

Annex III

The Gambian experience

The Gambian experience in community forestry has been gained over a period of about nine years, starting with the first pilot programme initiated in 1990. Like most other African countries, The Gambia's forest management programme during the first 20 years of its independence was characterized by State control of forest resources, ensured by restrictive forest legislation. Whereas during the first ten years of its independence, the State relied on local government institutions to collect forest taxes, which ensured that some money went to these institutions, the 1976 policy and the Forest Act and Regulations of 1977 and 1978 respectively led to the creation of a Forestry Department and placed forest management squarely in the hands of the State. The Forest Act and Regulations were both restrictive and punitive as far as access to forest resources by the local population was concerned. Although the local populations were allowed to collect forest products for domestic consumption free of charge, the licensing policy placed the monetary benefits out of their reach.

Commercialization of forest products coupled with population pressure on forest lands in the Gambia in the latter part of the 1970s resulted in serious forest degradation. In addition to this, the local populations that were settled close to these forest areas began to complain of 'their' forests being destroyed by outsiders (licence holders) while they were being denied access to the same forests for monetary benefits and for conversion to agricultural land. Fire incidences also began to take a toll on the forests as the local populations increasingly manifested a lack of concern for the forests, since they had come to perceive them as government-owned. However, as the degradation of the forests continued and the communities began to find it difficult to gather even basic products for home consumption, they started to agitate for their control of the forest and in some cases even took it upon themselves to stop some legitimate licence holders from having access to the forest.

In the mid 1980s, the Forestry Department began to realize the futility of the State's efforts to protect the forest against fires and illegal exploitation. It witnessed situations where community protection was ensuring the 'preservation' of the forest, such as in the case of Pirang Forest. This forest had been successfully protected by the local population of Pirang as a preserve for the practice of community traditional rites. Based on experiences gained in the management of natural forest stands with assistance from the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), which finally developed a forest management model, and taking advantage of a provision in the 1977 Forest Act that permits the minister responsible for forests to exempt certain individuals and communities from the provisions of the Regulations, the Forestry Department decided to introduce its first community forest management pilot project, under the Gambian-German Forestry Project, in 1990. The community forestry programme that ensued has grown from strength to strength since 1991 when the first Community Forest Management Agreement (CFMA) was signed. The number of villages involved increased from 3 in 1991 to 450 in 1999. The area under community management also increased from 102 ha to over 18 000 ha, while many more applications await processing by the Forestry Department. The success of community forestry in the Gambia has its roots in some fundamental strategies that have been adopted, although the demand that existed prior to its introduction, as well as the conducive political environment, have played a key role in making it the success that it is today. In the following sections an overview of these key elements is given.



Key elements for the success of community forestry in the Gambia

A demand for community control over the forest resources

There existed in the Gambia a popular call for the return of the forest to the people to permit their direct control of it and access to the benefits accruing from it. Consequently, at the time of the introduction of community forestry there were pockets of communities willing to engage in the process. This provided the Forestry Department with an opportunity to successfully introduce a pilot programme.

The legislative environment

The 1977 Forest Act had a provision that allows the minister responsible for forests to exempt a particular community from the restrictive provisions of the 1978 Regulations for the purpose of forest management or exploitation. The Forestry Department used this legal provision to implement community forestry by seeking such exemptions from the minister. This allowed a smooth implementation of the pilot projects of the first half of the 1990s.

A conducive political environment

At the time of the introduction of community forestry in the Gambia there existed heightened political awareness with regard to the need for environmental protection in general and forest protection in particular. This situation emanated from years of public sensitization campaigns conducted by the Forestry Department and other natural resource management institutions, which involved politicians as advocates. Political will for change was therefore cultivated over the years. When the forest condition seriously deteriorated as a result of overexploitation and uncontrolled fires, and it became obvious that the Forestry Department would not be able to control the situation, it was easy to get political support for the introduction of community forestry.

A desire for change at the level of the Forestry Department

The Forestry Department was itself committed to changing the situation in the country and therefore advocated for the introduction of community forestry by writing and submitting a concept paper, for GTZ funding, in 1987. This commitment of the department was an important key element in the successful implementation of the programme. To date the department continues to demonstrate the same commitment and to forge close working relations with other departments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for the country-wide implementation of the approach.

