

Impact of forest degradation on livelihoods

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Many of us are aware of the periodic reports coming from Embassies in countries of the drylands of Africa, that draw the international attention to famine and other disasters affecting most of the countries in the region. Increasing food imports figures (food quantities or debts) as well as food aid or food for work are examples of responses. Images of starving children or old people seen on TV and increasing poverty reflect that the problem acquires human dimensions.

Studies conducted by U.N agencies, World Bank and other international organizations confirm that the declining trends of the natural ecosystems are eroding the life support systems in the drylands of Africa. 28 – 35 % of Africa's population relies on food from abroad, and it has often happened that 15 -20 % of the African people are displaced because of food shortage and 2 % might have died when famine comes. Per capita income is correlated to per capita grain production. Is the declining trend of the per capita grain production an indicator of declining economic productivity in the drylands of Africa?

Soil erosion and fertility decline are major aspects of declining land productivity. There is a lot of debate on the causes of land productivity decline. Various studies provided evidence that the loss of forest cover is the main cause of soil degradation and productivity decline. In the absence of trees, the harsh environmental factors of wind and water run-off become strong forces eroding the soil. Hence land degradation, productivity decline, per capita grain production decline and the increase in poverty level as well as increasing number of people living in extreme poverty are becoming frequent. The consequences of desertification, land degradation and drought are closely related to issues of poverty.

The role of trees and forests in increasing food security and reducing poverty is gaining recognition. A large proportion of the dryland inhabitants depends on forests for subsistence or income. They use trees, in natural forests or on farm, to generate food or cash.

Approaches that support implementation of desertification and land degradation control focus on sustainable livelihoods. In drylands, the livelihood support systems may mean involving people in the analysis of their own livelihoods and how these are related to changes in natural

resource systems particularly tree and forest cover. Trees and forests are the key elements to prevent degradation and soil losses and improve agricultural productivity. Trees and forests provide a diversity of uses and benefits to the rural poor in the drylands of Africa. Fuelwood for cooking, timber for simple furniture, poles for construction, non-wood forest products for food, fodder and cottage industry in addition to the role of trees in protection of farms, all are closely related to the life style of the rural communities.

Experience gained, and lessons learnt through strategies, policies and projects indicate that:

Desertification and land degradation are very much related to the legal and political aspects of natural resource management, and that trees and forests play a key role in addressing these problems. A community-based natural resource management approach could provide an effective support to strategies addressing these aspects.

Many people stay poor because they have insufficient rights to manage their natural resources; the result is the degradation of forests and trees outside forests and increase in vulnerability.

It is the forest that helps people cope with difficulties and support their livelihood. Forests and trees absorb risks and reduce vulnerability. The forests improve the water quality and quantity. Forest resources provide commercial opportunities and income for the poor. The poor get from trees and forests:

- Subsistence goods
- Goods for sale
- Indirect benefits

These benefits and uses come from a diversity of tree species in managed forests and trees outside forests. Uses include: food, fodder, fertilizers, medicine, shade, windbreaks, fencing, water regulation, protein, and protection. Some of these are crucial in dry seasons and dry years.

Trees and forests are important at the local and national level for any of the dryland countries in Africa. In fact more input is expected to highlight more on Actions take advantage of the way forests and trees can

help reduce poverty and increase means of livelihood support to the rural
poor in drylands of Africa.