
Gambia: A case of community forest management

Gambia used to be covered by very dense forests. However, the country has undergone a severe deforestation and degradation process. In 1981, about 430,000 hectares were classified as forests --45% of the total land area. Seven years later, the forest area was reduced to about 340,000 hectares.

Gambian forests have also undergone a degradation process that implied the conversion of many closed forests into a poor quality tree and shrub savannah category, according to the national forest inventory of 1998.

The institutional framework implemented in the 1950's, with the aim of protecting the remaining forests gave the state overall power over the national forest resources, depriving the rural population of responsibility for forest management.

In the mid-1980's, awareness grew about the state of forests and the potential of natural forest management, leading to a new approach. The Department of Forestry realised that its efforts would be futile unless local communities were committed and involved in the process. Also, that was a long-term demand by the local communities, so the change in the government approach matched with the needs of the population.

In 1990, the first community forestry interventions were implemented in what has been perceived as a process of confidence building and demand driven. Each village has to establish a Forest Committee, generally formed on the basis of the already existing village institutional structure, with representation from both the male and the female members of the community.

Traditional leaders are involved from the beginning of the process, and their participation ensures the customary ownership of the forest land by the community, helping to stem any future conflict between different villages which jointly manage community forests.

Gambian authorities recognise that the practice of community forest management is not without problems. The difficulty to create the sense of forest ownership among the villagers is the result of mistrust about governmental actions and policies. To build it up, the use of financial or material incentives is avoided. No compensations are given to the villagers for the protection and plantation work they are accomplishing in their forests. A task decided by the forest committee and executed by the villagers without external support strengthens the perception that they are the real owners of their work and therefore of their forest.

A long consultation process of the Gambian community forest management policy and legislation has reaffirmed the need to return authority for forest management to the local communities.

The undertaking has contributed to an important extent to poverty alleviation within the project area --the entire Central River Division, one of five administrative regions of The Gambia-- by the sustainable improvement of the economic revenues of the local population. The empowerment of the

communities as well as their support to the Forestry Department in the management of the forest will, in the long run, also contribute to and strengthen decentralisation within The Gambia.

As the director of Forestry, Jatto Sillah, puts it: “Unlike the past, governments must start involving the population and communities in decision making, in designing and implementing programs. In order to facilitate better coordinated actions, the best tool for sustainable forest management should be ‘the bottom-up approach’. In simple terms, the people should be mandated to work out their preference of resource management, and institutions (Government, NGOs) would provide the technical assistance.”

The change in the approach of the Gambian authorities which has led to a combination of political will and local community participation is an interesting progress towards the sustainable management and utilisation of the forest resources, which deserves to be taken into account by the rest of the region.

Article based on information from: “CRD Forestry Project a Dream Come True”, July 09, 2002, The Independent, <http://www.newafrica.com/environment/newsletter/index.asp?ID=49302> ; “Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation: The Republic of The Gambia”, October 1998, Ghana – Accra, by Jato S. Sillah, Department of Forestry, Banjul, <http://www.wrm.org.uy/deforestation/Africa/Gambia.html> ; “Community Forest Ownership: Key to Sustainable Forest Resource Management. The Gambian Experience”, by Foday Bojang, Director of Forestry, and Dominique Reeb, Forestry Adviser - GTZ/DFS, <http://www.dfs-online.de/cfo.htm>