

ET09

# Conservation and participation in 'community forests'

## Key Points:

- 1** With few exceptions, 'community forests' are seen by communities as state property
- 2** In the past, forest plantations were often made without communities' consent
- 3** Use of food-for-work in forestry conservation blurs the voluntariness of 'participation'
- 4** Given this history, the 'post-conflict' period has seen widespread cutting of forests

This Briefing is one of a series produced jointly by the Forum for Social Studies (Ethiopia), Centro de Experimentação Florestal (Mozambique) and the University of Sussex (UK). Each is designed to summarise research findings and encourage feedback. The Briefing is part of the 'Marena' research project, funded by the UK's Department for International Development.

## Conservation and deforestation

The forestry sector in Ethiopia is strongly influenced by the perception that rapid deforestation is taking place. It is widely believed that Ethiopia was once largely wooded and that total forest cover has been reduced from 40% to just 3% over the 20th century. This view has been questioned by academics. Drawing on historical sources, it has been suggested that many 'former forest areas', at least in the Northern highlands, had little forest in the past. At the same time, considerable recent afforestation has occurred notably in the environs of urban centres.<sup>1</sup>

Although the past extent of forest cover is debatable, the 1990 Ethiopian Forestry Action Plan (EFAP) estimated forest cover to be only 2.7%. Extensive forest fires in early 2000 have resulted in further losses. Dramatic deforestation has also been associated with political transitions from the Imperial to Derg regimes and especially from the latter to the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (See *Briefing* ET11)

## State or community forests?

An interest in preserving forests defined as state-owned goes back to imperial times. In 1966, the Council of Ministers placed state forests under the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA). However, initiatives were restricted to delimiting areas, introducing forest guards, and limited tree planting, partly on a food-for-work basis. In 1980, a Forest and Wildlife Conservation and Development Authority was set up within the MoA. During the Derg the concept of 'community forests' was promoted partly to make use of food aid in 'reforesting' drought-prone areas.

In some areas 'traditional' community forests have survived, with local management and exploitation, but these are exceptional. In contrast, the 'community forests' established through externally-sponsored plantations were seen by local people as government property. As the EFAP noted, though the

MoA referred to them as 'community forests', the farmers largely considered these plantations as state forests.

## Ownership of 'community forests'

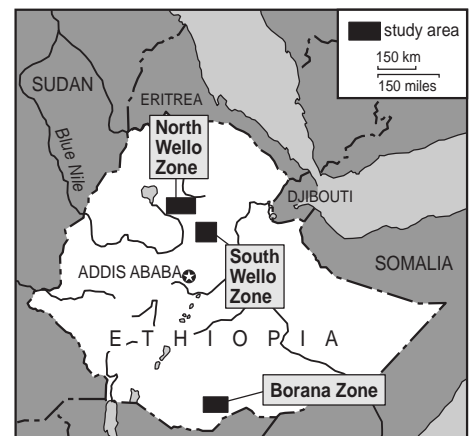
Under the *Derg*, no real sense of community ownership was fostered in government-sponsored projects since rules and procedures were not instituted for the protection and rational exploitation of the forests in the interest of the communities that planted them. Indeed very often there was outright opposition from these communities, since forestry projects came into conflict with the use of hillsides for grazing, and compensation was not provided for lost land.

Given this lack of consent, it is not surprising that 'community forests' were frequently subject to looting. The Peasant Association (PA) leaders tried to protect the forests, but this was seen as serving the interests of the state, not the community.

## Participation in 'community forestry'

The issue of participation was slow to become part of the forestry agenda. As one official at Federal level pointed out, he was trained to believe that his job was that of a 'policeman'.

Now, participation is on the agenda, but problems remain. For example, some environmental rehabilitation is carried out on a 'voluntary' mass campaign basis known



as *tesatfo* (i.e. 'participation'). But other work is carried out through food-for-work, or on Employment Generation Schemes. Advocates of the latter point out that the quality of work produced according to specified 'work norms' is better. Furthermore, both extension agents implementing NRM and beneficiaries living in a context of food insecurity are likely to opt for the latter.

But this means that NRM is becoming increasingly linked with external resources, especially of food. As a result, attempts at local autonomous NRM planning and implementation, as promoted by some small-scale NGOs, seems in danger of being quashed by the logic of international aid.

## The post-conflict transition

Post-conflict situations are characterised by instability and unclear entitlements, which can result in a breakdown of institutions for NRM. In 1989, in line with the adoption of a mixed economy policy, the MoA issued a directive to hand over forests to communities. In North Wello, nurseries but not forests were being handed over by the time the EPRDF forces took over. Forests became the *de facto* responsibility of local PAs. In the second half of 1991, the Transitional Government handed over many 'community forests' to PAs.

Yet, perhaps predictably, during the last months of the Derg and the early transitional period, the bulk of the 'community' forests were cut down. This was allegedly done by different groups including Derg soldiers, returnees from resettlement, EPRDF soldiers and poor peasants. It was sometimes even justified on the grounds that the forests were associated with the former regime. For several months, forest

guards did not get salaries or food aid and may were implicated in condoning or even active tree-cutting themselves.

An appropriate question therefore becomes why/how did some community forests survive? Part of the answer seems to have been in a few exceptional cases where a sense of ownership had been fostered.

One former Development Agent (DA) in South Wello recalled that in the late Derg period, some religious leaders and PA leaders came to him about cutting logs from a community forest to build a mosque. They said: 'You have been telling us this is our forest, now we want to use some of the wood'.

The DA found himself in a dilemma. He knew that he should tell them to apply to the *Wereda* (District) and that they would then be refused. However, if he condoned this cutting and further cases occurred, and were investigated, he and the leaders would be held responsible. Finally, they agreed to assess the amount of wood required, cut it in a neat manner and cleared it within a week. The DA noted that, with the change of government, the local community protected the forest, which still survives.

In another case in North Wello, church leaders argued that the community forest belonged to them since the *tabot*, the Ark of the Covenant, 'came out of the church' to defend the forest at the time of the transition.

## Concluding comments

Under the new government, 'community forests' have effectively been left to 'communities'. There are cases of PAs using

trees for building schools, clinics, mills, even PA buildings. Some have established ways of guarding forests, by giving some land or forest produce to guards, or collecting a levy to pay them.

However, these are exceptions seemingly carried out with little transparency. There are no clear rules or guidelines about exploitation of forests, replanting, sanctions or incentives at either the collective or the individual level. Those forests that have survived, have guards assigned to them. Their numbers are few, and their presence is fairly ineffective. Most cutting is done at night or in distant places, and there is a growing urban demand for fuelwood.

The MoA considers these forests as natural heritage which have some of the few remaining indigenous woods and natural bio-diversity. Yet, despite the rhetoric of the 1990s, forestry in the year 2000 seems to be low on the national agenda. Given the history of forestry policy, this is equally true for many communities.

<sup>1</sup>See articles by Bahru, Crummey and Dessalegn in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 3 (1): 1998

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