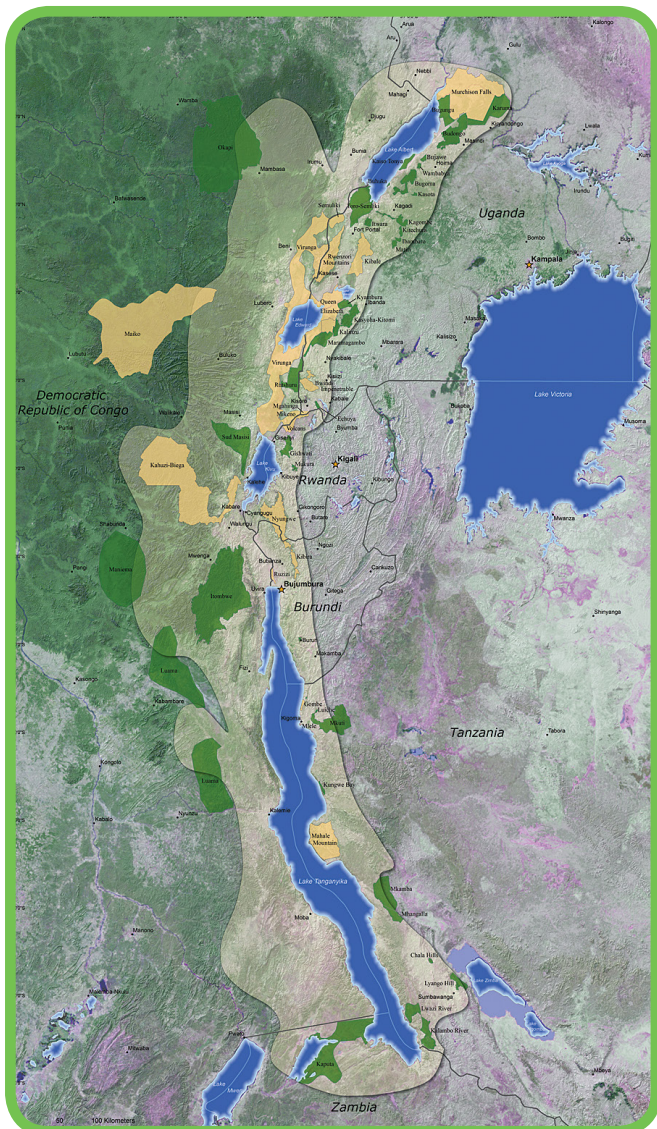


Environmental Impact Assessment and Transboundary Ecosystems of Albertine Rift

Policy Brief

1. Background



The Albertine Rift regions is endowed with a number of rich terrestrial and aquatic transboundary ecosystems. Those include for example Greater Virunga and Nyungwe-Kibira landscapes and different lakes from Lake Albert in north to Lake Tanganyika further in south respectively.

The Albertine Rift is recognised for its richness in biodiversity and ecosystem services, with a large number of either endemic or endangered species (e.g. Mountain Gorilla, Chimpanzees, etc). This fact leads to attributing different names to this region, such as Ecoregion, important bird area (IBAs), biodiversity hotspot and a big number of ecosystems are key biodiversity areas (KBAs). At

the same time this region is rich in natural resources including the underground natural resources. Some examples include mines and timber in eastern DRC as well as oil and Gas in almost all the Albertine Rift lakes right from Lake Albert in Northern West of Uganda to Lake Tanganyika in south west of Tanzania.

It is documented however, that these ecosystems face various threats, most of which are related to the increased human activities. The threats include but are not limited to; rising population pressure on natural resources over- exploitation, unsustainable agricultural practices, pollution including both point and non-point sources and the recent increase in exploration for and exploitation of non-renewable natural resources and the associated development of extractive industries in and around Albertine Rift ecosystems. These threats if not checked well and on time, may have significant negative economic, environmental, and social impacts.

The present policy brief outlines the ongoing effort in development and review of environmental assessment policies and regulation in the Albertine Rift countries and at East African level and give recommendations regarding of policies and regulation towards the improved transboundary ecosystem management. The Albertine Rift Conservation Society (ARCOS) and other civil society organisations grouped in the Albertine Rift Environmental Assessment Leadership Alliance (AREALA) are urging Albertine Rift countries to critically take into account the issues of transboundary ecosystem management in regards to development projects proposed in and around these ecosystems, considering the increasing need for economic development for these countries.

