

Community forestry implementation in the Gambia: its principles and prospects

by **Kebba N. Sonko**

Forestry Officer and Head, Community Forestry Unit, Forestry Department, the Gambia

and **Kanimang Camara**

Head National Consultant on Forest Extension and Training (NACO), the Gambia

SUMMARY

In the Gambia, rural communities began to participate actively in forest management less than a decade ago. This programme, which is guided by a set of principles, is being carried out to address the problems of population pressure on forest areas and their resources. The new forest policy of 1995 and the legislation approved in 1998 permit community forest management and community forest ownership. All five administrative divisions in the country now practise community forestry. It is considered the key to protection and rational utilization of the remaining degraded forest lands and a means of rejuvenating other scrub lands. Community forestry activities are implemented in accordance with certain institutional arrangements. These are guided by a step-wise process to provide mutual confidence between the State and the communities. The process involves start-up, preliminary and consolidation phases. The element of minimum external incentive and the low-input approach from outside donors to the communities make the programme self-sustainable. The communities use indigenous tools and implements to manage their forest with local initiative, and are supported by technical advice from the Forestry Department.

The expansion of community forestry in the country has given rise to the community-controlled State forest and the establishment of community forestry associations. Some benefits derived from the programme are the rehabilitation of community infrastructure (such as wells, seed stores and roads), better use of forest resources (in particular, branchwood) and greater appreciation of the value of the forest and its resources. Experience in the Gambia has shown that the challenges of sustainable forest management can be met if the government has the will to empower the rural population by making it owner of the forest.



Introduction

The Gambia, with a land area of 11 300 km² (including 527 km² of water surface of the River Gambia), is one of the smallest countries in Africa. The population given by the 1993 census is 1 025 000, with an annual growth rate of 4.1 percent (1993 Population and Housing Census). Thus the population density, about 96 inhabitants per km², is one of the highest in Africa and forest resources are consequently under great pressure.

The 1998 National Forest Inventory classifies about 461 600 ha or 43 percent of the total land area as forest, but 360 800 ha (78 percent of the forest area) belongs to the degraded tree and shrub savannah forest category. The large-scale destruction of forest lands has transformed once thick forests into areas with isolated trees and deteriorating shrub savannah. The forest inventory does not show a significant change in total forest area over time but it does show a clear decline in quality. Forest destruction in the Gambia is caused mainly by annual cycles of bush fires, but also by wanton and irrational exploitation of forest resources for fuelwood, construction material and minor forest products.

The seriousness of deforestation and the resulting environmental degradation with its socio-economic consequences were acknowledged in a timely manner. However, since the official introduction of the concept of scientific forest management by the colonial administration in the latter part of the 1940s, forest management has been characterized by State control and manipulation.

In the early 1980s it became apparent that the prevailing forestry practices were inadequate to halt the destruction

of the country's forest resources and that new approaches would have to be sought to meet the challenge of preserving a sufficient forest cover. As a result, the Gambian Government (in particular the Forestry Department), with support from the German Government through the Gambian-German Forestry Project, initiated community forestry in the country in 1991.

The forest situation in the past

The government's forest policy of 1976 and legislation passed in 1977 were similar to those of the 1950s during the colonial administration. The protection of natural resources was not adequately addressed. The communities' potential for joint forest management and the possibility of equitable benefit sharing among its stakeholders were not considered. In 1952, the urgent needs of the rural communities were ignored and traditional tenure rights over land and trees suppressed when forest parks were established. In that year 66 forest parks, covering 34 909 ha, were established. Large areas of fallow land, traditional forest reserves whose resources were intended for domestic use, became absorbed into forest parks or wildlife reserves.

The exclusion of rural communities from using forest resources in their vicinity created a feeling of alienation. This eventually resulted in their unwillingness to participate in the protection and management of what used to be 'their forests'.

The attitude of local communities towards forest ownership rights over the years remained unclear. They believed that they had been unfairly treated by the State. The traditional utilization of forest products became illegal, owing to the restrictive forest regulations. The loss of traditional ownership rights over land and forests further increased the destruction of the forest. The situation was made more serious by the general lack of public concern over the increasing pressure on forest resources caused by the growth in population and illegal exploitation.

