



EKURI INITIATIVE

Nigeria



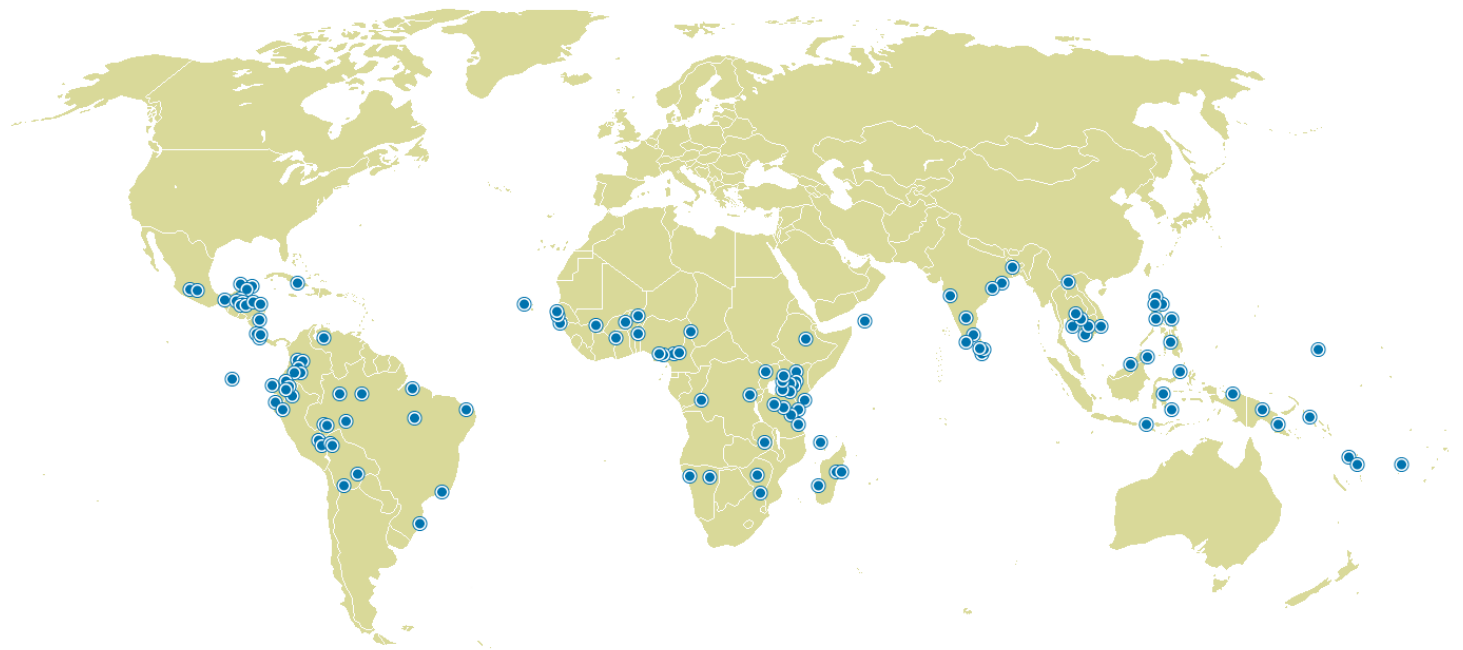
Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

UNDP EQUATOR INITIATIVE CASE STUDY SERIES

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.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are 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.



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PROJECT SUMMARY

Located in Nigeria's Cross River State, the Ekuri community manages a 33,600-hectare community forest adjacent to the Cross-River National Park. Community forest management began in the 1980s, when the villages of Old Ekuri and New Ekuri united in response to the proposed logging of their forest. The project would have included the construction of a road linking the villages to local market centres; instead, the community decided to sustainably manage the forest as a community asset, generating income, subsistence materials and food.

Levies on the sale of non-timber forest products by community members financed a road that eventually reached Old Ekuri in 1990 and New Ekuri in 1997. In addition to allowing farm and forest products to reach new markets, the road has also made possible the transport of construction materials for two schools, a health center, and a civic center where the community meets to discuss forest governance decisions.

