

Restoring Ethiopia's forestland at a historic pace

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This month the Ministry of Environment and Forest released the good news that has been subsequently relayed on several international and development orient media outlets.

The Ministry disclosed that: "due to the various multifaceted natural resource conservation, reforestation and other related activities carried out during the past decade, Ethiopia's forest coverage has reached 15 per cent".

Indeed, the forest cover in the country has shown some significant increase as a result of reforestation in Ethiopia over the last decade.

Afforestation is not a new phenomenon in Ethiopia. The country has a long history of tree planting activities. According to historical records, afforestation started in the early 1400s by the order of King Zera-Yakob (1434-1468). Modern tree planting using introduced tree species (mainly Australian Eucalyptus) started in 1895 when Emperor Menelik II (1888-1892) looked into solutions for alleviating shortage of firewood and construction wood in the capital, Addis Ababa.

However, forestry, along with the agricultural sector, has been neglected in the past decades. For decades, it was neglected to the point of reaching on the verge becoming extinct. A country that had about 30 percent of its landmass covered

with forest in the late nineteenth century had less than 3 percent of its land covered with forest in 1991.

Researches papers indicate that:

High forests, either coniferous or broadleafed, were the climax vegetation of 35 - 40 percent of Ethiopia before human settlement took place. With the inclusion of savanna woodlands some 66 percent of the country was covered with forest or woodlands at that time. Over the last 5000 years, there has been progressive deforestation, which has accelerated tremendously during the last century as the country's population has grown.

According to different scholarly sources, about 35 - 40 percent of the country's land area was covered with high forests at the turn of the 19 century.

However, rapid population growth (3 percent per year), extensive forest clearing for cultivation and over-grazing, movement of political centers, and exploitation of forests for fuelwood and construction materials without replanting has reduced the forest area of the country to 16 percent in the 1950's and 3.1 percent in 1982.

Further estimates of the distribution of forest and woodland areas made on the basis of information from LANDSAT imagery (1979) revealed that 2.8 percent of the land surface is under forest and woodland.

A FAO report of 1981, estimated the then rate of deforestation to be 200,000 hectares per year. As a result, large areas of the country were exposed to heavy soil erosion. It was also estimated that fertile top soil is lost at a rate of 1 billion cubic meters per year resulting in a massive environmental degradation and serious threat to sustainable agriculture and forestry.

The major cause of deforestation is rapid population growth, which leads to an increase in the demand for crop and grazing land, wood for fuel and construction. Lack of viable land use policy and corresponding law also aggravated the rate of deforestation.

The impact of this on the national socio-economic situation was immense. Forestry, including efforts of afforestation, make large contribution to the economy of the rural Ethiopia. A large number of labourers are required for forest nursery operations, afforestation and for the construction and maintenance of roads. This is a major source of income for the rural people.

People also profit from forestry employment through firewood, charcoal collection and sales, incense and gum collection. Fuel wood production is by far the largest employment generator accounting for nearly 50% of the total forestry employment, followed by afforestation contributing for about 34%. Forest industry employment amounted to about 2.2% of the total work force in the country and contributed 2.8% to employment in the agricultural sector in 1988/1989.

During the Imperial regime, about half of the forestland was privately owned or claimed, and roughly, the government held half. There was little government support for forestry operations. The military regime, Derg, that came to power in 1974 took a completely opposite policy direction. It nationalized forestland, sawmills, and controlled harvesting of forestland. This measure encouraged illegal logging and accelerated the destruction of Ethiopia's remaining forests.

Derg's decision to monopolize all forestry development responsibilities, including tree plantations activities and forest protection tasks discouraged effective community & individual participation in forest development. The full value of

forest depletion in 1990 to have been about Birr 138 million or some 25 percent of the potential forestry GDP of Birr 544 million.

In 1992, immediately after the downfall of the military regime, the Transitional Government recognized that

"Natural resources are the foundation of the economy. Smallholder peasant agriculture, in some areas including forestry, is the dominant sector accounting for about 45 per cent of the GDP, 85 per cent of exports and 80 per cent of total employment.

