



Global
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Rights, responsibilities and collaboration

The Ogiek and tree growing in the Mau

Background

The Mau forest complex has been called Kenya's water tower. Situated in the Great Rift Valley, it's the largest indigenous montane forest in East Africa, and a critical water catchment for the area. It feeds numerous rivers and bodies of water, which an estimated 10 million people, and countless wildlife, rely upon for their survival.

Around 45,000 indigenous Ogiek people live in the Mau forest. Traditionally hunter-gatherers and beekeepers, many are now also small-scale farmers. But the forest area has already been reduced by over a quarter since 1973, through agriculture, logging and human settlement. This affects its water distribution functions, and makes the area more prone to issues like flooding, erosion and soil nutrient depletion.

The Kenyan government has tried to evict people from the Mau forest since colonial times, purportedly in a bid to stop degradation. But "we cannot de-link the Ogiek from the forest," says Daniel Kobei, executive director of the Ogiek Peoples' Development Program (OPDP). "It would be a way of killing their culture, of killing their future."



Figure 1. Location of reforestation site.

So the Ogiek have been involved in domestic and international court cases for almost 22 years, working to secure their rights to stay in, and manage, their forests. Having finally won the cases, they're focused on showing the government that they can indeed maintain and restore the area successfully. "We're saying, "give us a chance to take care of the forest, and we'll do it to the best of our knowledge," explains Kobei.

Since 2016, they've rehabilitated over 100 acres in Logoman forest, one of the eastern blocks of the Mau forest complex, with a particular focus on indigenous species. "The Ogiek value these trees, which play a major role in conserving and protecting the ecosystem," explains Kobei. "They are also a food source, and they produce nectar for the bees."

Perspectives on success

According to Kobei, one of the major successes of the reforestation project is the tripartite management model, which involves OPDP, the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) and the local community. "It's brought together key stakeholders in participatory forest management who collaborate towards preventing further degradation of the forest," he says.

The KFS advises the community on appropriate saplings to plant, says OPDP communications and media officer Moraa Obiria. In partnership with KFS, OPDP is also training a squad of 25 voluntary community scouts, who monitor ongoing activities in the forest and protect against would-be illegal loggers and harvesters.

The involvement of the local community, particularly women and young people, has been particularly crucial to the project's success. Young people plant and raise tree seedlings, which OPDP purchases off them at sapling stage.

Then, members of the Community Forest Association and other young men and women in the community dig holes for planting the saplings, and water them once planted. Older women also help with watering the trees during dry periods.

"They don't get paid," says Kobei, "but they do it with a lot of passion. They're motivated by the solidarity to reclaim Mau, and the benefits of the other livelihood projects that we involve them in," he says.

Kobei praises the level of ownership shown by these community members: "They have really taken it on as their project, and that's why it has progressed so far." He attributes the high success rate of the plantings – over 85% – to this consistent support: "The community is the main anchor in preparing land, planting and nurturing the seedlings to maturity," he says.

Through this process, the wider community has become more knowledgeable about the importance of conserving their ecosystem, says Obiria. "So, it attracted the interest of other stakeholders – including non-Ogiek – in joining in with the forest restoration activities," explains Kobei.

"Planting trees is easy," he concludes, "but nurturing and protecting them, and ensuring they get the right environment for growth, is not so easy. It's the people involved who make it a success."

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Executive Director of the Ogiek Peoples' Development Program, Mau Forest Complex, Kenya

Challenges

A key challenge that Kobei identifies is the difficulties in compensating the volunteer scouts, due to constraints in financial resources. Their contribution is crucial to the success of the project, but will likely not be sustainable long-term without some form of compensation. One solution being trialled is helping scouts to establish their own tree nurseries and sell tree seedlings to community members, so they can earn some income.

Another challenge, says Kobei, is the lack of firefighting equipment and resources to train the scouts in the practical skills of controlling the forest fires that sporadically occur, especially in the dry season. Smartphones would also make a big difference to the scouts' monitoring, mapping and recording abilities, he says.

Infrastructure and accessibility also presents a challenge: OPDP doesn't own a four-wheel-drive vehicle, so when the team wants to work with communities deep in the forest they need to hire transport, which takes time and money.

It can also be difficult to maintain the focus on indigenous trees, because many community members want to plant fast-growing seedlings like cypress and pine. Kobei says OPDP hopes to employ a forestry expert who can advise the community on sustainable reforestation that can also provide economic benefits.

Overall, says Kobei, the central challenge facing the initiative is "to try and create a regime whereby the KFS and the community work closely to ensure that this is not just a one time project. It must continue to have some level of sustainability for the future."



Photo 1. John Samorai, Programme Officer of OPDP, at a rehabilitation site in the Logoman forest.

Scaling up?

The OPDP has already expanded its activities to Kiptunga and Mariashoni, two other sub-stations of the Mau Forest Complex, at the request of Ogiek in those areas. To grow further, it's clear that they need more resources to access these places, connect with communities, and train and maintain an increased number of scouts.

For Kobei, maintaining and expanding this work is unquestionable. "The forest presents Ogiek with a comfortable environment where they can get their medicine, where they feel happy, and where they can maintain their livelihood," he says. "It is everything for the Ogiek."

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

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