

## Community management of Mgori Forest, Tanzania: a case study from the field by a field officer

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### SUMMARY

This case study focuses on a 40 000 ha *miombo* woodland lying in the Great Rift Valley in central Tanzania. This forest is now under the management of five village communities that live on its western and southern perimeter. Each village is responsible for protecting and managing a portion of the forest. Each of these parts is known today as a village forest reserve. The villages manage their forest reserves in collaboration with the local authority (Singida District Council), which provides technical guidance and some financial support. The forest was on the way to extinction through improper management when under government control, but it is now safe and prospering under community management. This paper explains how this came about.



## The case

Mgori Forest is about 40 000 ha (400 km<sup>2</sup>) of miombo woodland lying on the Great Rift Valley escarpment in the far northeast corner of Singida Rural District, Tanzania. Four years ago, this forest was on its way to extinction because of clearing for charcoal burning, shifting cultivation, overexploitation of timber tree species and illegal hunting of both small and big game. The forest was public land and the Forestry and Beekeeping Department of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism had decided that the area should become a gazetted forest reserve.

This process was begun. First, expensive inventories, surveys and mapping were undertaken and then the forestry division began the process (also expensive) of clearing a 10 m cut-line around the perimeter of the forest. This provoked resentment. Local villagers feared not only the loss of forest products and services they had enjoyed for many years, but the loss of a forest they considered to be theirs. Legally, only one-third of the area fell within their recognized village areas. Two-thirds was classified as open, public land, but still local people felt it belonged more to them than to the government.

Village leaders complained to the chairman of Singida District Council and to the central government representative in the district, the District Commissioner. In addition, because they feared the forest was being taken away from them, villagers began to harvest as much as they could (Wily, 1996). Thus, the forest was in a very poor condition by the time a Swedish-funded land management programme began to take an interest in the district in 1995.



*Boundary-marking, Mgori Forest*

## The process

In February 1995 the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA)/Orgut Consulting AB sent two field technical advisers who, together with regional and district forestry staff, examined how Mgori Forest could be saved and how local communities could be involved in its management.<sup>1</sup>

In April of that year the author was designated District Council Liaison Officer. He was to work as the resident forester, help each village set up management, coordinate their efforts and provide a link with Singida District Council. Help was provided by an expert, who visited every few months during 1995 and 1996.<sup>2</sup>

The steps taken include the following.

- The first task was to visit all five villages that share a boundary with what was first intended as a government reserve. The villages are Pohama, Ngimu, Unyampanda, Mughunga and Nduamughanga.
- After hearing the villagers' views on how they would manage the forest, each village was assisted to form a village forest committee made up of 6 to 12 people,

1. For information about this project, contact the author, or Mr Mgula (Local Management of Natural Resources Programme [LAMP] Coordinator).

2. Dr Liz Wily, sent by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) for the LAMP Programme. Help on inventory and technical matters was provided by Hakan Sjöholm. These experts work for Orgut Consulting, which is advising the LAMP programmes in Tanzania.

including an elder who knew the forest well, and at least two women to encourage a gender balance.

- The villagers, after agreement had been reached with their neighbours, marked their boundaries by using paint on the trees, rocks and stones to indicate their part of the forest, their "village forest reserve".
- They prepared village forest management plans to guide them in their daily patrols of the forest. The plans were based on what the community had agreed about how the forest could and could not be used.
- Each village zoned its own forest reserve, assigning different uses or use categories to different areas; examples of such uses are dry wood collection, fruit collection, beehive management, pole production and timber production. All five villages declared most of their respective reserves protected areas, with only limited use permitted.
- One of the main rules decided upon was that access to the village forest reserve was restricted to members of that village.
- Outsiders could apply to use the forest, and might or might not be given permission.
- Clear rules were set out, and against each rule, the punishment that would result if the user broke the rule.
- Each village assembly (all the members of the village) met and appointed a committee to manage the forest reserve. The committee members and elected leaders of the village (village councillors or members of the village government) were to pay double the normal fine if they broke a rule: a fine for breaking the rule, and a fine for abusing their responsibility.
- Each village forest committee appointed patrolmen. Altogether over 100 young men volunteered for this task. They were excused other community jobs (such as road clearing and brick making for the school classrooms) and were told they would get a reward every time they apprehended a person breaking a rule. The reward would come from the fine the offender was to pay.
- Each village forest committee opened a forest management bank account in the local district capital.

Fines are paid into the account. Each payment is receipted using a receipt book endorsed by the district council so that it is a legal document.

- The five villages have formed a Mgori Forest coordinating committee. This committee meets two or three times a year. It is chaired by a district councillor. The committee has played an important role, reproaching the one village that has not been doing well and even insisting that the village change its village forest committee.
- The villages' main management tools are the management plans of action they have devised and follow, the regular meetings of the village forest committees, vigilant patrols by their patrolmen and by-laws that set out the rules for using and managing their areas of the forest. Each area is called a village forest reserve and is now accepted as being under the authority of the owner village.