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KEY FACTS

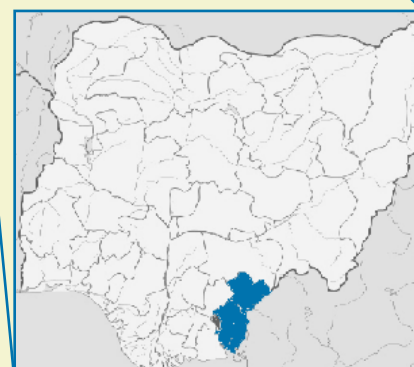
EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2004

FOUNDED: 1997

LOCATION: Cross River State, eastern Nigeria

BENEFICIARIES: 6,000 community residents

BIODIVERSITY: Cross River National Park



Background and Context



The villages of Old Ekuri and New Ekuri, jointly known as the Ekuri Community, are located seven kilometers apart in Cross River State, eastern Nigeria. The villages fall within Akamkpa Local Government Area, and together own 33,600 hectares of community forest situated in the buffer zone of the Oban Hills Division of Cross River National Park. Around 95% of this land is covered by primary or secondary forest. The Ekuri Community speaks Lokorli, an indigenous language not spoken anywhere else. The community is rich in tradition, with strong cultural cohesion and respect for traditional chieftain institutions. The primary occupations of the 6,000 community residents are farming, producing non-timber forest products and handicrafts, and small-scale trading, hunting, and fishing.

A West African – and global – biodiversity hotspot

The Cross River National Park is the largest protected area in the Nigeria-Cameroon region, forming a significant part of the Guinean Forests of West Africa, a global biodiversity hotspot. The park is divided into two separate sections: Okwangwo, established in 1991, and Oban, established in 1988. The park has a total area of 4,227 km², most of which consists of primary tropical rainforests in the north and central parts, with mangrove swamps on the coastal zones.

The southern Oban Hills Division of the park measures 2,800 km² in area and shares a border with Korup National Park in the Republic of Cameroon, forming a single protected ecological zone. The division has a rugged terrain, rising from 100m in the river valleys to over 1,000m in the mountains. The rainy season lasts from March to November, with annual rainfall of over 3,500mm; the soils are highly vulnerable to erosion where stripped of plant cover. The forest remains largely untouched in the less accessible areas, but around the margins it has been considerably affected by human activity in recent decades. In some places secondary re-growth has occurred, but other areas contain large plantations of oil-palm and rubber. Illegal logging is a serious threat and is on the rise.

A forest-dependent local economy

Population growth in buffer zone villages has also increased human pressure on the forest ecosystem from rural livelihood activities. The local economy is based on subsistence agriculture and the gathering of forest products for sale to urban populations; these economic activities constituted the traditional livelihoods of Ekuri community members. Because the nearest market was far away and goods had to be carried by head-load, high-value forest products were prioritized over farming produce. The main items traded were bush mango fruits (*Irvingia gabonensis*) and edible forest leaves (*Gnetum spp.*), but also included the meat of wild animals, including endangered species such as chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*) and drill (*Mandrillus leucophaeus*). Rattan canes (*Laccosperma* and *Eremospatha spp.*) and chewing sticks (*Carpolobia*, *Massularia*, and *Garcinia spp.*) were also traded to a lesser extent.

During the 1980s, the Ekuri Community did not have a working road running into the community. To access staples such as salt, soap, kerosene, and clothing, community members had to trek over four hours to reach the nearest road. These items were transported back to the village on the heads of those making the trek. In 1982, Old Ekuri began negotiations with a logging company to construct a road to the Ekuri Community in exchange for logging rights. This attempt by Old Ekuri was vetoed by Chief Otey Esira, the Village Head of New Ekuri. In explaining his disagreement, the Chief recounted and outlined the enormous benefits the Ekuri people had historically received and continued to gain from the forest. He strongly advised for the conservation of the forest so that these benefits might continue to sustain the community in perpetuity. As an alternative to mortgaging the forest and community's source of wellbeing, the Chief proposed construction of the road through self-help efforts. His appeal was well-received by the community. Rejection of forest concessions in exchange for an access road marked the formal beginning of Ekuri Community's involvement in sustainable forest management.

