

Global
Landscapes
Forum

4

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Thinking in tomorrow

Women leading forest restoration in Mt Kenya and beyond

Background

“My interest in tree planting started when I was very young, when I used to go with my mum to plant trees in the forest, as part of the shamba system of plantation establishment [a Kenyan form of taungya],” recounts Zipporah Matumbi.

She lives adjacent to the Upper Imenti Forest, part of the Mt Kenya forest ecosystem, and has a formidable track record in reforestation, community organising and influencing policy change.

Matumbi’s talent and passion for getting other people involved in conservation started young, too. Through the Girl Guides, she started encouraging other girls and women to plant trees. And since then, it seems, she hasn’t stopped!

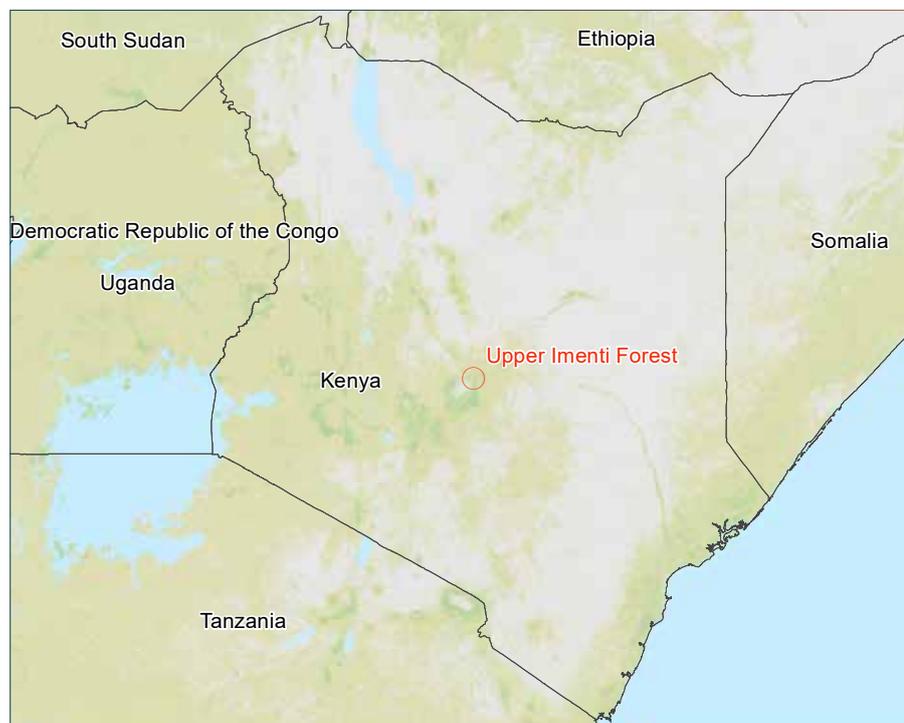


Figure 1. Location of reforestation site.

Taking action

In the 1990s, Matumbi began instigating community reforestation, livelihood and governance initiatives with women in her community. Deforestation was affecting rainfall, and local women were particularly affected by this, “since they have to go long distances looking for water,” she explains.

Then in 2000, she became involved in the drafting of the national Forest Bill, which sought to enshrine community participation in forest management. “It helped me to understand that the forest belongs to us communities, and that we have to protect it,” she says.

As a result, in the early 2000s, she spearheaded the formation of the Meru Forest Environmental Conservation and Protection Association (MEFECAP), in order to organise women’s community participation in protection of the Upper Imenti forests, where the Meru Municipality was dumping solid waste next to a water source. MEFECAP mobilised a number of other community groups, and successfully lobbied the municipality to stop this practice.

MEFECAP was registered as a Community Forest Association (CFA), and Matumbi was elected chairperson in 2005 – a role she held until 2017. The Association now has over 2000 members, and more people join each year, which speaks volumes to its success in raising community awareness and support of environmental issues.

Matumbi also began travelling within the country and mobilising other communities to form their own CFAs. She helped establish 18 CFAs (11 in Meru county) with a total of approximately 27,000 members.

In 2008, MEFECAP carried out the first participatory forest management plan (PFMP) for upper Imenti forest, which allowed them to design restoration programmes in the area.

