

Prudent management of forests will guarantee Kenya better tomorrow

Erick Omondi

Conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and the eradication of extreme poverty are the main global challenges of our times. Forests are sources of commercial products, ranging from pharmaceuticals to timber and clothing.

The protection of biodiversity is thus essential in the fight against poverty and achievement of sustainable development.

Sustainable forest governance is fundamental to the achievement of positive and sustained development outcomes. It results in efficient resource management, increased economic growth and equitable distribution of benefits across the Kenyan landscape. It is the key to realisation of other crucial natural goods for economic growth.

Transparent processes

Forest sustainability determines how to use forest resources today to ensure similar benefits, health and productivity tomorrow. Use and management of forest reserves is central to creating sustainable societies.

Good forest management requires predictable, open and informed policy making based on transparent processes, a bureaucracy instilled with professional ethos and a strong community participation in forest conservation efforts.

Towards achieving a sustainable forest resource, the forest sector has put in place forest governance structures to help manage the forest. The Constitution, laws and regulations concerning the management of forests give the governance road-map of forest resources.

Article 69 (1) (b,d) provides that the State shall work to achieve and maintain a tree cover of at least 10 per cent of Kenya landmass and the State shall encourage public participation in the management, protection and conservation of the environment.

Added impetus

The Fourth Schedule of the Constitution sets out the distribution of sectoral functions between the national and the county governments. In the forest sector, the county governments have the duty of implementing specific national government policies on natural resources and environmental conservation.

Devolution has thus added impetus to the drive for better forest sector management by bringing forest resource management

close to the people.

The Kenya Forest Service introduced community forest association, promoting participatory forest management, the plantation enterprise and livelihood improvement scheme to allow the associations to plant food crops alongside trees.

It also established field schools to educate farmers on tree planting and encourage farm forestry, charcoal producers associations to ensure charcoal is produced in a sustainable manner to achieve 10 per cent forest cover.

Although Kenya has some of the most diverse forest ecosystems, the forest biological diversity is still not properly protected.

A lot still needs to be done to stop degradation, especially of forest land. This can partly be achieved by embracing community participation in forest management.

County governments are yet to fully embrace forest management as envisioned in the Constitution. This is because most are in the process of developing the necessary institutional, technical and human resource capacity to manage the sector to enable local communities to benefit from forest resources.

Despite the progress made in entrenching ethics and good forest governance, more can still be done. Poor forest governance imposes global costs such as climate change, environment degradation, species loss and undermines the prospects for long term economic growth and social political stability.

Forest degradation is most severe for people living in poverty, because they have few livelihood options on which they fall back.

Building capacity

As community participation is imperative, building capacity and governance structures such as the community forest associations in the current legal frameworks will promote success in the management of forests.

There is need for more institutional capacity building by ensuring community forest associations are better structured and transparent.

Participation of locals in the management of forests will lead to better management of the resources and also help in poverty alleviation due to sharing of forest resources and benefits.

Sustainable forest management has the potential to lead to achievement of the Government's 10 per cent forest cover target by 2022.

Forests are an important enabler in increasing food security, improving livelihoods, combating climate change and creating a foundation for more sustainable economic social development.

Mr Omondi is a Corporate Governance and Management practitioner

erick@erickadams.co.ke