

INTRODUCTION

Why we need Africa's forests

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Africa's forests are needed for Africans! That is the first priority. It is only when this is secured that the rest of the world should consider how Africa's forests also contribute to global needs associated with forests. Without the first we cannot have the second. One might expect that this obvious positive relationship would spur the international community to action. Yet it is a source of continuing consternation that so much is known, about Africa and elsewhere, regarding trends in forest decline, the ways in which forests contribute to well-being of people, and the necessity for the ecological functions of forests to contribute to a stable global environment, but so little is being achieved in arresting loss of forest cover and degradation of forests.

What is it that would unlock the potential of the national and global communities to invest in and manage forests in Africa, as a way of realizing their potential to contribute to the human and environmental needs that exist? Africa's forests represent a compelling strategic area for investment of domestic and international resources in the global attack on poverty of Africa's peoples. It can be one of the Quick Win interventions proposed by the United Nations Millennium Project to save and improve millions of lives and to promote economic growth, applicable to all the forest ecosystem types that occur throughout Africa.

The Report of the Millennium Project (UN Millennium Project 2005 – Tables 1 and 2) reveals that for all the Millennium Development Goals the situation in Sub-Saharan Africa is declining or showing little positive change. And it is only slightly better for Northern Africa. For Sub-Saharan Africa the numbers of people living below the poverty line (measured as \$2.15 a day) increased over the period 1990 to 2001 from 382 million to 516 million, reflecting a 35% increase in numbers and an increase of 2% in the share of total population. South Asia is the only other region showing an increase in numbers living below this poverty line over this same period, but only of 11% and reflecting a reduction by 9% in share of total population. When the poverty line is moved down to \$1.08 per day Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region

showing an increase in numbers over this period (except for a very small increase in Latin America and the Caribbean) as well as an increase in the share of total population.

No wonder the Report concludes that 'Sub-Saharan Africa is the epicenter of crisis, with continuing food insecurity, a rise of extreme poverty, stunningly high child and maternal mortality, and large numbers of people living in slums, ... and a widespread shortfall for most of the MDGs' (UN Millennium Project, 2005).

In respect of the Goal of Environmental Sustainability, the report states that 'many countries are struggling because their natural resource base ...is progressively degraded'. In the case of forests specifically, the Report estimates that about 15 million hectares are cleared each year in developing countries. And most of the forests in Africa are being rapidly degraded, with immediate negative consequences for local populations, and ultimately with impact on global climate change and biodiversity loss.

The Report on Condition and Trends of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005 - Report on Conditions and Trends, Chapter 21: Condition and Trends in Forests and Woodland Systems) is revealing:

- Africa accounts for about 17% of the world's forests but for about 50% of net recent global deforestation;
- extensive conversion for agriculture and excessive harvesting has generated a great decline of woodlands in dry regions: open savanna woodlands in South Africa have lost about half of their original extent;
- while forest conservation in developing countries is generally weak, only about 1% of total forest area in Africa is managed under a long-term plan, compared to 25% in Asia, 85% in Oceania, 55% in North and Central America, and 3% in South America;

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- many countries in the arid zone are facing an acute water deficit: in South Africa 54% of available run-off is currently used and expected to increase by 75% during the next 25 years.
- The Report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment reveals also the close inter-relationship among attempts to meet development needs, the quality of forests, and human well-being:
- while fuelwood meets over 90% of the need for energy in 11 African countries, it is a driving force of deforestation especially in dry forests and open woodland;
- while infrastructure expansion creates new opportunities for employment, livelihoods and trade, 65% of forests in Africa now lie only 10 kilometers or less from the main transportation line, permitting ready access for unregulated harvesting in the absence of management plans and enforcement capacity;
- while products such as honey and beeswax from Africa are increasingly being exported, this very increase in economic opportunity could deplete the resource, in the absence of long-term plans for sustainability;
- while the domestic use of traditional medicines and increasing medicinal plant exports are becoming of economic importance to many African countries, lack of conservation practices runs the risk of depleting the stock and eroding biodiversity.

These dilemmas are calling forth appropriate national policies and management methods, but widespread investment is required

- for implementation and enforcement
- for building human and institutional capacities for management and devolution to communities
- for investment in alternative sources of energy
- for development of new markets and marketable products.

So is attention to those forces that represent major causes of deforestation and degradation but which are not amenable to exclusively national or community responses: demand of northern consuming countries; practices of commercial logging operators including illegal logging; mineral exploitation by multi-national enterprises; land conversion for large plantations; forest law enforcement in receiving countries; ethnic and political conflicts.

FAO has advised that 'in the absence of fundamental changes, the forestry situation in Africa will be marked by continued high losses of forest cover, deterioration in the state of the environment, and depletion of non-wood forest

products in general and medicinal plants in particular' (FAO 2003). This Report outlines the likely characteristics of Africa's forests in 2020 - at which time the continent will have to cope with an expansion in human numbers of about 50% - as continuing loss of forest cover, illegal logging, land use conflicts, loss of biodiversity, land degradation, and deterioration of watersheds. Consequently, 'poverty alleviation and environmental protection will remain the most important priorities over the next two decades'.