Development of a forest management concept

There was no experience in natural forest management in the Gambia prior to 1985. The Gambian-German Forestry Project subsequently developed a natural forest management concept, during the period 1985-1990, which was adapted to the local conditions. The forest management model developed as a result of the implementation of this concept focused on fire protection of forest stands and their enrichment planting. This model was used to introduce forest management and to establish the best practice for a country-wide programme. The existence and use of a model helped to avoid risky experimentation with the local communities. It also significantly enhanced the success of the Gambian case.

Phased approach to the introduction of community forestry

Apart from introducing community forestry initially at a pilot level using the forest management model to test both the willingness and capacity of the local community to implement it, as well as the applicability of the model at the community level, the Forestry Department used a phased approach to the introduction of the programme. These phases, the start-up phase, the preliminary phase and the consolidation phase, enabled understanding and confidence building between the department and the target community. It determined the continuity, or not, of the programme and permitted the association of other collaborators, particularly the NGOs.

The start-up phase allows consultation between the community and the department. During this phase, the community forms a management committee, makes the



necessary negotiations amongst its members and between itself and neighbouring villages and also receives training from the department on forest management principles. The start-up phase lasts up to six months and the community uses it to identify and preliminarily demarcate its forest and limit its utilization to extraction of non-timber products and wood for domestic consumption. The phase is also used to prepare the community to apply for its Preliminary Community Forest Management Agreement (PCFMA) from the department.

The preliminary phase implements the PCFMA that would have been signed between the community and the Forestry Department. It lasts for three years initially and can be extended for up to another two years depending on the results of an evaluation conducted at the end of the phase. The phase is used to resolve conflicts, consolidate institutional arrangements at the local level, prepare management plans and conclude all necessary administrative and legal issues. Commercialization of wood from fireline construction activities is permitted at this stage, and all revenue accruing from this activity is kept by the local community. The PCFMA phase is a 'test' phase for both the community and the department. It allows the community to demonstrate its capacity to manage its forest, and the department to determine the willingness of the community and its own ability to cooperate with the community. It also gives the community the opportunity to determine whether the department will live up to expectation, and therefore the possibility to opt out of the programme if it deems that necessary. Communities who do not satisfy the department in terms of their commitment have a chance to do so during a two-year extension phase. The engagement is annulled when a community grossly fails to satisfy basic evaluation criteria.

The consolidation phase is the period when a final CFMA is signed between the department and the community, permanently transferring authority and ownership over the forest to the participating community. The conclusion of a CFMA is dependent on the community 'passing' the evaluation. The preparation and implementation of a simple management plan is strictly observed during this long-term phase. Communities are allowed to harvest according to management prescriptions and are required to pay 15 percent of their revenue into the

National Forestry Fund, which is used by the department for forestry development, including the extension of community forestry activities. Communities are also required to place 40 percent of the remaining revenue into a Local Fund, which they control and administer, for reinvestment into their forest. They use the balance of 60 percent for other community development activities.

Participation through empowerment

The Gambian experience demonstrated that the level of community participation can be significantly enhanced when people are sufficiently empowered to make decisions for themselves, and are guaranteed right of access and ownership of their resources. Throughout the process of negotiation and implementation of community forestry the people are put first. They decide their forests, their committee membership and their own work arrangements, which the department respects and follows.

The authority of the traditional institutions is recognized and respected. Traditional leaders at the village and district levels are involved at all stages of the development of community forestry. Particularly the district chiefs, who are the traditional custodians of all forests in their administrative district, are allowed to play their role by signing an attestation to the fact that a village or group of villages has inalienable right of ownership over the piece of forest land that it has identified for management. The chief's authority as a magistrate is also used to resolve difficult conflicts. Most other conflict resolutions are carried out through the relevant village traditional institutions.