Regrettably, State ownership left little room for mutual understanding and trust regarding forest resource management. The efforts of the foresters to protect the forest by providing the communities with technical advice on forestry matters became futile.



The prevailing institutional framework did not allow the rural population to take on any forest management responsibilities. The State continued to enforce a restrictive law to administer the forest resources despite the fact that the livelihoods of some local communities entirely depended on those very resources.

In summary, the systematic deforestation caused by extensive tree felling and bush fires has been very damaging and forest resources have been wasted. However, in the mid-1980s and with the growing general awareness of the population and of government, it became clear that a new approach to forest management would have to be found.

The introduction of community forestry

With the realization that the Forestry Department would not be able to protect the country's forest resources without the willingness and active participation of the communities, a community forestry approach trial was launched in 1990, although the context of the forest policy and legislation of 1976 and 1977 was rather unfavourable.

The inadequacies of the institutional framework for joint management catalysed the review of this framework. As a result, a new forest policy (1995-2005) and new forest legislation (1998) were prepared and approved by the government. This new institutional framework now fully supports community forest ownership.

Institutional arrangements

The institutional arrangements for effective implementation of community forestry follow a step-wise process that builds confidence and mutual trust among the stakeholders (the Forestry Department and the rural communities). The procedure entails formal agreements between the State (Forestry Department) and forest committees representing the communities at village level. These committees, either newly formed or offshoots of existing village institutional structures, include both male and female members.

A forest committee takes charge of labour organization and work planning with community members in the village. The Forestry Department provides technical assistance and advice on basic forest practices such as plantation management, forest protection, tree nursery technology, simple bookkeeping and problem analysis. Technical advice is normally delivered through committee members, who are responsible for conveying it to the rest of the community.

Practical steps in implementing community forestry

There are three consecutive steps or phases in the implementation of community forest management. These steps must be followed by both the local communities and the Forestry Department. They are called the 'start-up', 'preliminary' and 'consolidation' phases.

Step 1: start-up phase

The local communities interested in community forestry form an organization with a committee to represent them on community forestry matters. The committee undergoes training in community forest management principles. This enables it to draw up its own management plan for work implementation and to demarcate its forest area.

In terms of forest resource utilization, the communities have no additional rights apart from those regarding domestic consumption because at this stage the resources are still State-owned. The start-up phase prepares the communities to apply for a Preliminary Community Forestry Management Agreement (PCFMA) for the gradual transfer of forest ownership from State to community. There is a probation period of six months, during which time the understanding and willingness of the villagers are evaluated.

Step 2: preliminary phase

The preliminary phase starts once the preliminary agreement has been signed and concluded by the committee and the Forestry Department. This is a learning period and one of negotiation to resolve possible conflicts.

During the preliminary phase the integration of other land use forms is encouraged in community forest management, such as agrosilvopastoral systems, including

ecotourism. For the purposes of demarcation and fire protection a belt of 5 to 20 m wide is planted with cashew (*Anacardium occidentale*), gmelina (*Gmelina arborea*) or *Cassia siamea*. This operation is optional but it serves to identify the community forest clearly, for it forms a demarcation line between the community forest and adjacent forest lands. In any case it is necessary to establish a permanent boundary of at least two or three rows of trees around the community forest unless it is bordered by rivers or artificial boundaries such as roads.

In the field, the communities and the forestry staff ensure that the application for a preliminary agreement is completed by providing the following documents:

- two copies of the location and survey maps bearing the signature and seal of the district chief;
- two originals of the village resolution;
- two originals of the statement of the neighbouring village heads;
- one copy of the preliminary management plan bearing the signature of the forest committee president;
- two originals of completed PCFMA forms signed by the executive forest committee members; and
- two copies of the statement of the district head (chief).

The preliminary agreement and management plan documents are collected and submitted by the Head of Forest Administrative Circle to the Divisional Forestry Officer for further processing. At this level, the Divisional Forestry Officer and the Commissioner make their recommendation by signing the preliminary agreement for approval. The Head of the Community Forestry Unit (CFU) and the Director of Forestry also append their signatures to the preliminary agreement. A community forest registration certificate from the CFU is given to the forest committee.

