



Sharing the Forest

In Ethiopia FARM-Africa's Participatory Forest Management approach is paving the way for greater community involvement in natural resources management and the opportunity to strengthen livelihoods

It takes much of the morning to complete the ceremony, such is the expectation that over one hundred people have arrived from throughout the district and many have something they wish to say. They have come to take part in the signing of their forest management agreement; a legally binding document between the local community and the

government forestry services that is a crucial step in establishing Participatory Forest Management (PFM).

For those living within and around the moist tropical forests of Hareenna Bulluk in Ethiopia's southern Oromia Region this marks the restoration of crucial rights that were revoked during the twentieth century

firstly by Emperor Haile Selassie and later by the revolutionary Derg. The decentralisation of the country, which began in 1991, offered the promise of a return to local management that is now beginning to be fulfilled.

In 2006, FARM-Africa with their local partner SOS Sahel Ethiopia and the newly established Bale Forest Enterprise of the Oromia State Government began working together in the Bale Eco-Region Sustainable Management Programme (BERSMP). The objective of BERSMP has been to bring local communities back to the centre of decision making over natural resources and to assist them to strengthen their forest-based livelihoods.

FARM-Africa and SOS Sahel Ethiopia have been pioneering PFM in the country since trials began in the late 1990s. Between 2002 and 2007 the Participatory Forest Management Programme successfully introduced the new practices into three sites in Ethiopia as well as in Tanzania. The key message of the PFM approach is that communities and government forestry services must work together to define forest use rights, develop forest management responsibilities and agree on how forest benefits are shared. In this way natural resources can be sustainably utilised for generations to come.

BERSMP is an ambitious attempt to take PFM to scale at a time when it is on the verge of becoming mainstreamed across the country. The project is already one of the largest in Ethiopia and could one day total over 600,000 hectares, which is larger than all other PFM sites in the country combined.

What unfolds in the forest clearing in Harena Bulluk during that morning is the culmination of the first phase of work for BERSMP and marks the beginning of a new process of learning, exchange and growth between professional foresters and community managers.

The agreement outlines the roles, responsibilities and revenues of both the community and the government forestry service. By recognising their role as a joint forest manager, the community is able to take the lead in addressing issues such as forest clearance, fire and illegal settlement with the support of the Bale Forest Enterprise. Investments in a range of forest products can be made and profitable businesses established with the knowledge that clear use rights have been established.

Of particular concern to the community are those aspects of their livelihoods attached to wild forest coffee, which remains abundant in the area. Until recently forest coffee was regarded as inferior to the well known plantation coffees from areas such as Harar because it did not conform to export standards. But there is now a growing awareness of the unique qualities of the coffee found in the Harena Forest and interest from boutique roasters abroad.

Raising the quality of this coffee by improving post harvest handling as well as creating market linkages via the Bale Forest Enterprise strengthens livelihoods and contributes significantly to sustainable natural resources management, which is the essence of FARM-Africa's and SOS Sahel's PFM approach.



The crowd assemblies Bereket Assefa