And that, renewable natural resources, i.e. land, water, forests and trees as well as other forms of Biodiversity had been deteriorated to a low level of productivity in the last century."

As a response to the decline in natural forest area the Government launched projects to rehabilitate formerly forested area for timber production and erosion control were started at large-scale.

The social values of forests and support their conservation and management for sustainable use and environmental sustainability were recognized in the Constitution and in the national economic policy and strategy as a key prerequisite for lasting success.

Even though, there wasn't a comprehensive federal policy that covers either land use or forest management. Proclamation No. 94/1994 that was issued to provide for the conservation, development and utilization of forests is currently serving as the forest policy statement of the country.

The 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia recognized in Article 92 "Environmental Objectives" that:

1. *Government shall endeavor to ensure that all Ethiopians live in a clean and healthy environment.*
2. *The design and implementation of programmes and projects of development shall not damage or destroy the environment.*
3. *People have the right to full consultation and to the expression of views in the planning and implementations of environmental policies and projects that affect them directly.*
4. *Government and citizens shall have the duty to protect the environment.*

In addition, the overall policy goal of the government was set as:

"to improve and enhance the health and quality of life of all Ethiopians and to promote sustainable social and economic development through the sound management and use of natural, human-made and cultural resources and the environment as a whole so as to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

However, there was a gap in terms an overall comprehensive formulation of sectoral and cross-sectoral framework on natural resources and the environment to harmonize these broad directions and guide the sustainable development, use and management of the natural resources and the environment.

The 2001 Rural and Agricultural development policy and strategy provided a detailed direction in this regard. The policy was immediately accompanied by detailed manuals and implementing agencies. To implement the Rural and Agricultural Development policy, 25 agricultural vocational training colleges (ATVT's) have already been established all over the country and graduated more than 71,000 agricultural development agents are graduated in animal science, plant science and natural resource. Moreover, 8,780 farmers training centers

(FTCs) have been built and many farmers are getting trained in various agricultural practices, extension services and on how to adapt new agricultural technologies that enhances agricultural productivity.

The current Forest Policy and Strategies aim to meet public demand in forest and forest products and to enhance the socio-economic and environmental contribution of forests through six focal areas: Those are: Fostering private forest development; Developing and extending technologies; Expanding markets; Administration and management of state forests; Forest protection; and Building data base on forest conservation, development and utilization.

The forestry development drive was also supplemented by several scientific policies and plans of actions - including, the Conservation Strategy, the Environment Policy, the Energy Policy, the National Policy on Biodiversity, the Wildlife Policy and Act, the FYDPs – 2001-05, 2006-2010 (PASDEP), 2011-2015 (GTP), the SLM framework – a 15-year program framework, and the CRGE Strategy (2012-2025).

The National Environment Policy clearly stated that the direction to be followed in terms of Forest, Woodland and Tree Resources would be, among others:

- a. To recognize the complementary roles of communities, private entrepreneurs and the state in forestry development;*
- b. To encourage all concerned individuals and communities as well as the government to actively involve in the planning and implementation of forestry programmes to ensure sustainability, minimize cost, and forestall conflict;*
- c. To ensure that forestry development strategies integrate the development, management and conservation of forest resources with those of land and water*

resources, energy resources, ecosystems and genetic resources, as well as with crop and livestock production;

d. To ensure that afforestation with exotic species be restricted to backyard woodlots, to peri-urban plantations and to plantations for specific industrial and other projects; otherwise until reliable information and knowledge on exotic species are available afforestation shall use local species as these are in tune with the environment and thus ensure its well-being;

e. To assist the natural process of afforestation of uncultivable areas by controlling felling and grazing and by planting judiciously selected local species, as well as by other affordable interventions.

f. To adhere to the principle that "sustainable forest management" is achieved when social acceptability and economic viability have been achieved and the volume of wood harvested in a given period is about equal to the net growth that the forest is capable of generating;

The outcome was impressive.