2. Why is this issue so important

2.1. There is an increasing need for economic development in the Albertine Rift countries



The Albertine Rift countries, like any other developing countries in Sub-Saharan region, are striving to improve on economic development for the wellbeing of their people. According to the African Economic Outlook 2013, agricultural activities, mining and energy resources (Including oil and Gas) are listed as the top areas that could boost the continent's economic growth and pave the way for a breakthrough in human development. Mostly, these projects are targeting the ecosystems shared by one or more countries in Albertine Rift and are undertaken at a scale that may critically damage environment and affect the ecosystem services provision. The consideration of transboundary issue and harmonised environmental assessment regulations will help to ensure the sustainable development in the Albertine Rift countries.

2.2. Albertine Rift, one of the target of international investors in extractive industries



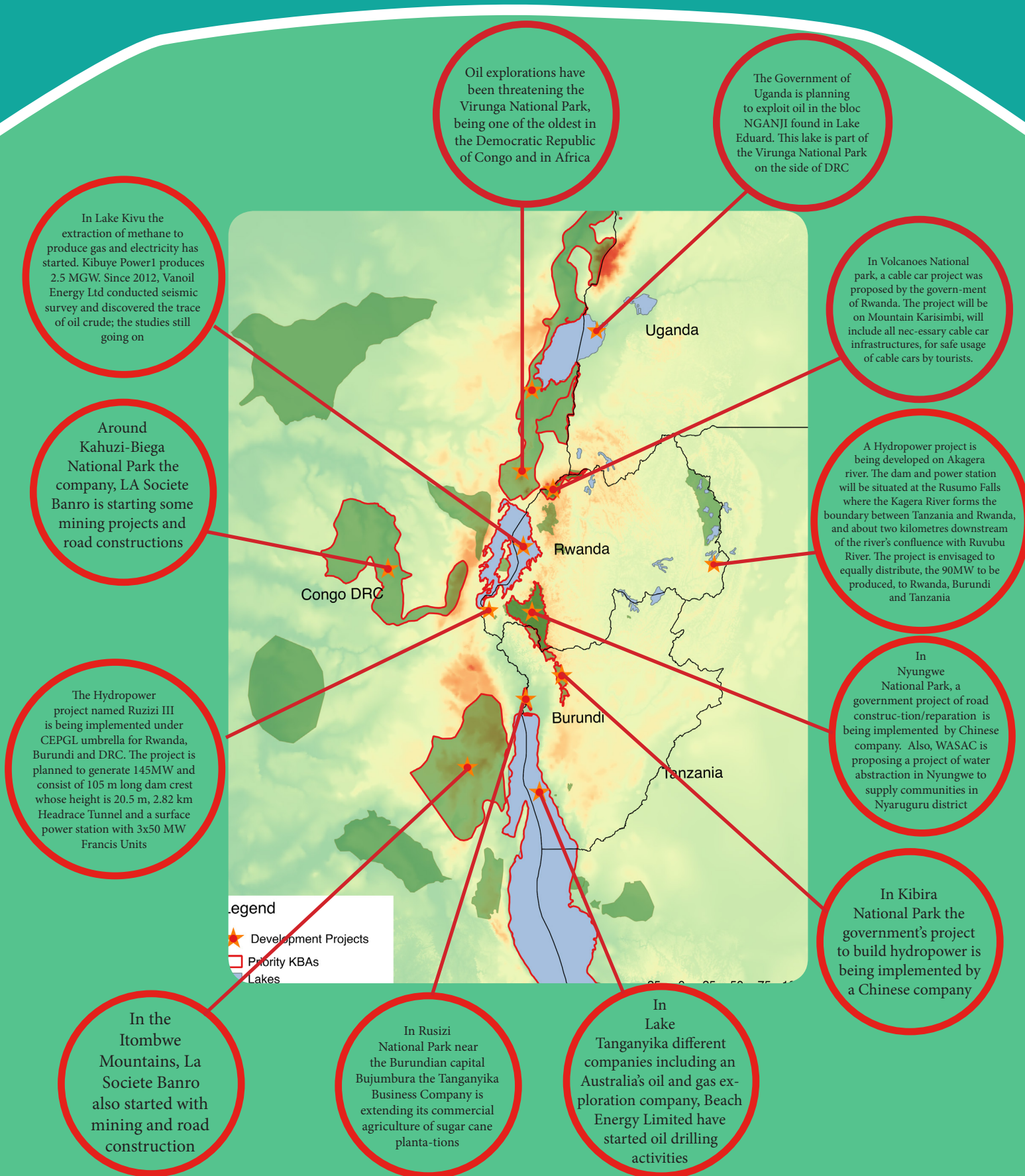
The Albertine Rift is increasingly becoming a potential target for western investors in terms of extractive industry such as oil and gas exploitation, and mining. In the recent past, drilling activities were initiated in most of the Albertine Rift Lakes and in Virunga National Park with success in some of the lakes especially in western Uganda in Lake Albert and Edward. In some other lakes such as Lake Kivu in western Rwanda, exploitation of Gas methane have already started. Also, mining activities are now taking place in many areas of the Albertine rift , particularly in the eastern DRC where natural ecosystems are highly targeted. Most of these activities are highly damaging and need a special assessment before their implementation as well as proposed alternatives and mitigation measures.

