

Walter Lusigi, Senior Advisor: Environmental Specialist

March 14, 2008—The intersection of knowledge, interest and commitment to his specialty becomes quickly apparent when you meet Walter Lusigi, a senior advisor and environmental specialist at the Global Environment Facility whose specialty is rangeland ecology.

When Today interviewed Lusigi about his long and well-respected career in international environmental policy, he was careful to emphasize what he sees as the most important task now before him: implementing the largest-ever Bank and GEF funded Sustainable Land Management Program in Sub-Saharan Africa.

“This is an important \$150 million GEF-supported Strategic Investment Program implementing 42 projects in 28 countries,” Lusigi explained. “The Bank will leverage an additional \$1 billion through co-funding toward the program,” he said.

The investment plan was endorsed by the entire African Ministers of Environment meeting in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in March 2007.



Walter Lusigi

Integrated Land Use

Of special concern is the degraded and poorly managed Sub-Saharan landmass that has to carry a rapidly expanding human population with pressing needs. Lusigi cited several instances across the continent where the pressure on land has already produced severe consequences.

“Part of the answer will have to come from multi-sectoral approaches that seek to integrate all aspects of land use. This will allow coordinated long-term planning that exploits linkages and deals with the problems of land degradation and alternative livelihoods for the populations,” Lusigi said.

Helping to meet the challenges posed by land degradation in many parts of the developing world, particularly Africa, is a motivating factor in Lusigi’s life. Lusigi said he is convinced that systematically scaling up sustainable land management approaches is the rational way forward, because it addresses the problem more holistically. This method also taps into the Bank’s leadership strengths. “It is crucial that the Bank pushes a single integrated agenda,” Lusigi said.

Career before the Bank

Lusigi’s work in environment predates by many years his joining the Bank in 1990. He is a Colorado State University-trained range scientist, ecologist and wildlife manager—a deliberate choice of discipline because his country, Kenya, is three-quarters dry land, and only one fifth is suitable for agriculture. Lusigi went to work in the dry lands soon after he completed both his bachelors and masters degrees in a record four years.

He fondly recalls what he sees as one of his first key accomplishments: the first-ever vegetation mapping of Masailand in Kenya under the auspices of the UNDP/FAO Kenya Wildlife Management Project. It was there that he helped introduce conservation on lands shared by pastoral people and wildlife, instead of simply protecting national parks that typically excluded

people.

“I loved camping out and working out in the field,” Lusigi reminisced, as he readjusted his tie—as if to signal that perhaps time and situations have changed a bit over the years.

Lusigi’s stint in the Bundu (Swahili for wild) was cut short by urgent requests from the Kenya government to assist in establishing his country’s National Environment Secretariat in Nairobi. When the secretariat was up and running, Lusigi returned to school, this time to the Technical University of Munich, Germany, where earned a PhD in landscape ecology.

He later returned to Kenya when the UNESCO Program on Man and The Biosphere tapped him to head a multidisciplinary research and development project in the semi-arid North Eastern region of the country. He worked there for more than a decade.

“My experience in that project reaffirmed my conviction in the integrated landscape approaches to sustainable land management, especially in drylands,” Lusigi said. However, finance was a permanent constraint and a limiting factor in his work, Lusigi recalled.

“Sometimes—especially during the dry seasons and during periods of acute food shortage—we had to drop everything and attend to the immediate food needs of the populations among whom we worked.” Overall, Lusigi views the 10-year \$10 million project he headed as an important success.

And at the Bank

With that mission nearly accomplished, Lusigi sought broader challenges and opportunities to make a greater impact in resolving the urgent and outstanding issues in rangeland development. This landed him at the Bank in 1990, at the newly established environmental unit of the technical department of the Africa Region.

Lusigi stressed how respectful he is of his Bank colleagues, although there is always room to be even more sensitive to client needs. “A humble approach by Bank staff would greatly help push Bank projects ahead more effectively,” he noted.

Lusigi was born in Western Kenya and attended school there until high school. He attributes his interest in the environment to the unique curriculum at his partly American- funded high school, Chavakali. The school was among the few places that offered courses in agricultural and industrial arts.

The grounding in these and related subjects—biology, zoology, botany, etc.—was so thorough that after graduating, he competed his “A” level in a record one year, instead of the usual two.

He taught high school sciences before joining college, briefly at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, before he transferred to Colorado State University upon winning a government scholarship.

On a Personal Note

Lusigi lives in Northern Virginia with wife. Several of his nine children have graduated from university. His oldest daughter holds an economics PhD. and works with UNEP. His second daughter is an urban planner who works in London. Lusigi’s other children save the youngest, have either finished college or are about to earn a university degree.

Lusigi has more than 100 publications to his name. He is a member of several international professional organizations.

The International Rangeland Congress will present him with a special honor award for his contribution to Rangeland Science and Development at its next Congress in June 2008 in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, China.

He is also a member of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (which he served as vice-president for 7 years), and the Norwegian Academy of Sciences.

Contributed by John Mulaa, EXTIC

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