

# RELMA

20+ years experience supporting improved land management



Photo: Courtesy of C Ong

## INSIDE:

### History

### Core Approaches

The pioneering ‘work on demand’ approach relied on *networking* to create diverse, multi-disciplinary teams. Collaborative *capacity building* activities served up a menu of technology options to land users, empowered communities for change, and demonstrated the importance of combining research with local knowledge.

### Publications

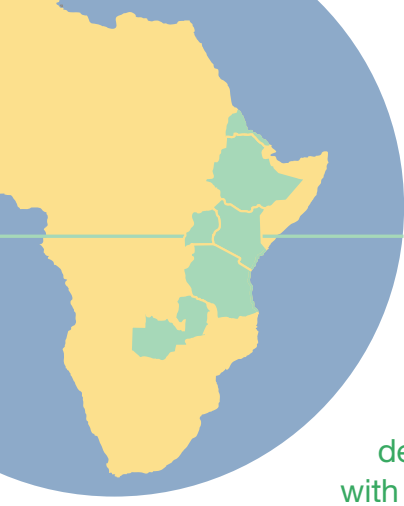
RELMA publications are a significant and lasting contribution to land management throughout the region.

### RELMA Footprints

For more than two decades, the Regional Land Management Unit (RELMA) and its predecessor promoted various technologies and approaches aimed at decreasing poverty and enhancing food security through land management and conservation. In the process, RELMA has helped to improve the lives of millions of smallholder farmers in 6 African nations: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia. RELMA’s considerable experience continues to inform land management efforts throughout the region and provides important lessons for the scaling up of agricultural technologies across the continent.



*The Regional Land Management Unit (RELMA) was closed in 2006. The first issue in a four-part review series, this leaflet examines RELMA’s core approaches, which continue to influence the activities of the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF).*



# History & Context:

In 1982, the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) supported the formation of the Regional Soil Conservation Unit (RCSU), later the Regional Land Management Unit (RELMA), in response to the appeals of national governments for aid in counteracting the devastating impacts of land degradation — particularly soil erosion. The small technical unit was tasked with enhancing food security and decreasing poverty through improved land management and conservation.

For more than two decades, RELMA (and its predecessor) remained a key player in improving land management in eastern and southern Africa. Steady, long-term funding from Sweden was critical to the longevity — and development — of RELMA. Donor security gave RELMA the freedom to create new approaches and to build an innovative network amongst diverse stakeholders and collaborating institutions, a key factor in ensuring lasting impact on the lives of African smallholder farmers (1).

Despite RELMA's many successes, the challenges that motivated the formation of RELMA persist. Two-thirds of all Africans continue to rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. Many of these farmers make their living from just 0.5-2 ha, earning less than 1USD per day (1).

Rampant soil degradation — two-thirds of Africa's arable land will be lost by 2025 — has alarming economic implications. In 2004, the World Bank reported that land degradation leads to an average annual loss of more than 3% of agricultural GDP across Sub-Saharan Africa (2).

RELMA's considerable experience in various aspects of improved land management — including linking research to extension, rainwater harvesting, conservation agriculture, and livestock production systems —

has yielded important lessons. These lessons — not just about what works, but also what doesn't — are informing efforts to meet today's land management challenges.

## Why is agricultural productivity declining in Africa?

In the last 40 years, Africa is the only continent where the average per capita food production is dropping (3). There are many reasons for this trend (3, 4, 5):

- Soils are nutrient depleted.
- Policies lack incentives for sustainable use.
- Population growth has exacerbated land shortages and forced migration into marginal areas with low agricultural potential.
- Smallholder agriculture is often rainfed and proceeds without modern inputs, such as fertilizers.
- Many farmers have poor access to markets, hampered by high transportation costs, and little infrastructure for processing and packaging.
- Environmental degradation — in particular, erosion, deforestation and biodiversity loss.
- Climate change is stretching the borders of marginal lands and driving extreme weather.
- Cross-cutting development challenges, including HIV/AIDS and gender inequality.
- Weak extension systems are ill-equipped to deal with emerging problems and modernize smallholder's highly fragmented agricultural systems.

## Networking:

Using a 'respond to demand' approach, RELMA entered into discussions with relevant ministries and departments within national governments to identify appropriate projects, articulate goals and begin programme planning, including budgeting and the allocation of seed funds for pilot activities. This collaborative process allowed for strong national representation in project design and execution (1). Close collaboration with national governments, coupled with RELMA's technical expertise, was also a critical catalyst in rehabilitating lagging extension networks that, despite being weakened by successive cuts to funding, played a key role in halting and reversing land degradation.