The preliminary agreement provides favourable conditions for forest management. It gives the villagers extended forest user rights to collect and commercialize felled trees on the fire-break and perishable forest resources, such as fruits and leaves, within the forest. Normally the phase lasts for three years. It is expected that within this period of time the forest committee will demonstrate its ability to manage the forest. The preliminary phase is concluded by an evaluation, upon which

recommendation for permanent transfer of ownership rights will be considered.

Step 3: consolidation phase

After evaluation, the boundary of the community forest is permanently demarcated by erecting beacons. The phase calls for a Community Forestry Management Agreement (CFMA). The agreement permits the transfer of permanent ownership rights over the forest resources to the communities. As a result, the communities are able to benefit directly from the commercialization of forest resources within the community forest as approved in the management plan. The only condition attached to the agreement is the approval of the Divisional Forestry Officer of a simple management plan based on forest resource protection and sustainable utilization.

Although the ownership right is permanent, the legislation foresees a legal procedure to revoke the agreement in case of proven severe misconduct of the forest committee.

Principles of the community forestry concept

In contrast to State forest and especially forest park management, community forestry requires a quite different approach since the planners, implementers and actors are rural people who are usually engaged in subsistence farming. Forestry in the sense of sustainable forest management is new to these people. Forest parks, on the other hand, first came into existence over 45 years ago. They are managed by professionals and involve paid labour and, to a certain extent, the use of machinery.

The setting up and management of community forests therefore followed different approaches and procedures. Experience in the Gambia has shown that the success of community forestry primarily depends not only on the willingness, interest, capacity and capability of the people to manage their resources sustainably, but also on the people and agencies charged with providing the necessary technical advice and training. The following principles are accepted by all parties involved in community forestry.

Diversification of structures to implement community forestry

Taking into account both the rate of forest degradation and the limited capacity of the Forestry Department, in terms of personnel and finance, to build an effective extension and village support service, the involvement of other organizations that operate in the field of natural resource management and rural development is inevitable. The Forestry Department has therefore made efforts to invite and train personnel from other organizations to assist in implementing community forestry.

Putting the people first

It is of the utmost importance that from the very beginning all participants and forest user groups are actively involved in all phases of community forestry, including resource assessment and surveys in the planning and implementation of activities, along with monitoring and evaluation. People's participation in community forestry should be an objective in itself and a means of achieving some higher objectives such as self-help and sustainability. Villagers and extension agents engaged in community forestry have accepted that they are equal partners in forest management. Extension workers play the role of facilitators. They are equipped with listening and talking skills and have the ability to see well-known situations from new angles and think about the effects of their own actions on others.

Process orientation

Community forestry has to be understood as the initiation of ecological, economic and socio-cultural transformation processes that can stabilize a destabilized system. Such processes cover several phases, each with different problems, for which over time a wide spectrum of technical and methodical resolving mechanisms must be available. The adoption of flexible and iterative community forestry management planning and implementation tools contributes to the development of such mechanisms.

By nature, transformation processes do not unfold in regular and predictable ways. Rather, they are characterized by leaps, drawbacks, deviations and unpredictable turns. Therefore, qualitative criteria used for project monitoring and evaluation (e.g. sustainability, adaptability, self-

control systems) have increased significance compared with quantitative results (e.g. number of agreements signed, number of seedlings produced or planted and area of forest protected).

This does not mean that process orientation relinquishes indicators for result achievement. However, an isolated view of results may often lead to a wrong conclusion. Rather, results must be looked at in relation to stages in the process, and they should only be evaluated in this context.

Finally, process orientation contributes to the training both of participants in sustainable resource management and staff involved in community forestry in conflict resolution.

Minimum external incentives

There is an ongoing debate about the pros and cons of incentives among donors and project implementers. The literature provides examples of contradictory experiences among different projects and countries. In what follows, external incentives are defined as inducements derived from a source outside the village, which have a direct or indirect financial value, and are intended to induce a change of behaviour in the recipients. Such incentives include food-for-work, paid labour, donation of inputs, construction of communal facilities and 'soft' loans. Legal incentives (such as user rights and tax exemption), technical advice and training and benefits generated from the sale of products are not considered external incentives.