Beginnings of collective action

A high degree of support from within the community allowed for the rapid mobilization of human and financial resources. Levies were imposed on the proceeds from sales of non-timber forest products, and were collected from every member of Old and New Ekuri villages. This levy system was in place for four years until the amount needed for construction of the 40 km road was pulled together. Construction of the road began in 1986, reaching Old Ekuri in 1990. At the inception of the Cross River National Park in 1991, the Ekuri Community approached the park authority to gain formal support to manage their forest on their own. The request was approved and a Community Forest Officer was based in the Ekuri community for two years to build the foundation of a formal community-managed forest system – the first of its kind in Nigeria. The Ekuri Initiative was formally established in 1992, ten years after the genesis of the idea. In 1997, the completed road reached New Ekuri village.

A community-based response to an environmental threat

The stated reason for the initiative's creation was to protect and safeguard the forest, both as an inherited responsibility from past generations and as a responsibility to future generations. This recognized the spiritual and cultural values of the forest for the Ekuri

community, as well as the ecosystem services it provides. Ekuri has aimed to develop sustainable forest-based livelihoods and improve economic opportunities for members of the community that will help in community development and poverty reduction. Forest conservation has also ensured the protection of watersheds and, by extension, the provision of fresh water for local people. The initiative also acknowledged the importance of protecting the diverse range of plant and animal species that populate the forest.

The organization's main objectives are to promote policies and programs that relate to the sustainable management and conservation of Ekuri community forest, and to promote community development projects and strategies that ensure integrated and participatory rural poverty alleviation. A key component of this has been disseminating and exchanging knowledge on development and conservation; Ekuri has also actively engaged in capacity building exercises. This has included providing training to community development groups and community-based enterprises, conducting research to better understand the challenges facing the Ekuri community, and offering community leadership training. Finally, the initiative has also played a vital role in identifying internal and external sources of funds for community development, and building partnerships with government, development agencies, NGOs and the private sector.



“My community has experienced climate change but has not been engaged in mechanisms to adapt to climate change due to poor knowledge on how to go about it. However, we are engaged in climate change mitigation through a Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) program, although this is still in its infancy.”

Chief Edwin Ogar, Ekuri Initiative

Key Activities and Innovations



The Ekuri Initiative is involved in awareness-raising, conservation activities, sustainable forest management, community development, and poverty reduction initiatives with the community members of Old and New Ekuri. Activities focus on these two villages, but also extend to neighbouring communities such as Okokori, Etara, Eyeyeng, Owai, and Mfaminyin. The target beneficiaries are the most vulnerable and economically marginalized of these communities.

Participatory forest zoning

The initiative began in 1997 with a perimeter survey of the 33,600 hectare Ekuri community forest, allowing for a better understanding of the area to fall under community management. Community land boundaries were initially demarcated through a process of careful negotiation with six neighboring communities with support from the Ford Foundation. Thirty-two community members were also given training on developing timber inventories, and a preliminary land-use plan was developed for the forest.

This plan delimited eight zones: an agroforestry stream buffer zone; protected area and animal corridor zones; non-timber forest product and forest management zones; farming and cash crop zones; and ecotourism zones. The last category includes the Agumdugum Peak, the Lowai Falls, and other picturesque sites. To date, however, poor road access to Ekuri has limited the development of the site as a tourist attraction.

Communal forest ownership and benefit sharing

The entirety of the Ekuri community forest is under communal ownership, including trees on individual farm plots. Every Ekuri community member has the right to harvest trees for their own use, but not for commercial sale; communal sales take place through the Ekuri Initiative. This is substantially different from other communities, where forest areas have been claimed by individuals and sold to logging companies, accelerating the loss of forests. The system of com-

munal ownership has been underpinned by the equitable sharing of benefits from Ekuri's various income generating activities.