Collaboration with other institutions

The apparent success of community forestry in the Gambia is also attributable, to some extent, to the collaborative involvement of relevant NGOs and the use of private extension agencies. Whereas the private extension agencies are contracted for their services, the NGOs are associated through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and bring in their own resources as a supplement to the limited project resources. The NGOs are used to perform work for which they are most qualified, such as institution building and strengthening. The MOU is signed for three years to ensure that uninterrupted services are provided. The Forestry Department and the project act as facilitators to establish contact between the villagers and other government departments, NGOs and donors for the implementation of non-forestry development activities that the villagers might request.

Appropriate policy and legislation

For the Gambia the five-year pilot experience provided the ingredients for the development of relevant policy and legislation. The policy and legislation were developed through a consultative process involving the communities, NGOs, other government departments and development partners. Currently both policy and legislation exist for extensive implementation of community forestry. The Forestry Department does, however, still need to further explain the policy and legislation to aspiring communities since the legislation is in English, which is not widely read or spoken at the community level, and is very recent.

Institutional arrangements

Community forestry is being implemented in the Gambia within the context of administrative decentralization both at the national level and at the level of the Forestry Department. Divisional commissioners are involved in the process by approving, on behalf of government, all applications from communities. This demonstrates government's willingness, both at the technical and administrative level, for the implementation of community forestry as much as it ensures the involvement of the local administrators in the process for the purpose of avoiding conflicts in the future. The Forestry Department staff at the divisional levels are authorized to process all

applications until the final stage when the director would append his signature, granting approval for the devolution of ownership and management rights to the community. This allows the staff to make decisions without having to refer every case to the headquarters. It also facilitates the process for the local community, which does not have to travel to follow up its application or to seek advice.

The community forestry programme funded partly by the Gambian-German Forestry Project is being implemented as an integral part of the Forestry Department structure rather than as a parallel activity to that of the department. No other personnel are employed from outside, except the private extension agents who work with the department staff, and the NGO collaborators. This process ensures that all experiences gained remain within the department and that the department can continue with the work at the end of the project. The National Forestry Fund will ensure that the department can hire the services of the extension agency if necessary. All Forestry Department staff are involved in community forestry in one way or another. Community forestry training is provided for newly recruited staff.

Minimum external incentive

Although incentives are necessary to encourage the wide-scale implementation of community forestry, the process in the Gambia recognized the need to limit these incentives to administrative, policy and legislative support with minimal material/financial input. This has been found necessary to avoid dependency on external material and financial resources, which can undermine sustainability when they cease to be available. As a result, where the project and the department used to provide tractors to plough firelines for the communities, these are being replaced by animal-drawn implements owned and operated by the community members themselves. Management plans are prepared with the committee members to transfer knowledge and skills to them so that they can continue with the same after project assistance has been withdrawn.



Capacity building at the community and Forestry Department levels

Community forestry implementation in the Gambia recognizes and emphasizes capacity building for both the Forestry Department and the participating community. In this respect the Forestry Department trains the communities in basic management planning, bookkeeping and marketing strategies, and uses them to train other community forest committees. The Forestry Department staff are provided with in-service training to facilitate the extension of the programme and for sustainability.

Constraints experienced in the Gambia***Misunderstanding of the community forestry approach***

The experiences of the local population with the post-independence forest regulations have caused many to mistrust the intentions of the Forestry Department. The department staff still encounter this situation in new areas that they contact. The need for continuous sensitization still exists, and the limited department staff is a constraint in this respect.

Land tenure

Despite the fact that land tenure conflicts have not been so frequent as to negatively affect the progress of implementation of community forestry in the Gambia, and that ingenious 'peace committees' have been formed by the villagers themselves to resolve such conflicts, the issue of land ownership will continue to pose some problems for the smooth implementation of community forestry. Individuals and families who voluntarily allow their fallow/unused land to be included in the village community forest may later need this land, which will prove difficult if not impossible to regain. Dissatisfaction amongst this group may result in sabotage of the process.

Inadequate institutional framework

The Gambian population has been highly sensitized to the prospects of community forestry. Consequently the demand for community forestry agreements has increased almost beyond the ability of the Forestry Department to handle and process all applications in the timely manner expected by applicants. This is a result of the limited human resources of the department. Unless the issue of manpower is addressed in the short term it could prove to be a major hindrance to the expansion of community forestry in the country.