Experience in the Gambia has shown that the heavy-handed use of incentives causes more problems than it solves, not least by inducing paternalism, creating conflicts and devaluing resource management objectives. Full participation cannot evolve if incentives are given to buy people's willingness and motivation. In general, the more community resources are used, the more likely these activities will be sustained in the long term.

Another danger is not only that the recipients may become addicted to incentives, but that the staff may also derive power and influence from the practice. To reorient staff used to such practices and get them to surrender some degree of power and adopt a more rigorous and participatory approach may then become extremely difficult.

It is therefore recommended that external incentives be used sparingly, while pursuing a low-input approach and adopting low-input technologies.

Dealing with constraints during community forestry implementation

During the countrywide implementation of community forestry some constraints have been encountered as a result of:

- misconceptions of the community forestry concept;
- landownership disputes (customary); and
- an inadequate institutional framework.

Misconceptions

- Until the beginning of 1994, relatively traditional methods were used to approach and sensitize the villagers. Villagers were verbally informed about community forestry, and this led to some misunderstandings on both sides and mistrust of the Forestry Department among villagers.
- Beginning in 1994, attempts were made to employ Participatory Learning and Action methods and grassroots Objective-Oriented Projects Planning, and efforts to work more closely with villagers were intensified.

- In addition, some useful training has been conducted for villagers and staff. This includes farmer-to-farmer visits, visits to community forestry areas, leadership training, functional literacy training, on-the-job training and a backstopping programme for sustainability of community forest management after the phasing-out of external support.

Landownership disputes

- Problems concerning customary landownership may emerge, especially during community forestry preparation and initiation. They can be divided into two types: problems occurring between different villages; and problems internal to the village or among villagers.
- Landownership disputes are normally settled by the local authorities (village heads and councils, chiefs, commissioners). Sometimes such conflicts cannot be resolved between communities, especially in the densely populated areas close to urban areas where competition for land is high. The chiefs in some districts innovated and implemented the concept of a 'peace committee'. This committee is made up of village heads highly respected for their knowledge of traditional land rights and for their objectivity. This committee has already been able to resolve conflicts without external interference on several occasions.

Inadequate institutional framework

- The Forestry Department was seriously understaffed. There were fewer than 150 staff, including support staff, in 1992.
- Furthermore, there was limited coordination between the department's activities and those of other related institutions. Such bottlenecks often resulted in the communication of conflicting ideas to the beneficiaries.
- To address these problems the Forestry Department developed its human resources status and collaborated with local non-governmental organizations to increase the number of specialized professionals. The department further strengthened its extension services. The role of forester was redefined to pro-

vide mainly technical assistance and advisory services to the rural communities. This resulted in greater acceptance of these officers by the population.

- Implementing guidelines and field guidelines have been developed for the active participation of other related institutions in resource management to address the problem of coordination and harmonization.

Achievements of community forestry implementation

Policy and legislative review

The revision of the forest policy (1995) and new forest legislation (1998) are great achievements in this period. Both policy and legislation now constitute an appropriate and supportive framework for the implementation of community forestry in the country.

Establishment of community-controlled State forests

The community-controlled State forest is a State forest managed with the assistance of communities that have CFMA status (Forest Bill 1998, Section 73). The forest committee is responsible for protecting such a forest from illegal forest exploitation and from fire. In return all benefits generated by the forest are shared between the forest committee and the Forestry Department. The communities also receive compensation for reporting cases of illegal forest exploitation. Continuous abuses of forest resources have declined since the introduction of the community-controlled State forest because communities treat these forest areas in the same manner as their own community forest.

As for community forests, the committee's responsibilities or rights may be revoked by the Forestry Department for failing to protect the forest from fires and illegal activities.

Establishment of community forestry associations

Two associations, namely Kombo Foni Forest Association (KOMFFORA) and Jarrol-Bondali-Kansala (JABOKA) Forest Association, emerged in 1998 from the community forest committees established in the Western Division. These are non-profit-making bodies that coordinate, monitor and provide advice to the community forest committees for the successful implementation of their activities. It is hoped that more associations will emerge countrywide and that they will eventually form a national community forestry association to safeguard and promote their rights.

