

Reflections on Participatory Forest Management in South West Ethiopia – beyond a project to a process of devolved forest management

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Abstract

This paper highlights key lessons from 12 years of project work in establishing Participatory Forest Management (PFM) in the SW highlands of Ethiopia. Arguments are put forward that to be truly sustainable PFM needs to ensure first that forest dependent communities have legally recognised long-term security of forest tenure and are truly the lead actor in forest management. Second that the community has sufficient forest user rights to ensure that the forest 'pays its way' competing with other land uses to generate sufficient returns to reward investment in PFM. Third, that mutual trust is established, with community members secure in their rights and government staff having faith in community abilities to manage the forest.

Challenges remain: acceptance of the new paradigm – a move from 'save the forests from the people' to 'hand it over to the people to use it or lose it' needs to be fully internalised within forestry professionals' mind-sets, government policy and institutional practice. Dependency is still too high on donor funding and securing truly sustainable community institutions is a battle still being fought. There is also an urgent need to decriminalise the use of the full range of PFM forest products to fully incentivise sustainable forest management investment.

Despite these challenges the impact on the forest to date is impressive with forest loss slowed, forest health increased, community livelihoods improved and customary links to the forest restored. These experiences demonstrate that successful PFM is fundamentally about addressing perverse incentives in the governance environment that delink forest-dependent people from their forests. Local people were never at the root of the problem with regards to deforestation in SW Ethiopia and with appropriate incentives in place like secure legal tenure, use rights and decision making power communities have proven themselves to be at the centre of a sustainable solution to forest management.

Keywords: [*Participatory Forestry Management, Forest Tenure, South West Ethiopia, NTFP, Institutional Capacity Building, Sustainable Forest Management*]

1. Introduction, scope and main objectives

South West Ethiopia has one of the few remaining areas of wet high montane forest in Ethiopia, of key importance for biodiversity¹ and environmental services (Sutcliffe, 2006) and of fundamental importance to the livelihoods of local people, both for home consumption and income producing valuable products such as timber, honey and coffee and often contributing at least 50% of household

¹ The area is recognised by the EU as one of the four hotspots for coffee genetic diversity of the wild coffee plant *Coffea arabica* in Ethiopia

needs². Previous protectionist approaches which aimed at strengthening government control over the forest and criminalizing use in an attempt to ‘protect the forest from the people’ have been counterproductive, impossible to enforce and created perverse incentives that have increased forest clearance and undermined the otherwise strong customary forest management practices that existed in the area, creating de facto ‘open access’.

The introduction of PFM, building on customary management practices was envisaged as a means of reversing the delinking of people and their forests. PFM pilots started in Ethiopia in 1996 with an emphasis on integrated development (land husbandry, alternative livelihoods) but as lessons have been learnt it has evolved to focus more on the value of the forest for local people through more secure access rights and supported forest based enterprises. The PFM approach has induced enhanced forest regeneration, improved forest protection and regulated access (Ameha *et al*, 2014; Takahashi and Todo, 2012; Lemenih, M. and Woldemariam, T. 2010. Review of Forest, Woodland and Bushland Resources in Ethiopia up to 2008 - unpublished manuscript) and since its introduction has been widely recognised by professionals as the most promising approach for motivating communities to engage in forest management in Ethiopia (Lemenih, 2010). The Non-Timber Forest Product – Participatory Forest Management Research and Development Projects (NTFP-PFM) took place between 2003-2013. The projects were implemented in 5 *woredas* (equivalent to districts) within three zones of the Southern Nations and Nationalities People’s Region (SNNPRS) and covered 105,000 hectares of forest.

The objectives of the projects focussed on two interlinked aims. Firstly, influencing the policy environment to allow local community control and use; and secondly, of setting up a stepped process of handing over control of the forest from the government to communities, culminating in the signing of a legal agreement to devolve rights and responsibilities over a demarcated forest area to communities. Other project objectives included supporting the development of strong community organisations to give communities a voice and supporting the development of forest based enterprises. The latter were seen as essential as control without use results in burden without benefits - a hollow form of ownership.

2. Methodology

Two important parallel processes were followed in implementing PFM in the projects. One focussed on influencing the policy environment to provide the correct governance incentives for PFM; the second on the development of a streamlined process for the establishment of PFM at field level. .

