

COMMUNITY FOREST OWNERSHIP: KEY TO SUSTAINABLE FOREST RESOURCE MANAGEMENT. THE GAMBIAN EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the century The Gambia was still covered by dense and almost impenetrable forests. In 1981 about 430.000 ha or 45 percent of the total land area were classified as forest, it was estimated that this area was further reduced to about 340.000 ha or 30 percent of the land area in 1988. Likewise, the degradation of the forest condition is so severe that most closed forests have disappeared, leaving only a tree and shrub savanna of poor quality. The Gambia belongs to the group of the least developed countries, with an average income of US \$ 325 per capita. Its population of 1,025,000 (1993) relies mainly on forest resources for its energy needs.

The main cause of forest destruction are annual fires which systematically burn most vegetation. This is in combination with human activity resulting from the high population density (96 inhabitant per sq km) and a growth rate of 4.1 percent per year (1993 population and housing census).

While the seriousness of deforestation and the resulting environmental degradation with its socio-economical consequences were timely acknowledged, the situation in The Gambia with regard to forest management (the concept of scientific forest management was officially introduced by the colonial administration in the late 1940s) has been one of state control and manipulation. In the early 1980s it became apparent that the prevailing forestry practices were inadequate to halt the destruction of the country's forest resources, and that new approaches would have to be sought to meet the challenge of preserving a sufficient forest cover.

It was in this context that the Forestry Department, supported by a German funded project (the Gambian German Forestry Project, GGFP), in 1984 began to introduce the concept of natural forest management. The authors, Mr. F. Bojang, Director of the Forestry Department, has been involved in this case since 1980, and Mr. D. Reeb, GGFP expert and policy adviser to the Director of Forestry, since 1987.

THE INITIAL SITUATION

Forest management in The Gambia, like in the developing countries in general and in Africa in particular, has hitherto been characterized by extensive state involvement with little recognition of the potential for achieving positive long-term sustainable forest management, development and utilization through the involvement of local communities. As a matter of fact, the Gambia Government Forest Policy of 1976 was a broad statement of policy objectives that was not specific on orientations or instruments for achieving the objectives. It expected public involvement in the development of the forest resources without providing a conducive environment for this.

With the introduction of the state-owned Forest Park concept in the 1950s and the Forestry legislation in 1977, which vested the state with overall power over the national forest resources, the local population that claimed traditional ownership of surrounding forests began to develop a feeling of alienation which

finally resulted in their unwillingness to be involved in the protection and management of what used to be ‘their forests’.

Because the communities no longer see the forest as theirs they began to perceive all their activities in the forests as ‘illegal’ with the consequence that forest utilization practices became increasingly damaging. This behaviour was further enhanced by the restrictive Forest Regulations. Inevitably the forest resource base of the country continued to deteriorate as a result of a lack of public concern and an increase in population pressure and illegal activities.

The forestry personnel who were mostly involved in forest protection in accordance with the forest laws were deemed to be playing a policeman’s role and were both feared and disliked by a significant cross-section of the local communities. Thus their technical advice on forestry matters were not taken seriously by the target communities.

In conclusion, this institutional framework deprived the rural population of the responsibility for forest management, although it was the most affected by deforestation, while the forestry administration was entrusted with a mandate it was unable to accomplish due to the tense relationship with the population and also because of lack of human and material resources. In reality forest resources became ‘ownerless’ and exposed to systematical ‘mining’, generating considerable destruction and wastage. While everybody would acknowledge forest destruction and was aware of its consequences, the existing and unadapted institutional setup was preventing any efficient action.

In the mid-1980s, when more knowledge had been gained in The Gambia about the state of the forests and the potential of natural forest management, it became clear that the Government will never be in a position to manage, on its own, the forest resources countrywide, and that a new approach would have to be found to save the remaining forest cover.

THE CHANGE PROCESS

The Introduction of Community Forestry

The introduction of Community Forestry in The Gambia was born out of the realization, by the Forestry Department, of the futility of its efforts at protecting the nation’s forest resources without the committed and willing involvement of local communities. The department also recognized the inadequacy of the policy under which it was operating as well as the inadequacy of the Forest Act and Regulations. Consequently, in 1987, the Forestry Department and the Gambian German Forestry Project wrote their first “Proposal for the Introduction of Community Forestry in The Gambia”. The proposal went through two other revisions until 1990, when the first attempts at introducing community forestry was undertaken.

Although the policy and legislative environment remained the same at the start of the program, the commitment to change the approach within the department and the Ministry responsible for forests, as well as the commitment within the Government to see that the negative trend in forest degradation is halted and eventually reversed, made it possible to implement community forestry. The long-term demand by the local communities to allow them to manage their own forest facilitated the process.

