Restoration Cases Flagship Collection

Case #7: Reviving traditional land-use practices to restore landscapes and livelihoods in Shinyanga, Tanzania

Villagers in their Ngitili. Photo credit: Obadia Mugassa

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In brief

Overview

During the 1980s, the Miombo woodland and *Acacia* savanna ecosystems of the Shinyanga region in northern Tanzania were well on the path to desertification following 60 years of deforestation and land degradation. Traditional rangeland management using a system of fodder reserves known as *Ngitili* lost ground to commercial crop production, overpopulation, unsustainable grazing practices, and relocation programs. A soil conservation program was initiated in 1986 by the government (HASHI, in Swahili). Slowly things began to turn around, and by 1990, HASHI started to receive financial support from Norway and technical engagement from the World Agroforestry Center. A key early innovation was to revive the traditional practice of *Ngitili* to restore degraded landscapes. HASHI promoted coordination between government, especially at the village level, and traditional institutions by aligning statutory law from the government with customary laws and regulations. The HASHI project helped tens of thousands of smallholders to restore degraded land and significantly improved their incomes and well-being. Restoring the goods and services provided by woodlands through the assisted regeneration and planting of native and non-native trees led to the return of diverse trees, grasses, herbs, mammals, and birds, improved water supplies, increased farmer income, boosted crop production, and increased availability of firewood and medicinal plants. By 2000, between 378,000 and 472,000 ha of *Ngitili* were restored in 833 villages across the Shinyanga region, reaching an estimated 2.5 million people. Maintaining *Ngitili* enabled some villagers to pay school fees, purchase new farm equipment, and hire agricultural labor. Income generated by communal *Ngitili* has been used to build classrooms, village offices, and healthcare centers. In 2004, The Natural Forest Resources Management and Agroforestry Centre was created to continue this work by promoting the conservation and sustainable management of woodlands in Tanzania.

Exemplary practices

Devolving decision-making to village institutions allowed HASHI to increase local responsibility for managing the *Ngitili* and other natural resources. After the mid-1990s, key responsibilities for forest management were transferred from the central government to village governments, including selection of trees for planting, production of nursery seedlings, and management of forest reserves. *Ngiliti* embodied traditional knowledge as well as biological legacies of regional ecosystems. HASHI blended the traditional system of *Ngitili* management with agroforestry practices such as woodlots and fodder banks. Local knowledge was acknowledged, valued, and shared across villages. Numerous local institutions, both traditional and formal, were committed to the protection, development, and use of *Ngitili,* and local people became empowered to make decisions and implement restoration practices.

Key lessons learned

- ◊ *Listen to the people first, and build on their local knowledge and institutions.*
- ◊ *Decentralization of land management from the national level to local villages is critical in empowering local leadership to enforce and advocate for restoration.*
- ◊ *Long-term planning enables continued financial support and builds strong relationships among all stakeholders involved.*
- ◊ *As restored land increases in value, competing interests can jeopardize social and environmental restoration gains.*
- ◊ *Women were particularly important beneficiaries of Ngitili tree products (food, fruit, firewood and medicines).*