Regional Advisory Committees (RACs), composed of key staff and managers from various Sida-funded projects and representatives from local universities and various NGOs, worked closely with RELMA advisors to develop annual work plans. Over time, the RACs became more regional in their representation.

Being a small organization, RELMA could not claim expertise in all development matters nor did it wish to — RELMA was most effective by maintaining a focus on land management. Each RELMA project progressively involved other targeted stakeholders



## *Work on demand*

---

## *Cultivate diversity*

---

with specialized expertise. RELMA routinely worked with Ministries of Agriculture, District/local administrators, NGOs, farmer institutions, networks, universities and colleges, and research institutes.

RELMA's multi-disciplinary, participatory methods supported partnerships among political leaders, scientists, researchers, policy makers and service providers from within and outside East Africa.

This diversified approach to solving challenges collectively, was also apparent in RELMA-supported capacity enhancing activities.

Over time it became evident, that linking agricultural production to markets would be a critical step in ensuring that conservation measures are attractive to individuals (6). RELMA was instrumental in the formation of two regional networks addressing this need: the Regional Farmers' Organization (REFON) and Link ProVaMP (Linking Professionals for Value, Marketing and Processing). REFON works closely with smallholder farmers to modernize their agricultural activities by building capacity to take advantage of new technologies and improved techniques, as well as teaching farmers to develop business strategies to enhance market orientation. Link ProVaMP is also focused on the modernization of agriculture in Africa, but it focuses on bringing together professionals and relevant institutions in order to link on-farm production with off-farm valuation, marketing and policy. Both networks have been involved in the introduction of high-value products, training farmers for contract farming, and developing capacity for local processing of agricultural produce.

# Capacity building:

RELMA researched and advocated a wide range of conservation measures suitable to different physical and socio-economic conditions, including agroforestry options such as fruit, fodder, wood and timber, and tree species that improve soil fertility. Bridging research and action, RELMA shared technical expertise through numerous workshops and seminars.

The programmatic flexibility created by sustained funding, allowed RELMA to stay current and relevant by responding to shifting approaches. Over time, RELMA's focus moved from conservation to production to marketing activities. Work in the latter, focused on developing credible farmers' organizations capable of articulating demand for services beyond the traditional extension content characterized by a narrow focus on input supplies and agronomy. This shift was also marked by the courting of private sector partners.

RELMA implemented a 'menu of offers' approach, which allowed farmers to select activities and technologies from a broad range of site-specific options that had been developed with extension workers and farmers. Those with shared interests could opt to form Common Interest Groups (CIGs). Frequently involved in local processing and marketing, these teams proved swift channels for the introduction of improved technologies to farmers, and acted as excellent forums for farmer training, particularly in organization and governance.

Community groups were also encouraged to tap into local knowledge and build on traditional social cohesion. By working with Local-Level Initiatives, RELMA projects benefited from a clear understanding of community attitudes towards change and the perceptions of their role in development. Local control and management of such projects naturally led to a stronger sense

of community ownership over development activities, including those supported by external organizations.

Examples of this homegrown approach are thriving across large tracts of arid and semi-arid lands in East Africa. These inhospitable territories, characterized by seasonal shortages of water, food and fodder, are all too often home to poor and politically marginalized communities. Although livestock rearing is the main — usually sole — economic activity, there are inadequate disease control measures and vet services. RELMA responded by empowering livestock keepers to form Livestock Producer Associations (LPAs) that act as local forums to improve production, disease control and marketing. These groups are also better placed to put pressure on governments to provide essential services.

Overarching between all RELMA's activities is a series of cross-cutting issues with pervasive influence over development. The networks generated and facilitated by RELMA projects possess the multi-disciplinary expertise necessary to tackle these issues, including gender, HIV/AIDS and climate change.

*Reinforce programmatic flexibility with focus*

---

*Combine research with local knowledge*

---

# Publications:

RELMA is well-known for its more than 72 publications, which remain popular due to their relevance and practical design. The shift in RELMA activities from conservation through small-scale production to marketing was echoed in both the content and form of RELMA publications.

The publications — reflecting the high level of collaboration typical of RELMA — were often developed in conjunction with the communities in question and are frequently the only formal documentation of local knowledge.

A recent review performed by the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (IIRR), named RELMA publications as the single most important source of extension, training and research information on natural resource management in East Africa (7). This achievement is linked to the demand for such information, usefulness, and free distribution. RELMA invested heavily in wide distribution.

