

## Village perspectives of community forestry in the Gambia

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I would like to speak about our forest conditions in relation to the 'far past', the 'not so distant past' and the 'present'.

When I say the 'far past', I'm talking about the time when the forest was protected culturally. For example there was no bush burning – which normally takes place a few weeks before the rainy season – without informing the nearby villages. Even if the forested area was between three villages, one of them was responsible for its protection and had to inform neighbours when there was the need to burn.

In the 'not so distant past', forest degradation began. At this time the government started to intervene by issuing licences, which further increased forest exploitation through felling of big trees and charcoal burning – just to make money. Then people said the forest belongs to the State and nobody cares about it. Consequently the number of rampant bush fires increased.

As this trend was going on, the State was not able to stop the people from felling, setting fire to the forest and charcoal burning. So there was concern about the serious forest degradation, with the resulting open forest areas, and the disappearance of most of the fruits and wild animals. The forest degradation has seriously affected our living conditions over the years by reducing rainfall and we can no longer meet our needs from the forest.

After some time the government recognized the situation and contacted the German Government to inform it about the status of forests in the Gambia. The Gambian Government didn't know how to manage the forest or how to improve the situation, so it asked for advice. When the Germans came to the Gambia their first activity was to conduct a countrywide survey. Then they informed the Gambian Government that despite the degradation of the forest, it could still be enriched by using a different management system. At this point they started the idea of community forestry.

But before the introduction of community forestry to the villagers, the Germans started to manage a forest park at Kafuta. This was done to convince the Gambian Government that our forest condition could be improved. The forest park at Kafuta used to be a very thick forest with lots of wild animals, which have all gone due to the serious forest degradation. Since it has been under management, the animals have started to come back and now you can see them even in daytime. Also the trees are showing better regeneration. From that moment I began to appreciate forestry and became convinced of its value before the concept was introduced to everybody. After the forest park had been managed by the Gambian-German Forestry Project for five years, the Gambian Government was convinced that our forests could be enriched and returned to their original state. So it followed the advice from the project to return the forests to the villagers who traditionally owned them. This would be the only means to stop degradation and let the villagers benefit at the same time.

That programme started in Brefet, which was chosen as a pilot village. The beginning was very difficult, because the project staff told us the forest would be ours, but we didn't believe this. We were suspicious because most of our daily needs come from the forest. A few days later the project staff came back again with the same idea. There was a lot of push and pull until we finally agreed to start with the management of Berekolon Forest and Folonkajang Forest. Four months later we also started to manage Kasila Forest, which is located between the three villages of Bessi, Ndemban and Brefet. It had to be joint management because each village has its farmland in this area.

Since the villagers and the Forestry Department didn't trust each other at the beginning, there had to be a concrete agreement before going further. We agreed on a three-year period, in which we could prove our manage-

ment intention and skills. During this period there should be no fire, no felling for individual use and no illegal activities in the forest. We selected a committee within the communities to monitor all these things and to motivate the villagers to be active in forest protection. Therefore we demarcated the area and established fire-breaks planted with gmelina (*Gmelina arborea*) and cashew (*Anacardium occidentale*). So there was also a small income from the clearing of the fire-break during the first three years, but as the Forestry Department and the project staff explained to us, we should not be concerned about money. They told us that uncontrolled and money-oriented exploitation was causing the destruction of the forest. At this moment we started to realize the importance of the forest and our aim was not to make money with it any longer.

After some years we realized that there is a serious link between rainfall and the forest. Before our forest management there was not enough rainfall, but already after a few years the rainfall was enough. This can be seen as a result of our few years' management. Another positive development was the improved situation for our animals. They used to go to Casamance for grazing, which is quite far, and they caught a lot of diseases as a result of this long journey and some of them even got lost. But now there is enough fodder for them in our own forest and they can stay close to the village.

After some time, we definitely knew that this concept was something good and we began to sensitize our neighbours. Most of them also joined the community forestry programme and they realized the benefit from it. With this concept the forest condition is improving and we can have fruits, fuelwood, fence posts, etc. for home consumption.

Today the community forestry programme has reached as far as Basse, covering almost the whole country. We started to set up independent organizations to promote community forestry, to advise the villagers and to strengthen their position.

Now many villages have their first (preliminary) certificate and others have ownership rights. Those who own the forest normally harvest the dead wood and enrich the area utilized. Before another ten years are out we want the whole country to become a forest. Also fallow land which has not been used for five years will never be farmland again.

I went to Senegal, Mali and Mauritania and saw desert, fewer trees, dust with dry wind and direct heat from the sun – we don't want that to come to the Gambia! We know that we inherited the forest from our forefathers and we should give it to our sons and grandsons of tomorrow.