## The impact

- Today Mgori Forest has been saved. In February 1995 it was disappearing. Many areas were being cleared by shifting cultivation. Nearly all the good timber had gone. Fires damaged the forest every dry season. At the time of writing (April 1999), the forest was in very good condition. Game has returned in big numbers and species that had disappeared have returned. Now, instead of having no wild meat, villages have a new problem – elephant damage to their fields. They are now trying to decide how to deal with this.





*Nursery developed as a result of Mgori villages protecting the natural forest*

- The flora of the forest has dramatically improved, even though it is only four years since it was first protected. No one has done any felling for four years and the trees are growing back steadily. The government sent an inventory team in 1996 to set up 15 blind plots. In March 1999 the team returned and looked at the plots. Only one tree in the 15 plots was missing.
- The condition of the forest is so healthy that bees are returning to the hives. More honey is being produced every year.
- Because the villages have taken to early burning to reduce the damage caused by late dry season fires, there is much less fire damage and fires burn out quickly.
- No new encroachment has occurred. The forest area is stable, but a problem related to this will be described later.
- Local people are very proud of their work and their success. They have stopped illegal timber fellers and armed hunters. They have negotiated with pastoralists to reduce burning of the forest when they move through it looking for pastures, or when young warriors look for their first lions or elephants to hunt. Outsiders now respect the villages' rules. They did not respect the forest rules drawn up by the government.
- The villagers are getting better and better at their task. Before they always waited for the government forester to deal with a problem. Now they deal with it themselves.
- The villagers are also sorting out their own politics. Some leaders are not helpful. Two villages got rid of bad leaders. One village removed its first committee.
- Keeping money always causes problems. Villagers have learned to keep proper accounts and report income and expenditure to the village assembly (the whole community).
- The most positive development to date is that after four years, the local district council is now willing to recognize the area each of the five villages is managing as its land. Each village has been helped to survey and demarcate its whole village area, including the forest reserve. The villages have also been helped to obtain certificates of village land, which make it clear that specific areas now lawfully belong to specific communities.
- Some villagers have decided to enlarge the forest area under their protection, adding other areas outside the forest reserve cut-line. Mgori Forest now covers not 37 000 ha but 43 000 ha.
- In addition, each village has two types of village forest. One area is the village forest reserve (five of these make up Mgori Forest). The five villages will keep the forest as a forest reserve in perpetuity. Other areas are "spare forest", which will be protected and properly managed, but the villagers may decide at some point to change the use of these areas if, for instance, their children have too little land.
- All five villages are now very cautious about letting new people settle in their villages. Because of the village forest reserve, they now understand that this could lead to future land shortages.
- Villagers now engage in land use planning. Each village now tries to limit grazing to grazing zones. Some of these are in the forest, some are outside.
- Some village forest committees now manage other parts of the village area, and make new rules for those areas (e.g. grazing land, dam areas).
- The community-based management approach is working very well. It costs government nothing. It is

effective. The only officer involved is the author. No one can now bribe the officer to collect timber or to hunt or to clear land, because he no longer has the right to issue licences or authorize such uses. Neither do his senior officers, and the villages will not recognize any permits that any official might issue.

- The legal and administrative arrangements that have been made include:
  - producing the village forest management plan;
  - turning village rules into village by-laws; and
  - helping each village to obtain title over its land, including the village forest reserve.
- The control mechanisms at the village level include:
  - regular meetings of the village forest committee;
  - reporting to the village government and village general assembly;
  - every villager can see the accounts book;
  - the liaison officer can intervene if there is a problem; and
  - villages watch each other and keep each other in order.

The forest service monitors community forest activities by compiling regular reports on the state of the forest and changes observed, which includes game spotted.

## The problems

There have been many obstacles along the way. Each has had to be overcome. A list of problems faced includes the following.

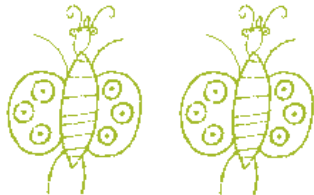
- It was difficult to persuade the government to allow the villagers to become the managers and owners of the forest.
  - The villagers drafted by-laws but the district council has not yet approved them, so the rules being applied do not have legal backing.
  - A neighbouring district is jealous and is now claiming one-third of the forest as its own.
  - The district council is not always supportive.
  - Often the liaison officer does not have the resources he needs to move around the area to help the villagers, who are poor.
- El Niño floods made the local people poorer and many of the patrolmen were too weak to patrol the forest. One village found its forest being plundered by hungry intruders who were felling trees from deep inside the forest and selling them. However, the villagers did not act quickly enough to catch them.
  - The forest is very large. It takes the patrols a full day to reach the middle of a village forest reserve. The patrolmen have no money for boots and whistles and bows and arrows to protect themselves. One has been bitten by a snake.
  - Now that the villagers want to start harvesting some trees, the district council is hinting that it wants control over the harvesting.
  - A clear tax system that is fair to both the village and the council needs to be worked out.
  - Many senior officers are against villages managing forests.
  - One village leader used the new local control over the forest for his own benefit and decided to clear part of the forest for himself. He accepted bribes from outsiders and did private pitsawing. Although the villagers were aware of this, they feared him. It took many meetings to reduce his power. Today, the village has a new committee. Even now the former village leader tries to intervene but fewer people listen to him than before.