2.3. Albertine Rift is a global Biodiversity Hotspot



As earlier mentioned, the Albertine Rift is one of the most important regions for conservation in Africa. For example, it contains more vertebrate species than any other region on the continent and contains more endemic species of vertebrate than any other region on mainland Africa. The Albertine Rift Afromontane forests also support many endangered species such as the Mountain gorillas (*Gorilla beringei beringei*), which are among the most charismatic flagship species in Africa. As a result, this region has been identified by many key international conservation NGOs as a top priority area for biodiversity conservation in Africa. Many of the proposed development projects targeting these areas, have a high potential to convert the natural ecosystems into other form of land use while destroying animal habitat with a big risk to loose both plant and animal species endemic to this region. Hence, the need to pay a special attention in welcoming some development projects to this region.

KEY BIODIVERSITY AREAS UNDER PRESSURE IN THE ALBERTINE RIFT



3. Existing policy efforts and gaps in Environmental Assessment in Albertine Rift

Tremendous efforts to develop and review the policy, legal and institutional frameworks in all the Albertine Rift countries have been made for the sustainable management of the environment. Particularly, legal documents guiding the designing and implementation of development projects were so far put in place (to certain extent depending on the country). Some example, include environmental policies, general and specific EIA guidelines, etc.

However, a gap is still existing in the management of development projects that affect the shared ecosystems. The existing frameworks guiding the Environmental Impact Assessment of such projects are to some extents inadequate, not harmonized, and where harmonization attempts have been initiated, the pace is slow. Currently, important developments/initiatives are emerging in some of the transboundary ecosystems, (e.g. Greater Virunga) but the mandate of the transboundary collaboration institutions is limited over the control of such projects. Furthermore, though the Albertine Rift countries have their own national environment assessment regimes, with some dynamics to consider transboundary issues, there is still need for the region to have harmonised environment assessment policies, regulations, procedures and guidelines for shared ecosystems.

At East Africa region level, which covers a big part of the Albertine Rift, the need to provide common environmental assessment policies is underlined in the Treaty establishing the East African Community (EAC). It is for this reason that in 2005 EAC has developed the Regional Environment Assessment Guidelines for Shared Ecosystems in East Africa. However, this was only concerning the 3 partner states, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, before Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan joined.

4. Policy recommendations for more effective environmental assessment in transboundary ecosystems of Albertine Rift

Given the rapid increasing development activities in the Albertine Rift countries most of which targeting the KBAs with the risk to irreversibly loose many of the endemic species and a variety of ecosystem services; also, given the need for Albertine Rift countries to sustainably increase their economic growth and while meeting the Sustainable Development Goals and Paris Agreements, the following action points were recommended:

- *To harmonise the environmental assessment policies, regulations, procedures and guidelines for shared ecosystems in the Albertine Rift region.*
- *To develop specific Environmental Impact Assessment guidelines for project targeting transboundary ecosystems.*
- *To develop sector specific guidelines for countries which only have general EIA guidelines*
- *To update the existing East Africa transboundary environmental assessment guidelines for shared ecosystems by extending it to the five partner states.*
- *To create a platform for public participation in Environmental Impact Assessment in transboundary ecosystems.*



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