Two 50-hectare plots have been set aside in which trees grown for sale are harvested using a directional technique, a process that reduces damage to the forest and to the soil. The group is also engaged in the harvesting of non-timber forest products. The community has introduced regulations for forest and farm products, including a registration fee for products, the regulation of sale prices to different buyers, and the introduction of sales taxes and gate fees. Each product has its own committee to oversee these activities and to ensure that 70 percent of weekly revenues are paid into the community treasury.

In its efforts to reduce poverty, the initiative has developed micro-credit schemes, given trainings and skills development workshops, provided scholarships, technical and financial support to farmers,



and invested in value-added secondary processing equipment and the transporting and marketing of non-timber forest products. These efforts have increased the financial viability of alternative livelihoods for community members, and in turn have decreased pressures on forest resources.

Accountability and governance structure

At the beginning of each year, the villages outline community development activities for the year and set aside revenue to address these identified needs. Copies of the income and expenditure books are kept with both the Treasurer and the Financial Secretary. The decisions on the use of funds are based on approvals by each Ekuri village at meetings. An end-of-year report is presented to the com-

munity to allow for accountability, evaluation and feedback.

A board oversees the initiative; the board in turn is advised by trustees, who devise policies for the organization. All drafts of policies have to be presented to the General Assembly, consisting of all Ekuri community members, before they are considered by the board. The board then tailors the decisions to reflect the priorities of the Ekuri community. The active participation of the community in the governance of the forest, community development and poverty reduction efforts contributes to the sustainability of the programs and of the initiative as a whole. Compliance is made possible by the fact that governing decisions are made by the community themselves, as opposed to being imposed from above or from outside the community.



“Make policy that guarantees the active participation of local communities in biodiversity conservation, not only for the long-term survival of biodiversity but for the sustainable development of these communities and the world at large.”

Chief Edwin Ogar, Ekuri Initiative

Impacts



BIODIVERSITY IMPACTS

The Oban Hills Division of the Cross River National Park is mostly covered with lowland rainforest. Common tree species include *Berlinia Confusa*, *Coula edulis*, *Hannoa Klaineana*, *Klainedoxa Gabonensis*, African Mahogany and Red Ironwood. About 1,568 plant species have been identified, of which 77 are endemic to Nigeria. These include 1,303 flowering plants, 141 lichens, and 56 moss species; the forests are also home to perhaps as many as 950 species of butterfly. Over 350 bird species have been recorded; the area is one of only two locations in Nigeria where Xavier's Greenbul is found. Other notable species include the Bat Hawk, Cassin's Hawk-eagle, Crested Guineafowl, Grey-throated Rail, Olive Long-tailed Cuckoo, Bare-cheeked Trogon, Lyre-tailed Honeyguide, Green-backed Bulbul, Grey-throated Tit-flycatcher and Rachel's Malimbe. Finally, there are at least 75 mammal species, including the African buffalo, the endangered African Forest Elephant, Chimpanzee, Preuss's Red Colobus and Sclater's Guenon, and the highly endangered Drill. The division may contain up to 400 chimpanzees.

The personal costs of conservation

The Ekuri initiative began while the 33,600-ha area which now constitutes the community forest was still largely intact. Ekuri's primary objective has been to sustain and protect this area. Protection has come against great odds, including attempts to coerce and intimidate the community into granting logging concessions. In 1989, the Chief of the Ekuri Community reneged on his initial commitment to protecting the forest, and secretly agreed to lease a forest concession to a logging company. This was not discovered until 1994, when the logging company began construction on a road from a neighbouring community. The Chief was dethroned and the logging concession was blocked, but in 1996 a court ordered his reinstatement and sentenced six Ekuri leaders – Patrick Akwa, Abel Aimor Ogar, Raphael Akamo, Abel Egbe, and Chiefs Edwin Ogar and Clement Agbor – to two-year prison sentences for obstructing logging of the

community forest. They served these sentences rather than concede the forest area, and the community was able to bring a successful civil suit against the deposed Chief, his supporters, and the logging company.

