

Village perspectives of community forestry in the Gambia: the Kombo Foni Forestry Association

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When and why was KOMFFORA formed?

KOMFFORA was established last year to represent and support village communities that have decided to manage their forests as part of the new community forest programme in the Gambia. Our constitution was adopted on 25 June 1998 by 17 founder villages and we received our certificate of incorporation on 8 July. There are now 24 community forests managing 3 000 ha in KOMFFORA, representing around 30 villages and a total population of 15 000.

KOMFFORA's community forests are in the Western Division of the Gambia. The Kombos and the Fonis are areas within this division. KOMFFORA was formed to support and strengthen those communities, to help encourage good forest management among them and to take on tasks such as marketing and training. Here the association can make an impact where one village on its own could not. The group acts as a channel for information from the villages outwards and communicates new developments back to its members. Most important of all, it is an organization that grew from the communities themselves and is run by them and is completely accountable to them.



What is KOMFFORA's structure and how does it work?

Every village in KOMFFORA elects a community forest committee of around 18 members, including officers of the committee and patrolmen for the forest. These committees then send three representatives to the association's board, although each village has just one vote. This board meets once a month to take decisions and discuss current issues. Members of the Forestry Department and local chiefs and *alkalos* (village leaders) are involved as advisers. Villages pay a registration fee and as more forest products are sold a proportion is given to KOMFFORA to fund forest management projects.

What are our aims and objectives?

As stated in our constitution, improving the management of the forests is one of our main objectives. The association is active in mobilizing members to be alert to the dangers of bush fires and urging potential new members to understand the importance of forest protection. Our villages have all been involved in fire-break clearing each dry season and logs cleared have been sold to generate income. The association seeks to make the most of its resources: whereas in the past branchwood was burned in the forest, now it is collected to provide income for villagers.

In the longer term, if things continue to go well, our aim is to set up training programmes to give community forest managers better, modern skills in looking after the forest. We want eventually to develop plans to enrich the

forest plots with indigenous timber species and to engage in more active forest management with techniques such as thinning.

The other main objective is the marketing of forest products. Already our forests sell logs from fire-break clearing and dead wood from inside the forest. Branches are sold for fuelwood. Later we hope to develop a more coordinated strategy for pooling our resources, working with the Forestry Department to build management plans to make the most of valuable timber species. The most pressing task is to undertake an inventory of our community forests to establish more reliably how much wood can be sustainably used. We have put together a plan for this involving our communities and foresters from the United Kingdom and the Gambia.

We have sent samples of our wood to several buyers in Europe, who are part of the World Wide Fund for Nature environmental wood-buyers' group (called the '95 Plus' group in the United Kingdom). We have had a very positive response from buyers in the United Kingdom and Italy, but we need more information from an inventory to plan any export of crafts or small wood products. We have also had contact with accredited inspectors of the international Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) environmental certification scheme. There too the response has been very positive. FSC certification is becoming an important gateway to wood and timber markets in the United Kingdom and other European countries. However, it is probably too early to follow that course until we have the inventory information.

So in almost one year we have come a long way. New villages are applying to join KOMFFORA, and during last year a new sister organization, Jarrol-Bondali-Kansala (JABOKA) Forest Association, began working in the eastern districts of the Western Division. It is coordinating new community forests in that area. Our members have been actively involved in tree planting, both of gmelina and cashew in the fire-break perimeter areas of the community forests, and as part of last year's National

Tree Planting exercise. Our members provided seedlings and staff to plant trees in schools and council areas.

Future developments

Last year members of KOMFFORA, local community leaders and members of parliament met to decide the allocation of land for our tree nursery and skills centre. Eight hectares of land near the village of Bessi were decided on. This is a major project and will form the base for many of our activities in the future. As I mentioned, we want to grow indigenous seedlings of our timber species such as mahogany and rosewood/*padauk/keno*. We want to use the centre for training our members in good forest management skills and, if things go well, to diversify to related activities such as woodworking skills and beekeeping. Some agroforestry projects may also be started to generate income for forest management.

We do have financial constraints. Everything we have achieved has been done without an office, telephone or our own transport. But we are determined to make the most of our own resources. Sales of timber will increase. Already some members have used the income from wood to buy bicycles to help patrolling. Others have bought torches to enable night patrols of their forests. I mentioned before the new sales of branchwood, something that has come about directly as a result of community forestry activity. Some members have used sales income to contribute to the building of a local school. Another community forest is developing a tourist lodge.

We also offer seedlings for sale and can contract members to undertake planting activities. And in the coming year we are planning a number of fundraising events. So, we are optimistic and determined about the future.

Community forestry in the Gambia has been a success so far but it is still young. KOMFFORA wants to be at the forefront of making it stronger and enabling our members to make the best of opportunities for their own development and the future of their communities and the nation.