Institutional Arrangements for Community Forestry Implementation

The introduction and application of community forestry is one of a process of confidence- building, and is demand driven. One of the primary conditions a community has to fulfil before a Community Forest Management Agreement is entered into between it and the Forestry Department, is the creation of a Forest

Committee at the village level. This Committee, which is generally formed on the base of the already existing village institutional structure, has representation from both the male and the female members of the community, and is responsible for all work organization at the village level. Its members are assisted by extensionists and the forestry staff in areas such as participatory problem- and solution-analysis, work planning and preparation of management plans. They also receive training in rudimentary forestry practices such as forest protection, tree nurseries, plantation and utilization as well as in basic book keeping. Where necessary and possible, training in other revenue generating economic activities is also provided. Other members of the community benefit from this training through their participation in work implementation and through their committee members.

Community forestry implementation distinguishes three phases: A preparatory phase during which the forest management by local communities is prepared; a preliminary phase during which the communities demonstrate their capacity in forest protection and management; and a consolidation phase during which the communities gain further managerial and technical forestry skills aimed at self-management. For the development of confidence between a participating community and the department, it has been found necessary to develop a mutually agreed upon Preliminary Community Forest Management Agreement (PCFMA) for the preliminary phase, and a Community Forest Management Agreement (CFMA) for the consolidation phase, between the local community and the department, on behalf of the Government.

The basic idea of the PCFMA is to develop suitable conditions for community forest management. It gives time to conduct negotiations, manage eventual conflicts over land ownership and allows the villagers to demonstrate their genuine interest in protecting their forest. Before submission of the PCFMA the villagers have to demarcate the forest they are intending to manage on a permanent basis. Special attention and care is given at this stage to integrate other land use forms such as agriculture and range land management. Once approved by the local authorities and by the Forestry Department, the PCFMA is valid for a period of three years, and is then automatically replaced by the CFMA if the community has shown its ability to manage their forest.

This CFMA grants permanent ownership rights over the forest resource of a clearly demarcated forest to the community or communities, and specifies details on the extent of cooperation with the Forestry Department, such as technical assistance and on the specific responsibility of both parties. With the CFMA the communities are entitled to keep the benefits derived from their forests. The only condition attached to the CFMA is to manage the forest resource according to a simple management plan that has to be approved by the responsible Divisional Forest Officer.

Every agreement signed with the community is accompanied with an attestation from the traditional chief to the effect that the community has customary ownership of the land that they claim or that they have permission from the chief's office to annex the forest land for their community forestry activities. In the traditional Gambian society the traditional chief is regarded as the customary custodian of all unclaimed lands as well as those claimed lands which have not been cultivated before. In recognition of this role the traditional leaders are involved from the beginning. Many community forests already established are being managed jointly by two or more villages. It is in the negotiations of these joint managements that the traditional chiefs have been found to be most useful. As traditional seats of arbitration, the involvement of the chiefs helps to stem any future conflict between claimants of the land concerned.

In situations where there have been multiple claims on a piece of forest land, the Forestry Department and the chiefs work together to secure a joint management of the forest by the claiming communities. Because such conflicts cannot always be solved between communities, especially in the densely populated area close to the urban centers where competition for land is high, the Chiefs recently innovated and implemented the concept of a 'peace committee'. This committee is composed of seven elected village heads (*Alkalolu*) that are highly respected for their knowledge of the traditional rights and

for their objectivity. Already on two occasions this committee has been able to settle serious conflicts without interference of the Government administration.

The community, through their forest committee, is also required to open a bank account into which all revenue from the forest management activities are paid. While part of this money could be used by the community to finance development activities at the village or larger community level, the agreement requires that a certain proportion, about 40 percent, be reserved for reinvestment in their forest. During the PCFMA stage they are exempted from all taxes. After the CFMA, while still exempted from all licence and permit fees, they are required to pay 15 percent of their collections into the National Forestry Fund as contribution towards the development of the forestry sector and community forestry in particular.

Extension work is mainly carried out by teams of private extensionists and foresters. However, to enable the large scale implementation of community forestry within a reasonable time, the Forestry Department has encouraged the collaboration of experienced NGOs, especially in the field of extension. So far two strong and renowned NGOs are participating in community forestry.

The practice of community forestry is not without problems however. As surprising as it may seem, it takes a long time to create the sense of forest ownership among the villagers. This is the result of profound mistrust about governmental actions and policies. This sense of ownership has to be carefully built up during the PCFMA stage. To achieve this objective the use of financial or material incentives are avoided. No compensations are given to the villagers for the protection and plantation work they are accomplishing in their forests. A task decided by the forest committee and executed by the villagers without external support strengthens the perception that they are the real owners of their work, and therefore of 'their forest'.

