
[Kenya: Lights and shadows in new government's approach to forests](#)

Kenya's new elected president, Mwai Kibaki, has named Dr Newton Kulundu as Environment Minister and well known environmentalist Prof Wangari Mathai as assistant minister. The newly appointed minister has already made a number of public statements related to forests which seem to imply that things might be changing --at last-- in the right direction. However, his statements leave some crucial issues in the shade.

In media interviews, the minister has said that "irregular allocation of forest land to private developers in the country will be revoked soon" and that "disciplinary action will be taken against all Government officials found to have dished out the forest land to politically correct individuals." Additionally, he said his Ministry will liaise with the relevant Government departments to have the allocations nullified and the land reverted back to the state.

All the above is good news. However, the minister does not go into great depth in the analysis of the underlying causes of deforestation, and focuses on the (true) fact that Kenyan forests have been depleted by "selfish individuals," but leaving aside at least equally important issues such as land tenure patterns and macroeconomic policies that also at the root of deforestation and forest degradation.

Environmentalists estimate that British colonialists and Kenyan farmers cleared about three quarters of woodlands in the last 150 years, leaving about two percent of Kenya's land area under forest cover. The fact that behind all those processes it would be easy to find "selfish individuals" would be certainly insufficient to understand and address the results of that historical process of forest destruction, that continues to the present day. Unless the underlying causes of forest loss are identified and measures are taken to address them, focusing on corruption alone will not be the solution to the problem.

The other major aspect of the new minister's approach to forests is to increase forest cover. Dr Kulundu's aim is to increase forest cover to 10% within the next five years, but he has not provided details about where and how this would be implemented and on what he means by increasing "forest cover." Hopefully, it might imply the restoration of native forests by and for the benefit of local communities or small scale community-based agroforestry schemes. But it could also mean the plantation of large-scale alien tree monocultures, which could impact further on native ecosystems and particularly on the dwindling water resources already affected by widespread forest loss.

We sincerely hope that the draft Forest Management Policy Bill currently being worked out, which the minister has said will be "aimed at increasing the forest cover in the country" will take on board what Kenyan journalist Mutuma Mathiu advised in May 2002 to the then Conservator of Forests Maj General Peter Ikenye, which ended saying:

"And what exactly is Gen Ikenye's mandate? To say that he will be in charge of the conservation effort would be a contradiction of sorts --there is no conservation.

The way things are, the job is likely to be three-fold. The most urgent task is to define the forests. Are the pieces of forest land which have been criminally degazetted still part of the forest? Can they be re-gazetted? There is also the job of determining the final status of squatters, settlers and land grabbers on forest land. A lot of forest squatters are very poor families. They can't be tossed out into the streets without a parachute. Devising that parachute will require lots of money, hard work, ingenuity and leadership.

Second is the question of protection. Having defined the forests, there will be need to devise new sustainable mechanisms to protect them. This will most probably entail some type of symbiotic friendship between forests and neighbouring communities.

Finally is the question of restoring those parts that have been destroyed. There is no point in filling our country exclusively with exotic trees. I think Environment minister Joseph Kamotho, having admirably absorbed his political setbacks, should now lead the nation in establishing nurseries of indigenous trees and planting them."

In a nutshell.

Article based on information from: "Can Our Forests Breathe At Last?", Mutuma Mathiu, The Nation (Nairobi), May 5, 2002, <http://forests.org/articles/reader.asp?linkid=10735> ; "Govt to Act On Forest Grabbers , Says Kulundu", Hilton Otenyo, The East African Standard (Nairobi), January 6, 2003, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200301060630.html>