

Annex IV

Field visit

A full-day field visit to five community forests was organized for the participants on Tuesday, 27 April. The objective of this field visit was to identify key enabling elements based on practice.

Participants were divided into five linguistically homogeneous groups. Each group was to visit one of five community forests that are at different stages of implementation. These were:

- ▶ Kachokorr Community Forest
- ▶ Berekolong and Folonkajang Community Forest
- ▶ Kusaabal Community Forest
- ▶ Sibac Community Forest
- ▶ Kumbeng Community Forest

In order to facilitate interaction with the local communities, and the discussions at the subsequent plenary sessions, participants were requested to bear in mind the following questions during the field trip.

- ▶ How would you assess the attitude of the villagers?
- ▶ Are the policy and the legislation effectively actualized in the field?
- ▶ What are the hurdles to the implementation?
- ▶ Does community forestry meet the expectation of the villagers?
- ▶ Is community forestry sustainable?
- ▶ What is or is not applicable to other countries?

During the plenary discussions on the following day, participants discussed their findings amongst themselves. They expressed their individual and group views on the issues that arose during the visit as well as those related to the questions above.

On the assessment of the attitude of the villagers

Generally the participants perceived sufficiently sensitized and highly motivated communities as regards expectations. Communities have a positive attitude towards community forestry. They have well-organized local institutions. In some cases it was learnt that the communities started to 'manage' their own forest well before the Forestry Department contacted them for a CFMA. It is evident that the Forestry Department has won the confidence of the people and the two are therefore working closely together. The villagers expressed their hope that the community forestry programme will be permanent as they have resolved themselves to a long-term commitment.

In most cases the forests have been kept safe from bush fires for several years. This indicates the communities' commitment to the programme since forest fires have been reported to be the single most important factor in forest degradation in the Gambia. The villagers take the lead in management decision making and actively participate in the preparation of management plans for the forests. In addition, the implementation of community forestry has promoted solidarity among villagers and between villages, as confirmed by the 'peace committees' established between villages.

On the issue of whether policy and legislation are effectively actualized on the ground

It was felt by some that, despite their demonstrated enthusiasm and active involvement in community forestry, some communities do not seem to fully understand the legislation. This can partly be attributed to the fact that the policy and legislation were introduced respectively in 1995 and 1998, whereas community forestry activities started in 1991. Not sufficient time has

elapsed to permit an in-depth comprehension of the two instruments by the newly conscripted communities. While some elements of the legislation are understood, there are other important aspects that the communities have yet to appreciate. As a result, the Forestry Department needs to conduct further sensitization of the communities to ensure that most of the legislation is understood in the near future. Some of the newly inaugurated community forest committees are not very clear on the tenure arrangements and on the 15 percent contribution to the National Forestry Fund. These shortcomings did not, however, in any way constrain the actualization of the policy and the legislation on the ground.

Those communities who were earlier involved in community forest management and on whose experiences the policy and legislation were developed seem to be comfortable with the two instruments as regards tenure arrangements, benefit sharing and the responsibilities vested in them.

On the issue of hurdles to the implementation

Participants felt that the Forestry Department may not have sufficient capacity to closely follow up with the existing community forests and attend to the current wave of applications from other villages with timeliness. At the level of the communities, one of the potential hurdles to sustainable implementation may be related to benefit sharing in the future. Barring the participants' comprehension of the local institutions and their mode of operation, some felt that the seeming lack of transparency could prove to be a serious constraint in the future.

It was also suggested that the failure of the department and the project to invest much in the other development activities of the local communities might undermine the success of the programme. This view was not shared by all the participants, some of whom felt that the motivation and the interest demonstrated by the villagers was all the more important.

It was mentioned that in some instances the role of women seems to have been downplayed. Men dominated discussions in the villages. For other locations, it was argued that women played their role as expected in the community and as opinion leaders during the dis-

cussions. What eventually came to light was that, although women play an important role in decision making and in work organization and implementation, they traditionally tend to take a back seat during group discussions with visitors where their men are present. Nonetheless a more active encouragement of women's participation was urged.