Management Activities

Forest management at the community level is based on the principle of management planning. With technical assistance from the department communities prepare simple management plans which guide their intervention in the forest area. Adapted tools are used for adequate visualization and documentation of the plan. One of the key pillars of the management plan is the establishment of fire protection structures around the forest such as fire lines, and the subsequent establishment of greenbelts. In the early stage planting material for the greenbelt, such as stumps and seeds, are provided by the Forestry Department. The greenbelt serves equally as a permanent demarcation line clearly indicating the ownership status of the forest land.

The communities are also encouraged to set up village nurseries where seedlings for planting in the firebreaks or for enrichment planting are produced. Ultimately all plant production should be done at the village level, while the Forestry Department will limit its supply of seeds to that which is not available locally.

Through their forest committees the communities organize themselves in such a way that fire prevention structures are put in place with minimum delay. Customary norms are followed for organizing themselves into work forces for the accomplishment of the various tasks. The Forestry Department does not involve itself at this level of organization. This way the communities could realize their own potential.

The interventions at the community forest level are based on the successful experiences on natural forest management of the Gambian-German Forestry Project which has demonstrated that keeping fires out of the forest is the most important initial intervention for a successful revival and development of the forest. Other activities include controlled and planned harvesting, e.g. initial concentration of all harvesting

activities on deadwood exploitation, and enrichment planting with valuable timber species. Dead wood exploitation immediately yields revenue for the participating communities.

THE OUTCOME

The Policy and Legislative Review Process

For a sustainable country-wide implementation of community forestry the Forestry Department saw the need to review and revise both its Forest Policy and Legislation, based on the successful experience gained during the past years, in order to create an appropriate and conducive environment for local communities and for individual involvement in forest management. This was done in line with the relevant provisions of Agenda 21 and the Forestry Principles of the Rio conference.

As earlier mentioned the Forestry Department realized the inadequacy of its operational policy for forestry development and therefore embarked on a process of a participatory review of the policy in 1992. This process was concluded within one and a half-year from commencement.

The resulting draft policy was again presented to a workshop of multi-disciplinary policy level personnel as well as representatives of the local and traditional authorities who had the opportunity to propose certain changes and to introduce new elements. Government approval of this policy was received in November 1995.

The policy makers had the chance to develop this policy according to tested concepts and to the exhaustive experience gained during over five years of people participation in community forestry. Therefore the new forest policy is characterized by its emphasis on supporting viable orientations, and therefore to respond to the basic needs of the population rather than just setting theoretical goals.

The Gambia now has a Forest Policy that specifically calls for community forest management undertakings as well as private forestry. The policy also calls for community ownership of the forest resources being managed by them and the benefits accruing therefrom, while calling on the Government to provide technical assistance and guidance to the participating communities and individuals through the Forestry Department.

The policy however requires a supporting legislation, which the current forest laws cannot provide. The Forestry Department has similarly initiated a participatory process of legislative review. This process, which is now completed, while resulting in maintaining a significant proportion of the current legislation, has led to the introduction of numerous new elements pertaining to tree and forest tenure, management and utilization at the community and individual levels. The new legislation has been specially tailored to regulate the process of getting community forest ownership and to secure the corresponding ownership rights. It also outlines the obligations of the Government and those of the communities, and it includes provisions for conflict resolutions and tax incentives. This legislation will form a very strong basis on which community forestry and private forestry will be able to expand.

The proposed new law has been presented to a workshop of farmers who had the opportunity to comment on it and to make proposals for the introduction and/or elimination of certain elements. As a third step in this participatory legislative review and revision process the department again presented the revised proposals to a two-day national workshop in July 1996 of multi-disciplinary policy-making level personnel. The comments from this workshop were included in the draft that was submitted to the Government for its consideration. Its enactment by Parliament is expected shortly.

It has been found necessary to follow a long process of public participation in the review and revision process of the policy and laws, in order to avert any future significant negative developments that may hamper the development and expansion of community and private forestry in The Gambia. The consultation reaffirmed the need to devolve authority for forest management to the local communities as public appreciation of the proposed changes and introductions was amply demonstrated by the participants during that process.

The Growing Importance of Community Forestry in The Gambia

Already over 6000 ha of forest have been brought under active community management since the introduction of the program in 1990. Applications have been received in respect of the management of an additional area of over 7000 ha. There are 45 established community forests while a further 50 or more are expected to be established. More than 300 villages are now involved in community forestry in The Gambia. Applications from new villages are being received in large numbers. The rippling effect of community forestry is considerably higher than previously expected. While in the past forest land was considered to be marginal land reserves, people are now assessing them from a different perspective.