Branchwood exploitation and sustainable utilization

Like most Africans, Gambians depend mainly on fuelwood for their energy needs. For this reason some tree species such as *keno* (*Pterocarpus ernaceus*) and *kembo* (*Prosopis africana*) are overexploited for commercial and domestic use.

In the past, most of the branchwood, which is available in large quantities, has been left to decay or burn to ashes while the people complain of a scarcity of fuelwood. However, through the implementation of community forestry, forest resources are now protected from illegal exploitation and from fires. Because uncontrolled access to, and wasteful exploitation of, the forest are no longer possible, people have adopted branchwood as an alternative to the expensive split wood. Villages have discovered that supplying branchwood can be a lucrative commercial venture. Some villages, namely Besse, Tampoto and Somita, are now outstanding at this trade.

Funds for socio-economic community development

At village level the income generated by the community forest is paid into a local fund. During the preliminary agreement phase the committee retains 100 percent of its revenue, while once the permanent agreement comes



into effect it contributes 15 percent of its revenue to the National Forestry Fund.

The agreements foresee that at least 40 percent of the local fund is used for forest rehabilitation activities and that a maximum of 60 percent can be used for village infrastructure development.

'Actual value' of forest resources

Forest resources have gained in value because access to them is no longer free but controlled by the forest committees and the Forestry Department. In 1997, for the first time in the Gambia fuelwood vendors purchased wood from the committees and a price was set for the resource. Gradually a market price reflecting the 'actual value' of wood is appearing. The development of a market structure is of utmost importance for the future of the forest sector in the country.

Expansion of community forestry and its importance in the Gambia

In 1991 only three villages were involved in community forest management, which covered 563 ha. Now, over 450 villages manage a forest area of 18 339 ha and protect a much larger area of surrounding forests. Over 20 applications for PCFMAs await approval and a large number of new applications are being received.

The reduction of bush fires and their total eradication in some community forest areas has resulted in improved regeneration, since the survival rate has increased significantly. This is regarded the best physical means of measuring the success of community forest management in the Gambia.



Increased fodder for livestock through villagers' participation in community forestry has changed the attitude of many people towards the forest. The herders who traditionally used fire to stimulate the growth of fresh grass for their animals have now stopped this practice. They have recognized that fodder quality and quantity are higher in unburned forests. They have also stopped taking their animals to the south into Senegal to graze during the dry season. They therefore no longer suffer the theft or loss of livestock during the migration to neighbouring countries.

The Gambian experience of community forestry

Consciousness and awareness of the rural population

The implementation of community forestry over the past seven years has made the people aware of the socio-economic and environmental consequences of deforestation. Furthermore, the political will shown by the government in giving communities the right to own forests has solidified the new confidence rural people have in it. Also, communities have now adopted, through their participation in community forestry, a system of sustainable use of natural resources.

Institutional initiatives and other socio-economic developments

The lessons learned by participants in community forestry have allowed the scattered and isolated committees to come together to form associations that reinforce their negotiating power and rationalize their operations. The communities are maintaining these associations to ensure this relationship continues and to serve as a linkage between the communities and government.

Sense of ownership over natural resources

Forest resources require a long gestation period before harvest, and the high community input of labour and time should be recognized. Participation in community forestry should only be measured by evaluating the com-

munities' management of the resources over time. The management of the community forests should not be tied to short-term monetary or material compensation but rather to the development of a genuine sense of ownership. In the Gambia, the participants' sense of ownership has created a very strong relationship between villagers and their forests. People therefore treat the forest not only as a source of revenue but also as an integral part of their livelihood and their future.

Gambian community forestry and the prospects for other countries

The Gambian experience of community forestry has been rewarding and encouraging. It has shown that with

an appropriate and supportive institutional framework the sustainable management of forest resources by the population can be a reality. Breaking the vicious circle of forest degradation is possible. Many countries have sent visitors to the Gambia in recent years to share the community forestry experience, and this has led to fruitful exchanges and harmonization of policies.

In conclusion, in the Gambia it is believed that many other countries where a strong political will exists to promote community forestry will surely improve their people's socio-economic status. The authors hope that the participation of many other countries will enable the challenges of sustainable forest management in Africa to be met.