Then, in 2014, Matumbi led the establishment of an umbrella body to coordinate the eleven CFAs in Meru county, entitled the Meru County Community Forest Association, of which she is also the chairperson.

Perspectives on success

What has all this work meant for Matumbi’s beloved forests? MEFECAP’s track record is certainly impressive. Since 2001, they’ve restored 2500 acres of forest and 830 acres of farmland, and planted over three million trees. In the Meru water catchments alone, close to a million trees have been planted. The survival rate of the planted seedlings is between 60 and 80%, due to animal damage and increasingly unpredictable weather as the climate changes.

A crucial element of the work is building sustainable and secure livelihoods, so that the growing communities living in and around the forests don’t need to over-exploit them to survive. The plantation-establishment system, a form of taungya that allows people to grow food crops alongside the seedlings until they shade out the crops after around three years, helps people to feed their families while the trees grow.

MEFECAP has also initiated income-generating activities “We are losing some parts of the forest because of poverty,” explains Matumbi. “So we have to raise the living standards of our communities.”

“**We are working with the community members to educate their children...so that when they see trees, they don’t just see money: they see good air and water and everything else.”**

– Zipporah Matumbi

Founder of the Meru Forest Environmental Conservation and Protection Association, Kenya

Challenges

The work has not been without its challenges. Matumbi's position as a woman leader in reforestation was initially controversial, as planting trees was considered as a claim on the land, which customarily belongs to men.

For this reason, a lot of local women were initially fearful of getting involved in the reforestation work. But over time, the activity has become normalised: men now allow women to plant trees on farmland even when they (the men) own the land, and to own the trees that they plant. Women can also prune the non-indigenous trees for fuelwood, and sell trimmings to educate their children and care for their families, says Matumbi. "So now, many women are planting trees. Not the men, because the men don't have time. But for us, we are thinking in tomorrow."

Capacity, skills and knowledge gaps also pose challenges. "We are in remote areas," describes Matumbi. "People need to be taught, people need awareness: we need to explain to them why we need to plant trees, and help them to do it."

Illegal logging poses an ongoing threat to the gains made. MEFECAP consistently patrol the forests and report infringements to the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) and

Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), despite being threatened for doing so. In the past, courts and forest officers tended to let loggers off lightly, "which was like ridicule to our efforts", says Matumbi. Now, the group has successfully lobbied for stronger and more consistent deterrents on the part of authorities.

Changing people's mindsets around forests is perhaps the most salient challenge, says Matumbi. "Lots of people just see trees as money," she says. Young people don't always have the same motivation to reforest as their parents: "They say, 'I'm not going to work if I'm not getting anything.'" The reforestation work is very uninteresting to our children."

So awareness-raising with younger generations to instill environmental values is important, too. "We are working with the community members to educate their children, to say if you go to the forests you can get food, you can get something to drink, so that when they see trees, they don't just see money: they see good air and water and everything else."



Photo 1. Zipporah inspecting tree seedlings with Kenya Forest Service official at a modified Taungya site in Upper Imenti forest.

Scaling up?

Looking forward, MEFECAP aims to continue conserving its forest and restoring degraded areas, in line with the bigger picture of climate change mitigation in the country's Vision 2030 development agenda, and international schemes such as REDD+.

They hope to train other CFA groups to do similar work and maintain the momentum they have gained, and particularly to help women become empowered to take leadership roles and move towards greater gender equality.

Matumbi's message to would-be reforesters is to start where you are. "We can do conservation anywhere," she says. She has observed even tiny plots of five trees impacting the surrounding ecosystem positively. "So even

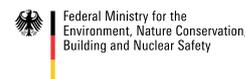
if it's only half an acre, let the people plant their trees," she urges.

According to Matumbi, "it all starts with our own small actions.... not donor funding or government projects." Communities can take charge of restoring their environment by mobilising their own resources first, and then accepting external support from governments and civil society when it's available, while remaining focussed on their own objectives.

"When I go to the forest and I see the trees I have planted, I feel very good," Matumbi concludes. "And when I speak with the other women, and see how they are planting trees too, I am very happy, because I know this is a legacy that will continue on."

Story was developed by Esther Mwangi (CIFOR) and Monica Evans
Photos by MEFECAP

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