Due to the importance of community forestry a visible trend in the reduction of bush fires is taking place. The absence of fire is certainly the best criteria to measure the success of forest management. Fire prevention and control is extremely difficult in absence of proper alternatives. Community forestry constitutes such a valuable alternative for the rural population. Similarly illegal exploitation within community forests have been successfully eradicated because every villager is willing to protect 'his forest'. The improved control on forest resources and particularly on firewood exploitation will help to change the status of wood being more or less a free access resource. As a matter of fact large amounts of wood are exploited in an unaccounted manner. In the near future community forestry should lead to a much improved control system of exploitation and therefore the true value of forest products will be gradually introduced, thus creating more incentives to manage a valuable resource.

Another significant development has been observed among the cattle herders who were, at the initial stage, not supporting the concept of community forestry management. They feared that forest management would exclude their cattle from the forest. They were furthermore of the opinion that fire was beneficial to the production of fresh grass re-growth. After about three years of forest management their attitude changed radically due to the improved health condition of their cattle. Furthermore the absence of fire has considerably increased the amount of available fodder within and outside the forest. Herders who in previous years use to migrate into the region of Casamance in Senegal are now staying on their community land. Consequently farmers are now benefiting from the presence of these cattle during the dry season through the intake of manure on their fields.

The protection of the forest cover has reversed the degradation trend of natural resources. Through community forestry management the resource base is gradually building up again with wide-ranging beneficial effects.

THE LESSONS LEARNED

The Rural Population Is Already Much Aware

One of the most important lessons learnt by The Gambia during the past six years of implementation of Community Forestry is that communities are very aware of the economical and environmental consequences of deforestation, and therefore are prepared and willing to participate in forestry activities provided the Government creates the right environment for such participation. Once confidence is

established, a responsible and dynamic development process, geared toward a sustainable management of natural resources, takes place within and among the participating communities.

Suitable Institutional Environment Initiates Self-Development

A recent study has shown that among the first villages to have participated in community forestry the forest committees have build up confidence in managing their forest. As a result the communities have decided to use the same mechanisms to manage other natural resources such as farm and rangelands.

Similarly with the growing number of villages involved in community forestry, the responsible committees are now organizing themselves to form regional associations to rationalize their operations and to strengthen their positions during negotiations. They also aim to further promote community forestry on their own. These associations will be able to maintain the linkages between the rural population and the Government.

Once the proper legal and institutional environment is provided, the population continues to build up capacity without external support because it responds to its vital needs.

The Importance Of Clear Ownership Rights Over Natural Resources

Natural resources can be managed by the population if, and only if, their ownership status is clearly established and understood. For forest resources that are managed on a comparatively long-term basis, the ownership rights should not be limited in time by the Government. The ownership should be permanent on the condition that the ownership communities are not depleting their forests.

In the process of community-based natural resource management all types of monetary or material compensation for a work done should be avoided as they will be perceived as a 'salary', thus giving the impression to the villagers that they are implementing an activity supervised by an outsider rather than work they have decided upon and for which they have understood the necessity. Actually, the absence of compensation strengthens their sense of ownership and creates strong ties between the villages and their forest.

During community forestry implementation, and contrary to what is often believed, it has been found that the communities were not seeing the forest primarily as a source of revenue. Access to forest ownership is their first motivation because they fully understand the importance of preserving the forest to meet their own needs and to secure their future without interference from outsiders.

The Gambian Experience Can Be Replicated in Other Countries if the Political Will Is There

The Gambian experience in community forestry is already interesting villagers, organizations and administrations of the neighbouring countries such as Senegal and Guinea-Bissau. Exchanges with villagers in these countries have already taken place and have created a mutual interest for the development of a common concept. Indeed, forest protection and management in a given country, even if successful, cannot be done in isolation. It is necessary to harmonize the forest policies of these countries in order to prevent the existing trend of gradual deforestation. In that respect The Gambia Government has shown that, with sufficient political will and courage the empowerment of the local communities can lead to a much improved forest management, and on its side the population has proved that they can be entrusted with such responsibilities.

The later aspect has relevance beyond the sub-region. It shows that the origin of the problem has often been misunderstood. While it is true that forest degradation results from demographic growth, poverty, and poor education; it is basically a problem of institutions inhibiting constructive actions due to the lack of security of tenure and benefit for communities or individuals to manage natural resources which belongs to the state.

While six years of experience is indeed short to draw any decisive conclusions with regard to adopting community forestry as the policy instrument for achieving the policy objective of keeping 30 percent of the total land area under forest cover and managing 75 percent of this, we in The Gambia are convinced that it is the only objective course of action in the present socio-economic conditions towards a sustainable management and utilization of the forest resources.