

Empowering Community in Natural Resources Management

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By Samson Haileyesus, SSI staff writer

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia - Almost throughout the breadth and width of the continent the rural community is at the forefront in development activities. The fight to sustain and preserve the natural resources is an ongoing global battle especially in Ethiopia, where forest once covered 37% of the country has now been reduced to less than 3%. More than 200,000 hectares of natural forest is believed to be cut down every year mostly for fuel, farmlands and furniture. Various attempts have been made to curb this problem but with little success.

Recently a new initiative entitled "Participatory Forest Management Programme (PFMP)" has been launched by FARM-Africa /SOS Sahel International with the aim to finding an alternative in solving the problem by way of ensuring environmental sustainability through community based natural resource management systems.

According to Ben Irwin, technical manager of Farm Africa/SOS Sahel PFMP, globally both in developed and developing countries there is a shift in forest management towards local communities, where the shift is partly due to practical reasons, in terms of better management but also due to a better understanding that people need to use resources sustainably. The rationale here is that people will conserve the forests only if they have the rights to the resources; if they gain more from the conservation of their forests then they will have no reason to deplete their forests.

PFMP has four key, areas of work, which include forest protection, forest sustainable utilization, forest development and forest management. It is currently working in three different ecological zones in Ethiopia; two in the Oromia region at Chilimo and Borana and one in the Southern Nations Nationalities', people's Region at Bonga.

"These," Irwin said, "would, be used as models for other projects in the country." Besides being given the ability to manage their forests, communities are also given the opportunities to reduce their reliance on forests by introducing alternate income generating, and diversifying programmes such as bee keeping, poultry farming and others. The

main aim here is that if the amount of trees being felled is reduced the water retention capacity of the land will increase thus, replenishing rivers.

Irwin said that some of the challenges of the programme included lack of legal precedence in giving forest rights, to the community, difficulty in finding professionals trained with current forest management technique and policy vacuum caused with the drafting of a new forestry policy.

Yakob Adugna Information and Training Officer, of FARM-Africa / SOS Sahel, said on his part that besides giving the communities training in the management of forests, reproductive health education is also given so that the adverse effects of population growth on the environment is, understood.

The-first Phase of the programme, the investigation stage, has now been completed and the program is now in its second stage where negotiation between the government and the community is underway and the handing over of responsibility for protecting the forests is to take place.

The Bonga and Chilimo sites are scheduled to be handed over to the community by the end of this year. The third and final stage of implementation is expected to bring on the actual management of the forest under the community with the technical assistance from government offices and the project staffs.

'The Participatory Forest Management is a joint initiative of Farm Africa and SOS Sahel UK International whose, objectives include the contribution to the long term conservation of forest ecosystems, through the development and establishment of, new systems in forest management; building the capacity of governmental staff and rural communities to manage natural resources in a sustainable and equitable way to maintain or increase income opportunities from improved natural resource management and diversified livelihoods and to catalyse the adoption of PFM within forest policy and practice. The EU, DSW, Comic Relief and DFID are funding the programme.