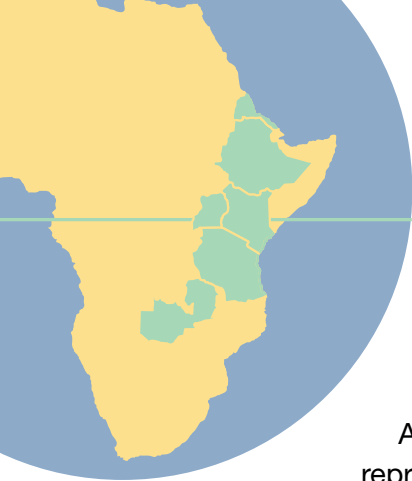
According to the IIRR external evaluation, there are several direct and measurable impacts of RELMA publications, including: a) increased demand for extension services, while simultaneously empowering extension providers through access to information; b) the creation of employment in commercialized small-scale agroforestry enterprises; c) the widespread adoption of sound environmental practices and proper use of land resources, leading to improved environment; d) increased crop and dairy production, and as a result, increased household incomes; e) increased cultivation of fruit and the intercropping of fruit with other cash crops (e.g. bananas and coffee); f) the provision of household fuel alternatives, decreasing the burden of women and children; and, g) assisting students in completing their studies (7).

*RELMA publications are the single most important source of extension, training and research information on natural resource management in East Africa.*

~ International Institute for Rural Reconstruction

Peer-reviewed articles authored by RELMA scientists and advisors are ensured longevity within academic publishing. However, the fate of RELMA's in-house publications is less clear. IIRR has suggested several options for ensuring future availability of these resources, including select reprints and digital conversions (e.g. online archiving and compilation CDs) (7).





## RELMA's footprints:

The 2004 merger of RELMA with the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) represented an early step towards succession planning, making ICRAF the natural beneficiary of RELMA's significant experience and modes of operation. The imprint of RELMA's activities will be greatest on ICRAF's land rehabilitation activities.

Following the merger, RELMA found a home in the ICRAF 'Land and People' Theme, which focuses on land management issues and scaling up agricultural technologies. From this vantage, RELMA's influence on policy pertaining to land issues and links to NEPAD will strengthen future ICRAF activities, and will encourage full involvement in the TerrAfrica initiative.

RELMA publications are also well-positioned to support ICRAF's pursuit of International Public Goods (IPGs) through development support activities, such as presenting information, expertise and resource materials to development agencies in a format useful to these audiences.

At least three broad programmes are expected to continue after the close of Sida funding to RELMA in 2006. Best positioned to continue are the rainwater harvesting activities, including agroforestry components, taking place under the banner of the Southern and Eastern Africa Rainwater Network (SearNet) and which have previously received co-funding from the Government of the Netherlands. Also expected to continue are watershed rehabilitation and land management activities in the Tekeze and Gash-Barka river basins, located along the disputed Eritrea-Ethiopia border. The third programmatic area expected to outlive RELMA is focused on the impact of conservation agriculture on the Lake Victoria Basin and in West Africa.

Beyond ICRAF, RELMA's approach, experience and knowledge will persist in the individual and institutional memories of its hundreds of partners and clients.



RELMA was made possible with the generous support of the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida).

Authors: Rachel Rumley and Chin Ong  
Design: John Gikang'a and Rachel Rumley  
For more information: Chin Ong (c.ong@cgiar.org)

### References:

- 1 Gathiru, K, and C Ong. 2006. *Evolution of RELMA's approaches to land management: lessons from two decades of research and development in eastern and southern Africa.*
- 2 The World Bank. July 2, 2004. *TerrAfrica: Halting land degradation.* Online at [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org).
- 3 Millenium Development Goals Technical Support Centre, Nairobi (Kenya). December 2004. *Africa's Green Revolution: A Call to Action. The Proceedings of the July 5th, 2004 High-level Seminar, covered by the Government of Ethiopia and the United Nations Millenium Project, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.*
- 4 Djurfeldt, G, Holmen, H, Jirstrom, M, and R Larsson. 2005. *The African Food Crisis: Lesson from the Asian Green Revolution.* CAB International, Wallingford, UK, 266 pages.
- 5 Diagana, B. 2003. *Land degradation in Sub-Saharan Africa: What explains the widespread adoption of unsustainable farming practices?* <http://www.tradeoffs.montana.edu/pdf/SDBD.pdf>
- 6 Lundgren, L. 1993. *Twenty years of Soil Conservation in Eastern Africa. Regional Soil Conservation Unit (RSCU) Technical Handbook Series no.4. RCSU/Sida, Nairobi, Kenya.*
- 7 International Institute Rural Reconstruction (IIRR). 2006. *Evaluation of RELMA publications in Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya. Submitted to RELMA. 14 pp.*