## Community management as the way forward

The following observations concern community management of forests.

- The arrangement is best when the government gives the people the chance to be the guardians and the real managers, getting technical support from government foresters (the district council).
- The enabling institutional changes have given the villagers the chance to become owners and managers of forest: national policy has been revised, and colonial forest laws and ways of thinking have been discarded.
- Attitudes among the population and in government have changed. The government is growing accustomed to giving villagers responsibility for forest land without fear that the forest will disappear.
- At present no new structure has been put in place to meet community forestry needs. More direct support is needed to promote community forestry.
- There is no taxation system specifically for community forestry products. What tax or royalty the villagers should pay if they start to use trees for timber needs to be worked out with the district council and with the government.
- Community forestry holds out the prospect of reducing or completely halting the environmental degradation now occurring in the district and country. The example of Mgori shows what can be achieved.



- Community forestry is sustainable and can be implemented – other villages are now planning to follow the Mgori Forest initiatives. The area now receives visits from many villagers from outside the district and country who wish to learn about community forestry from the Mgori village forest reserve managers/owners.
- The external support needed includes promoting ecotourism in the area, building communication infrastructures (roads, bridges) and establishing a market for the community forest products, which include honey and wax.
- Through efforts at Mgori and elsewhere, community forestry now means something quite different from ten years ago.

## Lessons learned

The main lessons learned are these.

- The community has the power to accomplish things or bring about change.
- Government itself must change. When both parties change their way of operating it will be possible to move forward and save forests.
- By involving the communities the government can reduce its costs, as the local people can do the necessary work cheaply and effectively.
- Community forestry involves the exchange of ideas, techniques and knowledge. The communities must not be treated as ignorant; they have extensive knowledge.
- Local knowledge can be incorporated into the new, “imported” knowledge to improve the condition of forests.
- Taking charge of a resource also helps the community act in other areas.
- Community forest management is one of the most effective tools of empowerment in Tanzania today.
- Community forest management is a process. Each year it changes, grows stronger and develops.

These lessons can be used to promote community forestry in Tanzania and other countries through exchange visits, and through sharing experiences and knowledge. Many more forests are now coming under village management because of Mgori. Here there is much to show foresters from other countries.

In order to create an enabling environment for community forestry in Tanzania and the Africa Region it is important for the government to:

- strongly support communities that have started along this road. What is most needed is respect for their authority. They also sometimes need small amounts of financial help. This is useful for small items such as boots for patrolmen, and to cover the costs of holding meetings for all villages who are managing forests, and of visiting each other's forests;
- revise policies that seem to exclude the communities from, or do not involve them directly in, the management of the forests. Ensure the laws support village-based forest management;
- train its foresters in participatory or community forestry activities. This should also include a change in the forestry syllabus;
- provide study tours to areas with long experience of community forestry; and
- ensure districts get the help they need. Many districts do not know what they should do or how to proceed.

The steps taken so far to create this environment include the following.

- The new Director of Forestry has changed forest policy, which has its origins in colonial times, and put in place a new National Forest Policy (1998) that fully includes local people in the management of forests.

The Mgori Forest developments helped a great deal in this process. The 1957 Forest Ordinance is now being redrafted into a new and better Forest Act. This law will fully support village ownership and management of forests and will encourage the government to designate local people as the managers of many of its own forest reserves.

- Study tours are frequently conducted to see how the Mgori villages manage the vast forest. In return, the author has also been given a chance to see how community forestry operates elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>
- Experts who can provide guidance at local level have been brought in. This is often possible only where there is a donor project.

As in many other countries, in Tanzania it is impossible to provide sufficient field-based government staff and working budgets; this results in continual battles between government officers and the community. In most cases the result is forest loss, both in terms of area and quality. The only remaining solution is to involve local communities with participatory management, as in this case study.

## References

- Massawe, E.** 1997. Community management of Mgori Forest, Tanzania. A paper prepared for an International Seminar on Community Forestry, Bangkok, July 1997.
- Wily, L.** 1996. *Collaborative forest management: villagers and government. The case of Mgori Forest, Tanzania.* Forests, Trees and People Working Paper Series. Rome, FAO.

3. In July 1997 the author visited Thailand to attend an International Seminar on Community Forestry at a Crossroads: Reflection and Future Direction in the Development of Community Forestry. This included a study tour to Chiang-Mai, in the north of Thailand, where community forestry activities started a long time ago.