Concern was expressed about the non-integrated nature of community forestry in the Gambia. It does not seem to consider other important sectors such as agriculture, communication, etc., and this might have a negative impact on its sustainability. It was explained, however, that community forestry in the Gambia does involve agriculture in the form of agroforestry activities on the firelines that are created around the forests and that, where possible, the Forestry Department helps to facilitate contact between villages/communities and other development agencies when the community members express a desire for activities in these sectors. It was acknowledged that community forestry could not and should not be seen as the only vehicle to integrated socio-economic development at the local level.

On the issue of whether community forestry meets the expectation of the villagers

There was general agreement that, to a large extent, community forestry meets the expectation of the villagers, as far as the forest and forest product ownership is concerned. Ownership of the forest is guaranteed by the law as long as the community consummates and observes a CFMA with the Forestry Department. Villagers have a clear say in the management decisions and in how to use the benefits deriving from the forest. They are learning basic forest management and book-keeping techniques and their organizational capacities have improved through their involvement in planned and organized work. Transfer of responsibility and ownership of the forest to the community has effectively stopped illegal forest exploitation and made it possible for the communities to keep the benefits for themselves, which was one of the reasons why the local populations in the Gambia agitated for a return of their forests to them. Other development needs have, however, not been addressed by the programme and perhaps there is need to look into this aspect.

It was, however, observed that ecological motivation, one of the factors considered highly in the Gambian approach, was not sufficient to meet all of the people's expectations. More needs to be done on the economic/commercial aspect. This aspect seems to be 'suspended' during the preliminary phase of implementation, and actively resumed only after the communities have qualified for the final phase and have signed a CFMA with the Forestry Department.

On the issue of whether community forestry is sustainable

The outcome of the discussions on the field trips generally pointed to sustainable community forestry in the Gambia based on policy and practice. The reasons given for this are as follows.

- ▶ Policy and legislation are based on proven/successful experiences of a pilot programme and therefore address the concerns of the local communities.
- ▶ The local populations, Forestry Department, government administrators and local authorities are all highly sensitized, involved and excited about the programme, especially with regard to its environmental and economic benefits for the communities and for the country at large.
- ▶ The forest legislation guarantees the communities' right of ownership, even though certain issues still need to be clarified further to them.
- ▶ The process uses entrenched traditional institutions, practices and norms, as well as local resources.
- ▶ There is a clearly decentralized approach with local empowerment through the legislative instruments.
- ▶ Conflict resolution is based on traditional values and practices, as far as is possible.
- ▶ The legislation allows for individuals, families and communities to contest, in a law court, the establishment of a community forest on land that they believe is theirs, thus permitting an earlier resolution of potential conflicts.
- ▶ The government has set up a National Forestry Fund into which contributions of 15 percent from community forestry revenue (after the CFMA has been signed) and 50 percent of government forestry taxes

and royalties, as well as 100 percent of all revenue generated from forest park management and forestry project activities, are paid for the purpose of forestry development in the country.

- ▶ The process is largely gender-sensitive at both committee and operations levels, although traditional barriers seem to surface every now and then with regard to women's roles.
- ▶ The youth appreciate community forestry and they lead all the implementation activities under the advice and guidance of their elders.

The above elements, necessary for successful and sustainable community forestry, were noted during the field trip. Nonetheless, in order to strengthen the sustainability of the Gambia's programme even further, the Forestry Department was urged to explain the laws in even greater detail, promote the active role of women in decision making, further promote the economic and commercial aspects, and make sure that tenurial arrangements (especially where more than one village is sharing a forest) are better explained and understood by the people.

On the issue of what is or is not applicable to other countries

This point was not adequately addressed during the discussions. Individuals, however, pointed to the fact that the conducive policy and legislative environment apparent in the Gambia do not exist in their respective countries. They also lamented the present lack of commitment, on the part of their forest services and politicians, to the process of handing legitimate ownership rights to the communities.

Conclusions

The general conclusions that could be drawn from the field trip and the plenary discussions that followed it are that: community forestry as practised in the Gambia is a potentially good tool for sustainable forest management and for socio-economic development at the local level. However, government inputs into the process in terms of making it an integrated multidisciplinary approach have to be increased in order to take maximum advantage of this potential.