
[Nigeria: A unique example of community based forest management at the Ekuri community](#)

Introduction / Background

Nigeria in West Africa is the most populous country in Africa with an estimated population of 170 million. Nigeria's ecosystem from the south, consist of the mangrove, tropical forest, savannah and semi arid zone to the north. Nigeria tropical forest during pre-colonial and after independence in 1960, was relatively intact. However, deforestation, degradation, fragmentation and changing land use patterns for agriculture, illicit logging, overhunting, unsustainable harvesting of non-timber forest products, uncontrolled fire, unsustainable collection of firewood and urbanization have gravely depleted the Nigeria' rainforest. According to RainforestsMongabay.Com “ deforestation is a serious problem in Nigeria, which currently has one of the highest rates of forest loss (3.3 percent) in the world. Since 1990, the country has lost some 6.1 million hectares or 35.7 percent of its forest cover. Worse, Nigeria's most biodiverse ecosystems—its old-growth forests—are disappearing at an even faster rate. Between 1990 and 2005, the country lost a staggering 79 percent of these forests and since 2000 Nigeria has been losing an average of 11 percent of its primary forests per year—double the rate of the 1990s. These figures give Nigeria the dubious distinction of having the highest deforestation rate of natural forest on the planet” . Cross River State, a sub-national government in Nigeria on the border with the Republic of Cameroon is currently host to 50% remaining forests in Nigeria and is one of the “biodiversity hotspots” in the world.

Forest Governance System:

The forests in Cross River State as bequeathed by the British colonial administration, is divided into the forest reserves (controlled by the government), community forest (managed by communities), private forest (by NGOs) and Cross River National Park (by the federal government). According to International Union for Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) Strategy 2010-2014, “ Forests are biologically diverse systems, which offer a variety of habitats for plants, animals and micro-organisms. Forest biodiversity is interlinked to socio-economic factors, providing goods and services that range from timber, non-timber forest products to mitigating climate change and genetic resources” are critical to the daily sustenance of communities including Ekuri and the global community at large.

Ekuri Community: Who are they?

One of the communities in Cross River State of Nigeria that has substantially and successfully made inroad in community forestry is Ekuri community. Ekuri community which consist of Old Ekuri and New Ekuri villages is 7km apart from each other with a population of 6,000, belongs to Nkokoli tribe

who only occupies but 5 villages in all of Nigeria; speaks Lokoli, a unique language spoken nowhere else. Ekuri community due to colonial legacy has 33,600ha of primary forest on her land, the largest and relatively intact communally controlled forest in Nigeria and perhaps in West Africa.

Origin of Ekuri Community involvement in formal community forest management:

In 1981 without external influence, the Ekuri community conceived the idea of a formal community forest management initiative first to sustain the inheritance of forefathers, livelihoods, to promote community development, poverty reduction and to avert negative lessons learned from communities that have lost their forests. This idea continued to be developed over the years through active involvement of the chiefs, elders, women, men, youths and children to safeguard the commonwealth that the community depends upon for daily survival. More so, Ekuri as diminutive minority in Nigeria realized that her sustainable development is hinged on her forest as there is little chance of state or federal government initiating or advancing development schemes that would benefit Ekuri.

Problems in Ekuri that triggered community forest management:

At the inception of this idea, Ekuri people trekked four hours through the undulating forest to the nearest motorable road to market light but high priced forest products and bought essential goods which they head-loaded also back home. There were no other community facilities; diseases, illiteracy, poverty and mortality was rife and these motivated and intensified united efforts and commitments by all in Ekuri community to overcome this malaise. In 1992, the Ekuri community established Ekuri Initiative, as a community based NGO with a mandate in conservation, sustainable forest management, community development and poverty reduction.

Achievements:

Since its inception, the Ekuri Initiative has recorded inspiring achievements:

- Though the Initiative has a Board that makes policies for the organization, draft of policies are tabled before the general assembly meeting of Ekuri community for competing inputs and such inputs are integrated into new policies guaranteeing community's ownership of decisions and sustainability of policies, programs and activities.
- The harvesting of timber from two-50ha inventory plots and sustainable harvesting of NTFPs- afang, bush mango, cane ropes, achi seeds etc have generated incomes used for the construction of a 40km dirt road with bridges, culverts to both Ekuri villages, partly funded a health centre, built a school block, a town hall, awards of scholarships, skills development of youths to relieve pressures from the forest. The Initiative has also provided technical capacity to Ekuri farmers in sustainable agriculture, improved crop varieties, housing subsidy, payments of medical bills for the vulnerable,

boundary maintenance to deter trespasses etc.

- The Initiative with supports from donor partners implemented a perimeter survey of Ekuri community forest (33,600ha); a land use plan jealously guarded by the Ekuri villagers; a detailed 5-year plan for the use of the land; an agriculture and non-timber forest products plan; successful legal fights over illegal and fraudulent logging concession in Ekuri community forest and various capacity building activities etc.
- The success story of the Ekuri Initiative has inspired the Cross River State Forestry Commission to rewrite her forestry sector strategy making community based forest management the principle of the entire strategy. Furthermore, Ekuri community based forest initiative is accorded the status of a “flagship community based forest project in Nigeria”. The British's Department for International Development (DFID) has supported the Forestry Commission to replicate Ekuri model in 33 forest communities as well as Living Earth, a British NGO in 5 communities across the State.
- The Nigerian Conservation Foundation has replicated the Ekuri's model in Taraba State in the north-east of Nigeria. Several communities in Nigeria have visited the Ekuri community to learn from her innovative experiences including communities from Nigeria, Cameroon, Uganda, Mozambique and South Africa.
- The Ekuri Initiative has evolved income generation mechanisms ranging from registration fees from buyers of all farm and forest products, sales taxes, gates fees that go into the community's treasury on a daily basis for community uses. The Ekuri community has evolved a system where all trees in the forest and on farms (except planted by an individual) are communally owned. This strategy has drastically reduced degradation of large expanse of forest by the rich for farms or to acquire trees to sell to loggers as happens in other communities to the disadvantage of the poor. The traditional system of land ownership by individuals in Ekuri is through deforestation for farming; however with the new experience, land in the farming zone of the land use plan is equitably distributed among members of the community in a gender sensitive manner ensuring justice, fair play and uncompromising commitments of all to the ideals of the community to protect her “commonwealth”. The Initiative has also the sole responsibility of harvesting timber for commercial sales to meet the needs of the Ekuri community against individual logging practiced in other communities.
- A recipient of UNDP's “Equator Award” in 2004 in recognition of the Initiative successes in reducing poverty through conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.
- The greatest achievement of the Ekuri community based forest initiative is the undying capacity to protect her commonwealth, curtailed logging interest despite various mundane attempts by the

powerful moneybags and collaborators in the corridor of power. This has substantially contributed to the relative intactness of Ekuri community forest and sustaining the socio-economic, cultural, environmental development of the Ekuri people. Besides, this has benefitted neighboring communities who also are depended on this forest for daily sustenance as well as water for downstream communities. Ekuri community forest is a storehouse for carbon thus assisting to mitigate climate change beneficial to the entire world. The proactive roles of the Ekuri community to preserve her natural heritage has the genuine capacity to meet the needs of present and future generations and is worthy of emulation by other communities to save mother earth from total depletion of resources and accompanying negative consequences on human being.

Chief Edwin Ogar (Program Coordinator), Wise Administration of Terrestrial Environment and Resources (WATER), 6 Abasi Ita Street, Off MCC Road, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. Phone: +234 803 546 1507. Email: newedeva@yahoo.com