As a result of these personal sacrifices and the efforts of the community as a whole, total forest cover has actually increased within the Ekuri Community area. In line with the land use plan activities of 1998, satellite farms outside the farming zones that were abandoned have been regenerated, increasing the area of forest. Roughly 31,000 hectares of land is currently under forest cover in Ekuri Community. The forest is no longer under threat from logging due to the cancellation of all forest concessions in Cross River State by the state government. The efforts of the Ekuri Community played an integral role in changing attitudes to logging, and the forest is now a pilot site earmarked for Nigeria's Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) programme.

Ongoing threats to wildlife

Despite its efforts to protect the forest, however, wildlife populations have continued to decline due to overhunting for the commercial meat trade and from poachers from the nine communities neighbouring Ekuri. Hunting, water pollution and poisoning (for fishing) are severe constraints to the regeneration of wildlife species numbers. With funding from the UNDP-implemented Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme, the initiative is implementing an extensive environmental education programme in the Ekuri community, and attempting to expand this to Okokori, Etera and Eyeyeng communities. Plans are also being developed to work in partnership with the Cross River State Forestry Commission to intervene in a further six neighbouring communities, but this has been delayed due to a lack of resources. This would attempt to combat continued species loss from the activities of unemployed youth in the region.

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

Activities of the Ekuri Initiative have brought socioeconomic improvements through job creation, increased forest-based revenues, diversified livelihood options, and access to more diverse markets. While the initiative has created direct employment for some villagers, individual households have also been able to improve their incomes through farm development, the sale of non-timber forest products, and the creation of small-scale enterprises.

The Ekuri road – enabling improved community wellbeing

The project has also had substantial benefits for the Ekuri Community in terms of development and infrastructure projects. These projects have been funded with revenues from the sale of timber and non-timber forest products. This has ensured that everyone in the community understands the incentive for protecting the forest and is invested in its conservation. There is now clear understanding amongst the community that if the forest is lost, the community also loses its social safety net.

Proceeds from the sale of non-timber forest products and levies have enabled the initiative to build a 40 km road, culverts and bridges so that farm and forest products can be transferred to markets, and that supplies can be brought in for the building of two schools, a health centre with improved facilities that meets the health needs of the local population, and a civic centre where the community can participate directly in forest governance decisions.

Changing the face of the local economy

Livelihood diversification opportunities have been created by the initiative through trading arrangements, while greater market access has been made possible by construction of the road, which allows goods developed within the community to travel to more distant markets. Various foods and cash crops now guarantee a higher income, reducing pressure on high-value forest products. It is estimated that an individual family can now earn up to USD 100 per month from growing a diversified parcel of cash crops. Sustainable harvesting techniques have also been promoted. For example, the community harvests afang leaves (*Gnetum africanum*) for use in cooking with a technique that leaves the vines undamaged to regenerate new leaves for future harvesting cycles. The group also harvests mature rattans in clumps, allowing younger plants to grow and mature. Okro and bush mangos are dried so they can be sold at better prices in periods of scarcity or when they are otherwise out of season. *Randia (caplobia)*, a resilient cattle stick, is harvested above the base to allow for regeneration through coppice.

Women's empowerment

The initiative has promoted the participation of women at all levels of decision-making and in all activities, to an unparalleled degree when compared to neighboring locales. Women have been included in forest governance, community development, and poverty reduction activities. Four of ten members of the initiative's Board are

women, while in many of the micro-credit groups, women outnumber men. The initiative also works closely with the Kirsti Women's Movement, a group based in Ekuri that has organized women's cooperatives to increase agricultural production.

