
Tanzania: Traditional knowledge in forest restoration

Forest restoration has become a necessity in many parts of the world, particularly where local communities are suffering from the social and environmental impacts resulting from deforestation. The success of this activity depends on the involvement of the communities themselves, based on their traditional knowledge regarding resource use and conservation. The following example serves to illustrate this.

The Shinyanga region lies in central Tanzania, south of Lake Victoria, and is occupied mainly by the agropastoral Sukuma people. They have provided a key tool for forest restoration, with their indigenous natural resource management system called "ngitili", which involves conservation of fallow and range lands by encouraging vegetation regeneration, particularly for browse and fodder. The Sukuma have had to deal with erratic and poorly distributed rainfall with high variability between seasons, so they have developed a response to acute fodder shortages caused by long and frequent droughts.

The Shinyanga region used to be extensively forested with dense woodland and bushland species, and good cover of understorey grasses. But, massive clearing of forests to eradicate tsetse flies between 1940 and 1965, and impacts of intensive cropping leading to clearing of land for agricultural expansion, rapidly declining land productivity, and shortages of herding labour, have prompted the establishment of communal ngitilis --with an average size of 50 hectares-- which together with individual ngitilis now cover over 70,000 hectares of restored woodland.

The traditional ngitili system of the Sukuma people provided a good entry point for forest restoration through local community efforts. Objectives of ngitili have been expanded to cover other wood products and services required by the community while retaining the original objective of providing fodder for the dry season. Currently, traditional and scientific experiences are shared in management of ngitilis to facilitate restoration of forests and improvement of community livelihood.

Ngitili areas have led to soil conservation and reduced soil erosion, consequently contributing to improvement of agriculture and livestock production. Important naturally regenerating indigenous trees are being left and managed on farm and grazing land. To ensure that the ngitili were guarded and respected, traditional law known as mchenya was applied, supervised by the village security committee.

This example proves that forest restoration is not a technical issue but one of community involvement and adaptation of traditional knowledge systems. The revitalisation of ngitili has thus contributed to improved livelihood security through the restoration of woodlands which now provide a wider range of goods and services for the local people.

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