

Community-Based, Participatory Soil and Water Conservation in Ethiopia

Development thinking increasingly regards empowerment of poor people as crucial to the effectiveness and sustainability of development interventions. In Ethiopia, the MERET (Managing Environmental Resources to Enable Transitions to More Sustainable Livelihoods) project utilizes a community-based, participatory approach to soil and water conservation and reforestation that benefits one million people annually in 600 communities.

Severe land degradation and deforestation in Ethiopia threaten the livelihoods of an overwhelming rural populace. To tackle these problems, the U.N. World Food Programme (WFP) has partnered for over 30 years with the Ethiopian government in reforestation and soil and water conservation. Launched in its current form in 2002, MERET represents an important step in the evolution of Ethiopian conservation activities away from the “command-and-control” methods of the 1970s and 1980s. That approach proved very ineffective. Communities felt little sense of ownership due to their lack of participation in planning and management, and so did little to maintain conservation structures such as terraces and check dams.

Since 1991, soil and water conservation in selected communities has made use of the Local Level Participatory Planning Approach (LLPPA), through which district government officials collaborate with communities on planning, implementation, and evaluation. The federal and state governments provide policy guidance, funds, and technical assistance. WFP supplies food aid commodities that community members receive in exchange for construction and maintenance of conservation structures. The agency also helped to design the LLPPA methodology and trains both community members and government officials.

According to a 2006 study of empowerment in MERET communities carried out by WFP and the International Food Policy Research Institute:

- LLPPA has enhanced community capacity to plan and manage development activities. Communities have moved beyond basic conservation to deciding on the allocation of productive resources and governance of communal assets.
- MERET communities elect Planning Teams to develop five-year conservation plans, subject to ratification and evaluation by the whole community. This process allows for voice and accountability in community decision making.
- Many district-level soil and water conservation officials voice strong commitment to collaboration with the communities, having learned from the failures of the earlier top-down approach. MERET creates space for dialog and exchanges between communities and the district government. However, a high turnover rate among local officials hampers the smooth operation of the project, and some communities would like to have additional services, such as home economics and nutrition advice.
- MERET empowers women by engaging them in income generating activities and by assuring them significant representation on Planning Teams.
- MERET helps improve food security and reduce poverty because soil and water conservation facilitates diversification of agricultural production, increased productivity and food availability, and higher incomes. MERET participants report improved family health, education, and nutrition, as well as greater self-esteem.
- MERET has scaled up in one sense, as LLPPA is now used in Ethiopia’s national Community-Based Participatory Watershed Development guidelines. However, there are no formal associations of Planning Teams beyond the community level that could foster participatory approaches more widely.