

Strengthening Forest Smallholders to Reverse Deforestation

Western Tree Planters Association is an association of 12,000 small farmers with tree plantations, based in Webuye in western Kenya. It is promoting bee keeping as one of many services to its members. But, the question begging to be asked for many of you is: what on earth does this have to do with reversing deforestation?

Aggrey Barasa, a WETPA field worker took me to visit Mr. Fred Munialo in November. He has several acres of plantation as well as several acres of native species (for medicine), plus fruit trees and is also a leading honey producer in the area. What role does honey play in his mixed agroforestry enterprise?

WETPA is promoting beekeeping, and Fred hosts a demonstration site, because income from honey helps overcome one of the challenges in promoting tree planting with small farmers in deforested landscapes: how do you live during the 8-15 years while your tree plantation is growing?

WETPA has designed new beehives, provides them to farmers at low cost, provides technical advice and training, offers a honey collection service, and processes, packages and markets the honey. WETPA does similar extension work with other agroforestry products (eg new variety of avocado that begins producing in 18 months). WETPA also supports tree nursery establishment, tree planting, and encourages organization of Village Savings and Loans associations. These VSLA are a clear demonstration of how WETPA and its members are doing all they can to mobilise their own resources (36 have been established.)

One of WETPA's goals is that every farm have at least 10% tree cover. Since WETPA was formed in 2009, have its effort had any discernable impact on forest cover in the landscape? Looking across the valley from Fred's place, tree cover looks to be about 25%. Ten years ago, it was about 5%. This is an outstanding achievement by many farmers, by leaders such as Fred (he is known as one of WETPA's "Tree Promoters"), and by WETPA.

I had a chance to ask Fred and a number of other farmers why they are so passionate about planting trees. Two reasons: for improved income, especially to ensure their kids get good educations; and, to help fight climate change. As one of them said: "As small farmers, we're the first to see the effects of climate change. With increasing irregularity in temperature and rainfall patterns, we are seeing new insect and disease problems every year."

What message should we hear from WETPA and its members? What message would we like the international community to hear? In my opinion, the message is:

"We're doing an important job and getting good results"

WETPA's work has global significance. Can we easily think of anyone more deserving of recognition and support? So, are the farmers and the association who are making this contribution receiving any support from the big international climate funds? Are they receiving financial support, both as recognition for what they're doing now, and as a way to increase this contribution in the future? Short answer: No

Long answer: a very small project with VI Agroforestry from Sweden with Nordic Climate Facility funds.

So, the Short answer: No, not yet.

WETPA is just one of many positive examples of exceptional work being done by smallholder, community and indigenous forestry organizations around the world. Collectively, community, indigenous and family (or forest smallholder) forestry represent about one-third of the world's forests. We cannot talk about global solutions to forest challenges without recognizing the contribution these forest producers are making now, the potential to increase that contribution, and the challenges we face. In each of these respects, we are quite different from large-scale industrial forestry.

In seeking to encourage greater understanding of and support for this work, IFFA stresses the importance of four basic preconditions which largely determine whether small forest farmers decide to plant trees, and engage in a process of increasing the sustainable management of their existing forests:

- Secure tenure
- Good access to markets
- High quality extension services
- An effective association to represent them

We also stress: these four conditions are a “package”. To get good results, all four are needed; none of the four is optional.

To express these principles of secure tenure, market access, extension and effective associations in concrete terms, the farmer who is trying to decide whether or not to plant trees wants to know:

“Will I own these trees when they're ready to harvest? Will I be able to sell them on reasonable terms? Will I have access to the information I will need to plant them properly and protect them

from insects and disease? Will I have a strong association to represent me in all these issues?”

These questions are as relevant for family forest owners in my home country of Canada as they are in Kenya, or anywhere else. The details may be very different, but the basic principles are exactly the same.

To what extent are these conditions in place in this part of western Kenya? An effective association? WETPA is very dynamic. It also helped form a national Federation of forest smallholders (FF-SPAK) and was the first association from Africa to become a member of the IFFA. With FF-SPAK, it has received great support from Kenya Forest Service.

Secure tenure? There are some specific issues, according to FF-SPAK: access to land with secure tenure is difficult for many women and young people. Market demand for forest products is generally good, but farmers often must deal with brokers to access the markets (hence WETPA’s role in honey marketing; there are plans to initiate collective marketing of some timber products this year. So, in general terms, we cannot say the four conditions are fully in place in WETPA’s area, but we can say that actions are well underway to ensure that is the case.

And the results support our claim: with clear progress towards these preconditions, livelihoods will improve, tree cover will increase, sfm will improve, and there will be a wide range of benefits to the climate and other SDG’s.

And, WETPA and similar groups of small farmers around the world could do much more with appropriate recognition of their efforts from the international community. An urgent challenge from our perspective is to figure out how to link organizations such as WETPA and its members with the big Climate Funds.

Peter deMarsh, Feb. 21, 2018