

Community Based Forest Management in Bechi Peasant Association exceeds expectations

- By Obaka Torto



Beneficiaries of the project (Photo: GPRDO)

The Bechi peasant association is located in the Bechi Kebele of the Sheka zone, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS). The Bechi Kebele is home to 10,171 people, most of which are dependent on the slowly dwindling Sheka forest. God for People Relief and Development Organisation (GPRDO) has been working in this region since 2005 to promote community based forest management systems. In 2013 GPRDO was able to expand their work in this region after receiving a grant from the [Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund \(CEPF\)](#) to implement GPRDO's project: ***Scaling up alternative livelihoods income sources focused forest development and protection approaches in Bechi Peasant Association***. GPRDO signed the small grant agreement with [Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society \(EWNHS\)](#), coordinator of [CEPF](#) in Ethiopia, in December 2013 and the project is expected to run until November 2014.

Cash crops, especially coffee form the economic backbone of this area but many residents also rely on tree felling as means to make a living. The aim of the project was to scale up the production of non-timber forest products (NTFP) as an alternative income source and a way to preserve the remnant indigenous forest. These NTFP include spices, coffee, fruits, amaranth, and rice among others.

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Community discussions on key environmental issues and selection of project sites (Photo: GPRDO)

The targeted community play a pivotal role in this project, contributing over 50% towards the total costs of the project. Community members volunteered at nursery sites, provided materials for the construction of beekeeping shelter sites and participated in forest conservation activities. Community members exceeded expectations when they volunteered their own land for the construction of development centres in instances where land could not be secured from local government or by renting.

Four community forest protection group (CFPG) development centres were constructed and serve as the central location for the development of NTFPs, they also function as demonstration sites that facilitate easy transfer of knowledge. This scheme was so successful that local government and other agencies now also utilise the centres as a way to provide centralised and experiential learning to farmers.

Success of this project can be attributed mainly to the early involvement of the community and other stakeholders. GPRDO engaged the community at a very early stage involving them in the proposal design phase and building on projects that the community members had initiated. GPRDO also involved the targeted community through to the implementation stages, regularly holding workshop days and training to ensure that members were on board and up to date at every stage.

This project encapsulates the idea of community ownership and illustrates that once communities are made aware of the value of their resources and the importance of conserving them, they are willing to not only participate but they are quite prepared to own the process.

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) is a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement, Conservation International, the European Union, the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Government of Japan, the MacArthur Foundation, and the World Bank. A fundamental goal is to ensure civil society is engaged in biodiversity conservation.