

Village perspectives of community forestry in the Gambia: the Jarrol-Bondali-Kansala JABOKA Community Forestry Association

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Two years ago our village, Kanleng, joined the community forestry programme.

First, the foresters came to sensitize our village. In the first meeting, there was no agreement. We said: "The foresters are fooling us, so that the forest can be given to the government and we will be denied entry to the forest, our livestock will not have access any more. Even for us women, the collection of fuelwood will not be possible."

After that meeting, when the foresters had gone, we thought a lot about what to do. In that year, we heard over the radio that the region of Kombo had received a lot of rain. But in our area, when we saw the clouds becoming darker, they did not give much rain. That year passed without much rain for us. Later, we decided to send somebody to the foresters to ask them to come back for further discussions. The foresters should help us to establish our own forest because the rain clouds always gathered over our area, but the rain came down over the forests in Kombo.

When the foresters came again we told them that we were interested. They asked us: "Why did you change your mind?" We answered that we used to see the clouds gathering over our area but the rains would come down in Kombo, where you find more trees. We also wanted to have more trees. So we asked the foresters to assist us. When the foresters were in the meeting, they explained to us the steps of the community forestry concept, and since we liked the idea, we identified an area and showed it to the foresters. Later it was surveyed. After the survey, we formed a committee. The village meeting assigned each committee member a certain responsibility. We were told that we would be checked on after a three-year period for the work we were going to do in the forest.

To protect the forest from bush fires, we started to establish a fire-break. We would remove the grass and cut the shrubs and some of the trees along the fire-break line. During the work, men and women, boys and girls came out together. The men cut the trees, the women cut the branches and the young boys and girls removed the branches.

In the rainy season, we planted trees to suppress the grass on the fire-break. After starting work in the first year, we could observe a very good survival rate and the plants were growing very fast in the second rainy season. The work continued in the second year until the clearing of the firebelt was finished. We had been told that we would be checked on after three years, but the work was already completed after two years. The reason was that everyone was very anxious. The first cashew trees had even started to bear fruits. Since the forest management started, no bush fire had occurred. More and more wildlife was coming into our forest since it was not burning.

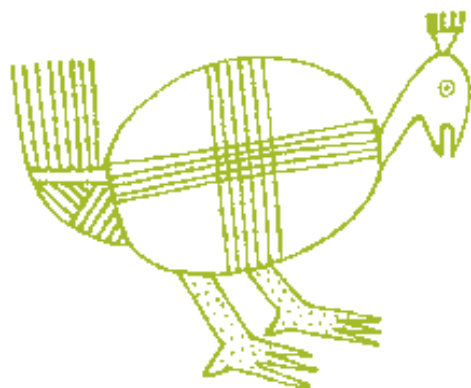


From the beginning onwards, we joined with the villagers of Bantajang and we never had any quarrel with them over the forest management.

We also planted sesame on the fire-break line and we realized some income from that. Some of the cut trees were sold and that also realized income. Nowadays everyone is committed with both hands to the forest management. We have even started to convince other villages to join community forestry.

In the beginning, there were fears in the women's *kafo* (working group). We thought that the forest could become government property, that our goats might be denied access, that we would not be allowed to fetch fuelwood, or that we would not be allowed to collect fruits, which we normally sell to earn the school fees for the children. So we told our husbands that they should refuse the ideas of the foresters. Even the men's cattle would not be allowed to enter the forest and eventually they would die.

But the committee that was formed did not prohibit any collection of fuelwood or fruits, and later when working on the fire-break we could even collect a lot of fuelwood. When the trees on the fire-break will be big, we hope to harvest fruits and fuelwood from there, and maybe even timber from the *gmelina*, but that might be more something for our children and grandchildren. At the beginning, when going to work we had doubts whether we would be stopped if we collected some fuelwood, because we had heard of licences necessary for that. But when nobody stopped us, we realized that the foresters are honest in what they tell us.