POLICY IMPACTS

The work of the Ekuri Initiative has greatly helped to strengthen the links between the local community and Cross River State government authorities. Implementation of its joint forest management model has involved working closely with the Cross River National Park authority and the Cross River State Forestry Department. In 1992, a volunteer Community Forest Officer (CFO) was assigned to the area by the national park authority. They assisted the Ekuri community in compiling the first inventory of a forest plot. The relationship between these villages and the Forestry Department, previously described as antagonistic, became much more positive. This progress was attributed to a number of factors, including the role of the CFO in promoting intensive discussions about forest management at the village level. This individual was also instrumental in infrastructural improvement, and acted as an intermediary between the forestry department and villages, articulating requests for assistance and collaboration in the early years of the initiative. The national park authorities also provided training for sixteen local people in forest demarcation and enumeration skills. Finally, the initiative involved women from an early stage in the forest inventory process, and promoted a strong sense of community ownership.

In turn, this relationship has had positive impacts on policy-making decisions at the state level. The successes of the initiative in conservation and sustainable forest management inspired the Cross River State government to rewrite its forest sector strategy in 1994, enshrining the practice of community forestry as a guiding principle for the forestry sector, while logging concessions have been abolished throughout the state. In September 2010, the Cross River State House of Assembly passed a forestry bill into law in which attention was given to community forestry, confirming the participation of local communities in conservation and sustainable management of forests as a key strategy within the state.

The Cross River National Park has also been included as a key site in Nigeria's REDD+ programme, with three REDD pilot projects considered from Cross River State. One of these projects would include the Ekuri forests, along with neighbouring community forests in Iko Esai, Okokori, Etara-Eyeyeng, and Owai, and Ukpon River Forest Reserves, comprising an approximate total of 214,000 hectares. The Ekuri Community's engagement with the state's incipient REDD+ programme has further helped to strengthen ties between Ekuri and the state government.

Despite the successes of the initiative, however, Ekuri community members have yet to be included in steering committees or government advisory bodies, apparently due to the minority status of Ekuri in Nigeria.

Sustainability and Replication



SUSTAINABILITY

The initiative's sustainability is largely based on ongoing awareness-raising activities, monitoring and enforcement of compliance with the land use plan, sanctions on offenders, direct community participation in forest governance, and equitable benefit sharing. The key components that have made the project sustainable to date are the commitment of staff and community members to the project vision and, financially, revenues generated from the sale of non-timber forest products.

Ekuri has managed to successfully leverage national and international partnerships to mobilize funding for its infrastructural projects. This support has also had significant benefits in terms of capacity building. An example of this level of support is the receipt of a grant of around €30,000 in 2002 from IUCN. This project supported Ekuri's sustainable use of timber resources from its 50-hectare plot by improving the transport and marketing of timber, including relocating the office of the local logging company from Calabar to Ekuri itself, a distance of 200km. This had previously caused high transport costs for the timber, while the community had little influence over this office. Two small trucks replaced the old truck, and new chainsaws were purchased to improve the quality of the timber. The grant was also used to build the organizational capacity of the Ekuri Initiative with the aim of developing greater accountability for the funds from forest use.

The project's sustainability can be guaranteed if long-term financial support is provided for key program areas, thereby providing substantial benefits to target beneficiaries and further gaining their support for and commitment to conservation efforts.

REPLICATION

Using revenues from the sale of sustainable forest management products, the initiative has been able to scale up activities in five neighbouring communities – Okokori, Etara, Eyeyeng, Owai and Mfaminyin – which cover 10,000 people. Project expansion has been made possible through awareness-raising, needs assessments, infrastructure development, capacity building, and the introduction of a range of income-generating opportunities. This work was supported by the Ford Foundation, UNDP-implemented GEF Small Grants Programme, and by income generated from the forest.

The initiative model has been shared with several communities in Nigeria and others from Cameroon, Uganda, Mozambique, and South Africa. With support from the Ford Foundation, the initiative hosted the 1999 Sub-Saharan Conference on Community Forestry, which drew participants from local communities and government agencies in selected countries south of the Sahara.