The interventions made as per the directions have bore fruits that the forest cover has started to grow. The total forest cover of Ethiopia has tripled in size since 2000 as a result of large-scale reforestation campaigns.

According to recent data, **about 15 percent of the country's surface area is now forested** (16 million hectares). Another 44.6 million hectares are under wooded land. The forest vegetation consists mainly of Acacia and Boswellia, but also includes some high forest, riverine woodlands, mixed deciduous woodlands and bamboo woodlands.

Moreover, very significant stride have been achieved in the rehabilitation of degraded landmass through area closures and reforestation/afforestation in the last 20 years. Until 2009/10, area closures cover about 1.5 million hectares whereas areas covered by reforestation/afforestation account for about 6.1 million hectares. Most of these areas have now reached the level of forest stand definition.

The progress has been commended in several international reports. For example: The African Economic Outlook report 2013, which was prepared by UNECA, AfDB, OECD and UNDP, stated that.

"the government has sought to mainstream environment issues in the development process, through its Community Based Participatory Watershed Development and Sustainable Land Management programmes.

A green economy strategy, Climate Resilient Green Economy, was launched in 2011, addressing climate change adaptation and mitigation, while pursuing the goals of economic growth, zero net emissions and building resilience. The Climate Resilient Green Economy Facility was launched in September 2012, to support the government's vision of becoming a middle income economy with low carbon growth by 2025."

Indeed, Community Based Participatory development is the heart of each and every work of the government. In the same fashion, the green development approach was based on the active participation of the peasant.

As the Sweden University of Gothenburg's "Environment for Development Initiative" attested:

"Forest conservation is getting more attention in Ethiopia, from the highest level of government to the community level.

“Control over forests has been shifting to the local level for several years. Communities in Ethiopia are being asked to manage forest resources, not only for livelihood needs, but also to keep in place healthy forests that can act as carbon sinks.”

“Community-controlled forests, on the other hand, tend to have clear rules and sanctions and community participation, and are well-monitored. As a result, community forests tend to be healthier and store more carbon than government managed forests.”

Addressing the neglect and damage on Ethiopia's forestry includes a massive effort to rehabilitate the precious flora and fauna in the national parks, reserves and other areas of the nation.

For example, the Semen Mountains National Park had reached to the level where UNESCO classified it a world heritage in danger. Semen Park is one of the 22 national parks, two wildlife sanctuaries, five wildlife reserves, 10 community reserve areas, 21 controlled hunting areas, and 4 biosphere reserves, protected areas that cover about 14 percent of Ethiopia's total landmass.

Now, Semen Park, after 20 years of effort, is to be removed from UNESCO's list of endangered heritages by 2015.

Indeed, the political commitment, clear direction and determination in forestry development had been observed across the board and had earned praises from several corners.

One notable case, the remark made by Professor Nicholas Stern (Lord Stern of Brentford), chair of the Grantham Research Institute, former adviser to the UK Government on the Economics of Climate Change and Development and former Chief Economist and Senior Vice President at the World Bank.

Professor Nicholas Stern said, in the context of paying tribute to the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi:

"On climate and environment and their relationship with development, Meles Zenawi was visionary, determined and practical.

He saw, as with so many other things, that Africa and the developing countries should take their future development, and their environment, in their own hands. He proposed Ethiopia's Climate-Resilient Green Economic Strategy (CRGE): he had a vision of Ethiopia being both a middle-income country and carbon-neutral by the second half of the next decade, and had concrete plans for getting there.

He saw how to contain Ethiopia's double-digit growth rate and de-carbonise at the same time. He saw how degraded land could be restored to great productivity and how forests could be preserved and enhanced by the work of, and in the interests of, local communities.

His ideas on environment and development are still embedded in Ethiopia's plans for the future."

Indeed, Ethiopia remains firmly committed to the idea of advancing both environment and development side by side.

The tremendous progress made in expanding the forest coverage to 15% is the latest evidence in this regard.