The work was very difficult because we were not used to forest work, and for the women the removal of logs and branches was hard, but we got used to it. When we could not lift logs, we tried to roll them, and when we grew tired, we sat down and rested.

Because not all the people went to work, some became discouraged, but they always tried to tell everybody that it is not good if some people go to do the work and others just sit in the village. Some would follow, some not, but after some time, everybody realized that the idea behind community forestry was genuine and everyone took part in the work.

The first benefit we realized was a small income from sesame. This year, we have a lot of sesame and we have sold some fuelwood, so the income is higher, thank God. The firebelt is clean and wide enough. I think fire will not enter the forest, and even in other surrounding State forests, we have cleared some roads so that fire cannot spread. The width of the firebelt is more than 15 m.

The commercialization of branchwood, started by women in other villages, is not taking place here. We fetch fuelwood only for our own cooking fires. We also wanted to engage in the branchwood business, but we have not started yet.

Last year, we established an association of all community forests in the Foni Jarrol, Foni Bondali and Foni Kansala districts. It is called JABOKA. JABOKA currently has 12 member community forests with 37 villages and about 3 000 ha of forest.

JABOKA was formed because the three district chiefs wanted all forests in their districts to come together so that they could support each other. To become a member of the association you have to have a forest committee. With a Preliminary Community Forest Management Agreement (PCFMA), you qualify as a full member. When we were about to form JABOKA, we learned that in Kombo an association already existed. It was proposed we form an association as well, and we went to have a meeting to hold elections. During the election, each community forest was represented by three people. I was not prepared to stand for election. But another candidate from a community forest without a PCFMA was not qualified for the board, so I was elected. I stood against two men, but I came first. It was not because I'm

famous or beautiful, but the people voted for me, even though I'm not educated.

The members pay 150 Dalasis [about US\$15] every year as a membership fee. The money is used for activities such as sensitization campaigns, field trips, purchase of tools or seeds, or to obtain documents.

Our activities were first hindered by lack of transport. Only when a vehicle from the Gambian-German Forestry Project was available did we go on a sensitization tour. We discussed the concept and we tried to convince other villages, which have not yet joined the community forestry programme. Our second sensitization tour was supported by a vehicle from Saint Joseph's Family Farm Project, Bwiam. Many villages showed interest in community forestry, and some even identified an area to show to us.

When we went to the village of Karrol, the village elders told us they were afraid to join community forestry, because if a bush fire occurred, the Forestry Department would jail or fine all of them, and they would not be able to pay the fine. In Karrol we were not able to convince the people. Some villages said that despite their interest, they could not join because they were too small in number. But if you look at our community forest (Manduworri), it is managed successfully by two small villages, and in other cases you have up to six villages that can stand together to manage one community forest. One of the common problems is that the youths are in Kombo, at the coast or in the cities and only very few participants can join the forest work.

Sometimes the government departments are like a vehicle that is passing our village: you see the vehicle passing but it is not possible to make them hear what you want to say. For the women we want a village garden because when the women come home from the forest, they sit around and cannot do a lot. If the committee wants more people in the community forest, they should also consider that rice and fish are finished.

Another problem is that the road from the village to the forest is in a very bad condition in the rainy season. I am able to visit other villages and their community forests, but I cannot access our own forest!

We once had visitors from another division who wanted to see our community forest. But since the road was so bad, their vehicle could not pass and we had to go on foot. And that is not nice if you are the President and cannot show your own community forest.

This year JABOKA wants 25 new villages to join community forestry. We want to give seeds or stumps to villages that want to start a nursery. We also want to control the commercialization of branchwood by finding a common price for it and by charging a fee on it to limit its exploitation.

Finally, I want to say that we have gathered here to discuss technical aspects of bush fire protection and forest management. But we should not forget that God has created both men and women. Though men are more powerful in the work, women should not be left behind. Men and women have both formed their working groups in the villages. Both should stand together to manage the forest.