The UK Department for International Development (DfID) has supported the Cross River State Forestry Commission to replicate the Ekuri model in thirty-three other local communities, meaning that nearly forty communities in Cross River State are currently applying the Ekuri community model. These include Agoi Ibami, Agoi Ekpo, Iko Ekperem, Biajua, Okiro, Abontakon, Iyamitet, Isoket, Bengdehe Afi, Iso Bendeghe, among many others. USAID's Sustainable Practices in Agriculture for Critical Environment (SPACE) have also encouraged replication of Ekuri's model in Okuni, Nsofang, and Bamba. The replicating communities are still in the early stages of development, however, and further support is necessary for them to be scaled up.

PARTNERS

- Cross River National Park: Assigned a community forester to Ekuri for two years, a vehicle, funding for the demarcation and enumeration of trees in the first plot, and funds for completion of the health centre, road maintenance, and awareness-raising activities.
- Cross River State Forestry Commission, supported by UK Overseas Development Agency (now DfID), 1994: Funding for technical support, inventory mapping, vehicles for the transport of building materials, and training of six individuals in directional felling of trees, maintenance of equipment, and other technical skills.
- Ford Foundation, 1996-9: Funding for the perimeter survey of the Ekuri community forest, preliminary land use plan, a detailed five-year plan, agriculture and non-timber forest products plan, micro-credit scheme, assistance in registering the Ekuri Initiative with the national government of Nigeria, and support to organize the Sub-Saharan Conference on Community Forestry.
- Forest Management Foundation, 1997: Funding for a truck to transport building materials to the community, and Ekuri timber, non-timber forest products, and farm produce to markets.
- Bonny Allied Industries: Cement for building four major bridges.
- Crushed Rock Industries: donation of chippings and aggregate used for building of the same bridges.
- Global Green Grants Fund, 2002: USD 5,000 grant to cover legal fees regarding the illegal and fraudulent lease of forest in Ekuri community forest; USD 3,000 grant for improvements to the path between Old Ekuri and New Ekuri.
- IUCN, 2002-5: gave €30,250 grant for relocation of the initiative office, oil palm pressers, four power chainsaws, and micro-credit for women's groups.
- EU Micro Projects Programme in Six States (MPP6): Built fifteen facilities – roads, schools, markets, health centres, water infrastructure, and civic centres for Ekuri and other communities in Cross River State.
- UNDP-implemented GEF Small Grants Programme, 2010-11: gave USD 29,000 grant for capacity building project titled “Community Based Conservation in Ekuri Community Forest; Ekuri Community, Akamkpa LGA, Cross River State”
- Wheels4Life, 2007: USD 2,000 for the distribution of twenty bicycles in 5 communities.



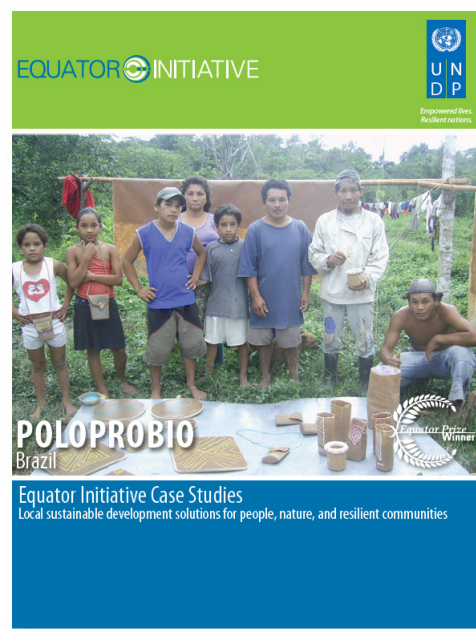
“Biodiversity is essential for the world’s sustainable development: therefore, we must conserve it”

Chief Edwin Ogar, Ekuri Initiative

FURTHER REFERENCE

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- Ekuri Initiative PhotoStory (Vimeo) <https://vimeo.com/24477411>

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EQUATOR INITIATIVE

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The Equator Initiative brings together the United Nations, governments, civil society, businesses and grassroots organizations to recognize and advance local sustainable development solutions for people, nature and resilient communities.

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