
Kenya: The controversial 'shamba system' of exotic tree plantations

Kenya's 'shamba' or Tongya system has been generally defined as a form of agroforestry, where farmers are encouraged to cultivate primary crops (maize, bananas, beans and cassava) on previously clear cut public forest land on the condition that they replant trees. Since the mid 19th century, Kenya adopted this system to establish tree plantations by means of cheap or totally free labour, in order to meet the demand for timber.

The shamba system, which in theory seeks to involve landless communities in forest conservation, has been steeped in controversy in Kenya for a long time now. By the early 1980's, many problems associated with the system started emerging –notably about 19% of Shamba systems were encroaching on natural forests.

Besides being open to abuse, critics point the replacement of indigenous forests with exotic tree monocultures. The most common exotic species planted in public forests include eucalyptus and cypress. Those plantations established under a monoculture regime interfere with the forest dwindling its biodiversity, and reducing its water catchment qualities.

This has led to a problematic scenario.

On the one hand, the “shamba” system is criticized on the grounds of the detrimental impacts of the monoculture exotic tree plantations it became. Under the present government of President Kibaki, farmers have been told to keep off indigenous forests. The Deputy Minister of the Environment and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Prof. Wangari Maathai contends that, “We cannot sacrifice indigenous forests at the expense of exotic plantations. Plantations represent a monoculture of trees, but a forest is an ecology system”. Maathai affirmed that the system had been abused as farmers were allowed – through corruption – to turn large sections of indigenous forests into farmlands, “destroying local biodiversity and greatly reducing the capacity of the forests to be effective water reservoirs”. Furthermore, poachers, illegal loggers, charcoal burners and even drug barons had also invaded the forests.

On the other hand, the ban of the “shamba” system, intended to protect native forests implicates the eviction of thousands of farmers, raising controversy within society.

Overall, what is clear is that the root of the problem can be traced to a policy that has created dependency on an unsustainable monoculture tree plantation pattern which has globally proved to be socially, economically and environmentally harmful. The difficult blind alley of Kenya in this regard, is just another case in point.

Article based on information from: “Call to keep off indigenous forests,” Nation Reporter, <http://www.ogiek.org/indepth/break-call-to-keep.htm> ; “Smallholder agriculture: the Shamba system”, http://www.rsrg.uni-bonn.de/Projekte/kenya/dfg_rep/vegetation_types/farm_system/shamba.html

