



Protecting the forest

Sarah Gillam reports from Ethiopia on an initiative to help local people as well as the landscape and natural resources of the country

I catch Daghue Woldegongise dressed up in his best outfit, all set for the official forest signing ceremony. Where once he was employed by the Government as a guard to keep people out of Chilimo forest, now he and villagers will be managing and protecting the forest themselves.

Officials take shelter under the canvas tent as the heavens open. The dignitaries sing the praises of the local agreement while villagers literally sing (and dance) their way through the ceremony. The Chilimo and Galessa forest blocks are the first two of 10 to be signing this agreement with the Government and it's an important day. In addition to having the right to manage and protect the forest, the community will have exclusive user rights over forest products like wild coffee, cardamom, pepper, bamboo and medicinal plants.

Daghue knows from bitter experience the consequences of illegal timber trading. Five years ago, his house was set on fire after he caught people cutting down trees.

"The conflict became very serious. Parts of the forest by the town were particularly badly affected," he says. "We have to stop illegal

felling now or we are in danger of losing our forest forever."

After today the community will have the force of law behind them and be able to prosecute anyone who transgresses the agreement.

Disappearing forest

It's not come a moment too soon. In the 1800s, 40% of Ethiopia's land mass was said to be covered in natural forest. By the 1950s, the forest had reduced to 16%, and by the 1980s to around 3%. Now it's less than that and roughly 200,000 hectares are lost every year. Such drastic reduction is attributed to an annual population growth of 2.75% and land clearance for timber, agriculture and fuel wood. As poverty levels rise, so pressure on forests increases.

In the past, a protectionist approach to forestry was adopted but with the change of government in 1991, a new attitude has prevailed.

In the late 1990s, FARM-Africa, a British NGO working in Ethiopia, organised a tour to India, Zimbabwe and Mozambique to look at community forest management programmes,

taking Ethiopian Government officials with them. Suddenly, everyone realised that community involvement was the missing ingredient.

FARM-Africa and the Ethiopian forestry department set to work in the Oromia region in the south of the country and have since extended their work to Chilimo and Bonga forests in the west.

"When we started implementing this approach, we didn't have any experience of involving communities," said Zelalem Temesfen, head of forestry projects with FARM-Africa in Ethiopia, who was seconded from the government.

"We all had to learn from our mistakes. Convincing the community took a long time. Initially people asked us whether we were coming here for the sake of the forest or for them? Our answer was both."

"We started by doing income generation work and encouraging people to take up alternative livelihoods to forestry. We had to build a good rapport with people so they would trust us."

A sustainable future

FARM-Africa together with the Ministry of Agriculture and Chilimo villagers looked at the whole problem of illegal timber felling and how people earned their incomes.

Early survey work estimated that 97% of people living in and around Chilimo forest were using its resources to varying degrees, so if they increased the variety of livelihoods that were not dependent on the forest, there was a chance it could slowly recover by itself. But how to ensure sustainability?

Chairman of the Chilimo Forest Users Group, Tesema Jebora said they all sat down and began by discussing their regrets about not taking action against offenders.

"We didn't want to pass on a degraded resource to the next generation," he said. "Losing this forest would have been disastrous for the community."

They talked to all the forest users and together drew up a management plan with FARM-Africa and the Ministry of Agriculture.

"Most of the community are poor because they lease so little land, so almost everyone was dependant on illegal forest products. Timber traders from outside the area were going into the forest and just cutting down trees. We've stopped that almost completely," he says.

"The community's attitude to the forest has changed radically. People have other ways of earning a living with things like bee keeping and poultry and although it's not enough at the moment, it will grow in time."

"We are committed to managing the forest as a resource and this can be witnessed by our agreement today. Our own livelihood problem is beginning to be solved."

Daghue is a case in point. He's turned his attentions to poultry. He leases a hectare of



□ Daghue with his wife, Fantu Eshetu, and three of his children SARAH GILLAM

land and grows enset, a kind of banana plant, and maize and works as a labourer to keep himself, his wife and four children.

Poultry plans

Two years ago, FARM-Africa gave him 25 one-day-old Rhode Island Red chickens, inoculated against Newcastle disease and complete with instructions for a hay box and feed for eight weeks. A single hen lays an average 24 eggs a month if properly fed and managed, and the eggs sell for 50 cents each – double the price of the local produce because they are so desirable.

"When I was given the day-old chicks, one of my neighbours came and had a look, doubtful that I would ever be able to raise them without the hen. But on the advice of FARM-Africa, I made a hay box and stuffed it with old clothes to keep the chickens warm. I fed them for eight weeks on the feed provided and after that they ate local grain. They have to be protected from predators and you have to keep an eye on them all the time. But after about four days, they start to come out of the box and wander about. My family eat the eggs and any left over, we sell."

Daghue said he'd like to be a poultry supplier for the area but he's slightly hesitant because there are no veterinary services and the chickens are vulnerable in the rainy season.

"We need to buy drugs to inoculate the chickens against Newcastle disease and coccidiosis. And we'll probably have to club together to buy the drugs which are very expensive. Otherwise, I've learnt a lot about rearing chickens and I'm selling eggs to people within a 15 mile radius. They take the eggs and put them under their hens to hatch..."

there are now Rhode Island Reds all around Chilimo!"

The villagers have formed themselves into a cooperative, giving them legal status. They've got an office and are dispensing development fund money to the community.

"Last year we were given 22,000 Birr as grant money for the community development fund by FARM-Africa," said Tesema Jebora. "That money is loaned on a credit basis and repayment is made with interest. Each member has also saved around 40 Birr (nearly £3) and 155 households have benefited from grants. Some members have bought sheep and some grain, selling it when the price has risen. The interest benefits all the community."

"The next two to three years will make a significant difference – once we have started enrichment planting in the forest, tightened up our management and protection activities, it will change the forest resource base in a very short time. And in consultation with the Ministry of Agriculture, we will cultivate forest products legally. We plan to use the forest to sustain our community for ourselves and for generations to come." ■

FARM-Africa (Food and Agricultural Research Management-Africa) aims to reduce poverty by developing innovative approaches to natural resource management in Africa. The charity works with small-scale farmers and herders, in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and Uganda, prioritising pastoral development, community forest management and smallholder development and land reform. See www.farmafrica.org.uk

□ Daghue Woldegongise with his chickens SARAH GILLAM