Forests are central to these two priorities in Africa. Forests cover about one quarter of the land of Sub-Saharan Africa and provide a range of benefits for people and their environment: in addition to generating revenues and livelihoods, they contribute about 10% of GDP in 19 countries, about 10% of national trade in 10 countries; they offer a safety net for poor people for food, fuel, building materials, subsistence incomes, medicines; they contain about 20% of the world's biodiversity hotspots and provide habitat for many game species which are source of food for local communities. Moreover, the number of poor people so supported is not small: over two-thirds of all Africans rely directly or indirectly on forests for their livelihoods; among them are most of the estimated 600 million Africans who live on less than \$1 dollar per day. The relevance of forests for poverty alleviation and environmental protection is not incidental, it is structural (CIFOR 2005).

FAO (2003) suggests the need to adopt 'new approaches' to forestry in Africa, outlining 'priorities and strategies for enhancing the contribution of forestry to the economic, social and environmental interests of Africa', and specifying areas with potential for positive change as revitalization of the public sector, making markets work for poor people, and enhancing the efficiency of the informal sector through legal and institutional frameworks and better access to information. The truth is, none of these can be said to be a 'new approach'.

When one scours the literature about the nature of interventions that might be made to arrest decline in forests, in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world - whether it be in the annals of the various incarnations of the United Nations attempt to deal with forests (as in IPF, IFF, UNFF), or in the periodic reports from FAO, or in the outputs of various initiatives, occasional (like the Report of the World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development) or routine (like the contributions from research organisations such as the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) or the World Agro-Forestry Center (ICRAF) - recommendations for such approaches can everywhere be found.

While the problems of African forests are extensively diagnosed, their relationship to the well-being of Africans widely recognised, and the nature of interventions required abundantly clear, there is not as great conviction or commitment about the solutions that forests offer to stemming the persistent poverty in or the persistent economic decline of Africa². Yet the research of organisations such as CIFOR and ICRAF in Africa and elsewhere provides evidence of

² For an exposition of these see World Rainforest Movement, Africa: Forests Under Threat

the myriad ways in which forests can be made to contribute to uplifting the well-being of those who depend directly on them: through more secure livelihoods, higher subsistence incomes, more marketable products and reliable markets for those products, diversified economic opportunities. The nature of the interventions to be made to achieve such results are also clear: from sound macro-economic policies that embrace the potential of forests, to more targeted policy instruments, to enhancing the capabilities of public organisations and communities.

These are occurring – but they are sporadic, still only in pockets, through projects, mostly as initiatives of external organisations on pilot basis. What is required is a combination of the international and local resources available to make a frontal assault on the issues, to scale-up solution-oriented efforts, to extend them to larger areas for critical mass, and to apply the learning from previous activities. This is the only approach that would enable the research and investment to date to really make a difference.

There are some indications that this is beginning to happen³: with the help of international organisations, more countries are improving their national forest laws and policies; more communities are being strengthened to manage their forest resources sustainably; the CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) has pooled resources of several of its Centers in its Sub-Saharan Africa Challenge Programme so scientists, farmers and communities will work more closely and synergistically. But far more concerted efforts, and concentration of investments in forest-related solutions, are urgently required.

The Millennium Project Report presents scenarios for the year 2015 about the benefits of meeting the Millennium Development Goals (UN Millennium Project 2005 – Table 9): for Sub-Saharan Africa the poverty headcount could reduce by 50%, GDP per capita could increase by 25%, undernourished people could reduce by 33%, child mortality could decrease by 50%, maternal mortality could decrease by 70%, and so on. The symbiotic relationship between sustaining forests and achieving the rest of the Goals is made evident in the report of the Project's Task Force on Environmental Sustainability, which specifies a list of required interventions that, among other things, would target the groups directly involved in informal forest activities to increase their real incomes. Such an approach would embrace the two-thirds of Africans who rely directly or indirectly on Africa's forests for their well-being.

Such achievements are, however, predicated on commitment for 'a decade of bold ambition' in international cooperation that would fix the international aid system so that it more purposefully supports such outcomes in Africa and in the rest of the developing world. This call is made amidst widespread – and understandable – skepticism about commitment of the international community to the nature, level, and longevity of effort required to overcome the accumulated fallout of decades of developing-country adversity in terms of debt, terms of trade, lack of investment, and persistent

poverty. The heightened rhetoric surrounding the Millennium Development Goals, in the absence of commensurate actions to achieve them, will only rekindle such skepticism; it also offers a new opportunity to galvanise the political will to address these Goals, and in so doing to realize the potential that forests can make to their achievement.

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³ See, for examples, CIFOR Annual Report 2004, *Forests for People and the Environment*