran scientists engaged local communities in Bududa and Butaleja last August, in a bid to understand how best to prevent, mitigate, and overcome the current shocks and stresses from their environment. These shocks include floods and landslides.

"We wanted to find out what trade-offs the people would accept if you had to make a change," Prof Jim Fishkin of Stanford University explained.

Prof Fishkin is behind deliberative democracy, a process he has carried out in over 20 countries around the world, through some 70 deliberative polls. According to him, deliberative democracy involves experts enlightening local community leaders on policies relating to social problems in the area, then letting the public find solutions to problems.

But these two sets of discussions, one in Butaleja and the other in Bududa district were the first in Africa, where he engaged local communities in small group discussions of between 15 and 20 members.

“What trade-offs would people accept if you had to make a change; how do you get a representative view of the community?” Fishkin asked. “We found that if you give people a chance to make the changes that improve their lives, they are better at it.”

Fishkin explained has developed deliberative polling as a way of resolving local problems together with community leaders. Ran’s Chief of Party, Prof William Bazeyo, added that deliberative polling was an initiative intended to bring knowledge from the university closer to the public.

“Ran is here to move the universities from the universities, to the communities”. The question is; “how can we do things differently to address community challenges (disasters that present as shocks and stresses), strengthen resilience in these communities and register a transformative impact in the communities?” he offered.

“In Bududa, for instance, our researchers have been trying to find ways to make sure that people don’t suffer. There is documented information about environmental degradation, which we shared with the locals and they appreciated it.”



The researchers hope to ease the suffering of people of Bududa during the floods

Prof Fishkin says Ran scientists held 200 interviews in Bududa and a further 232 in Butaleja. Over 400 participants, randomly selected from the districts of Butaleja and Bududa, were recently gathered to deliberate upon how to deal with the environmental disasters and population pressures that challenge life in these vulnerable communities.

To ease implementation of the discussions, the groups were divided into three topics, including Resettlement Management, Land Management and Population Pressure. The community was joined by Makerere University faculty, district

representatives, and officials from the Office of the Prime Minister and Ran representatives. Prof Fishkin explained that the discussion groups yielded some positive views.

“The local communities endorsed some changes in the support for disaster management committee called for increased sirens, and less use of the sms [short message service] – since the sirens are more effective in saving lives during a disaster,” Fishkin explained.

Dr Lynn Atuyambe of the Mulago-based Institute of Public Health was one of the scientists, who participated in the study groups, which were aimed at helping the people on the Mt Elgon slopes.

“The discussants were mostly farmers in their 40s and married.

Eleven policy options out of 36 raised with the residents changed positively in the direction of increased options/support for public policies to save the community,” he said.

“There was a call to strengthen disaster management committees in favour of sirens to avert disaster... the residents were concerned about not having phones or power to charge the phones all the time,” he added.

In other findings, Dr Atuyambe said there was also an increased call to urbanise the trading centres, through getting people out of the way of landslide and flood-prone areas.

“This would include building roads for easy access to markets, good health centres and piped water in properly planned areas to get people out of the mountain areas, where they are especially vulnerable,” he explained.

However, Dr Atuyambe added that there was an ongoing challenge over how to move the residents out of the calamity-prone areas.

“Many have been asking us difficult questions. For instance, who owns the land where we are going [to be resettled]? And what if someone settles [in the areas] where we have been moved away from – is it a trick to take our land?”



The aftermath of a landslide which demolished homesteads in Bududa

Another of the scientists involved in the project, Dr Roy Mayega, said they were moved to implement the project after studies showed that Uganda's wetter areas were experiencing an increase in rainfall, while the drier areas were experiencing a decrease in the level of precipitation.

"However, the data, which has been gathered over the last few years, is still not statistically significant to call it climate change, but it is something to pay attention to, especially in relation to changes in [soil] fertility and our traditional association with land," Mayega said.

Dr Dorothy Okello, also on the project, explained that the increased rains along the Elgon were due to efforts of re-forestation and degazetting of the mountain, but though crop activity was still a challenge.

She said the deliberative polling also had influenced some decision-making in the areas under study.

"We noticed an increased preference for upland rice [which grows on the plains] as opposed to the wetland rice [which grows in the swampy areas, usually prone to flooding]," she said.

The report findings have been disseminated to the Bududa and Butaleja district community and to policymakers. The project was carried out in partnership with 20 sub-Saharan African universities, supported by the US Agency for International Development (Usaid).

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