Shaping the policy environment

The project approached the Regional Government of SNNPRS and offered technical and financial support to the process of the development of a new proclamation, regulation and guideline. This acceptable ‘entry point’ of policy influence was an important lesson in itself. Government was unwilling to allow an NGO to directly influence content, but was open to the idea of process support. The participatory process was ‘sold’ to the Regional Government by explaining that it would, among other things, ensure that through stakeholder participation policies would be better tailored to the SNNPRS, thereby ensuring they would be more widely accepted and supported by stakeholders during implementation.

Although the outcomes were clearly improvements in terms of providing more opportunity for devolved forest management and clearer recognition of community rights to forests, the undertaking

² NTFP-PFM Project, 2004. Baseline description of project area: Summary of participatory appraisal data at Kebele and Got level. Mizan Teferi, Ethiopia.

of such a participatory process - probably the most participatory policy process ever followed in Ethiopia - was a major achievement in itself.

The participatory policy process that was followed is detailed below. (NTFP-PFM, 2013).

Preparation – establishing a multi-disciplinary government team and assessing the task and requirements.

Developing Methods - training the multi-disciplinary team on technical aspects required to develop a policy, particularly with respect to stakeholders' engagement and consultation. This included organizing the first proclamation development planning workshop for the team with financial support and some technical backstopping from project staff. The workshop identified a series of steps to be followed and formulated a process action plan. A follow up planning workshop was held where further training on policy consultation skills was given and a more detailed action plan and toolbox of methods for the formulation of the policy was refined and elaborated.

Field Consultation - The team then conducted extensive stakeholder consultation work involving 87 government representatives and 170 local community representatives in eight zones, 10 *woredas* (districts) and 34 *kebeles* (communities) of the region. This involved the collection of information from a range of stakeholders involved with forest management, such as farmers, forest users, Development Agents, government officials and private sectors actors. After gathering the information, identifying policy gaps and assessing recommendations from the stakeholders the team produced a draft policy.

Multi-Stakeholder Workshop – A multi-stakeholder workshop was then held in Hawassa to present a review of the existing policy and propose recommendations for its revision. A first draft version of the proclamation was presented for comment and enrichment. The workshop was attended by 84 individuals, including a full range of stakeholders.

Policy Drafting – The policy was reviewed after the workshop and a revised version produced for final consideration in government and with stakeholders.

Legal Compatibility – The final policy was reviewed for legal correctness and compatibility with other regional legislation before being sent for formal approval.

Final Stakeholder Review Forum – A final multi-stakeholder forum was held to present the final version of the Proclamation to stakeholders for their final comment.

Regional Cabinet and Council – Review and approval by the Regional Cabinet with the Regional Council formally and legally approving the new Proclamation

Publication - The Proclamation (Proclamation 147/2012) was formally published by the government. The NTFP-PFM project and follow-on projects are producing additional copies for local circulation along with the Regulations and Guidelines. These are being used to raise awareness of the new legislation amongst the forest fringe communities.

To inform this process a thorough stakeholder mapping exercise was conducted and support provided by the project on a number of the key steps in the policy formulation process to improve skills on the development of stakeholder engagement and stakeholder analysis. This support enabled a genuine engagement of stakeholders in the policy formulation process.

Establishing PFM at field level

One of the most important incentives in PFM, but much more subtle than devolved control and user rights, is empowering communities to be in the driving seat. Facilitated community self-determination is a key principle of how the PFM steps have to be conducted. This sits at the top end of the participation spectrum (Figure 1).

Type of participation	Roles of community members	Role of professionals
Full engagement	Undertakes analysis, identifies priorities and presents	Facilitation
Consultation	Gives feedback on ideas presented by professionals	Undertakes analysis and presents ideas for feedback
Informing	Listens or reads	Undertakes analysis, prioritises and presents

Figure 1: The spectrum of participation; the projects followed the 'full engagement' level

The most important attributes in PFM facilitation are, in order of priority:

- 1) an appropriate attitude and behaviour on behalf of the facilitator,
- 2) appropriate facilitation skills, and
- 3) acquaintance with PFM methods and steps including selection and adaptation of the methods depending on the PFM purpose and context. The PFM steps and sequence that emerged in the learning-by-doing approach adopted by the NTFP-PFM projects are shown in Figure 2.

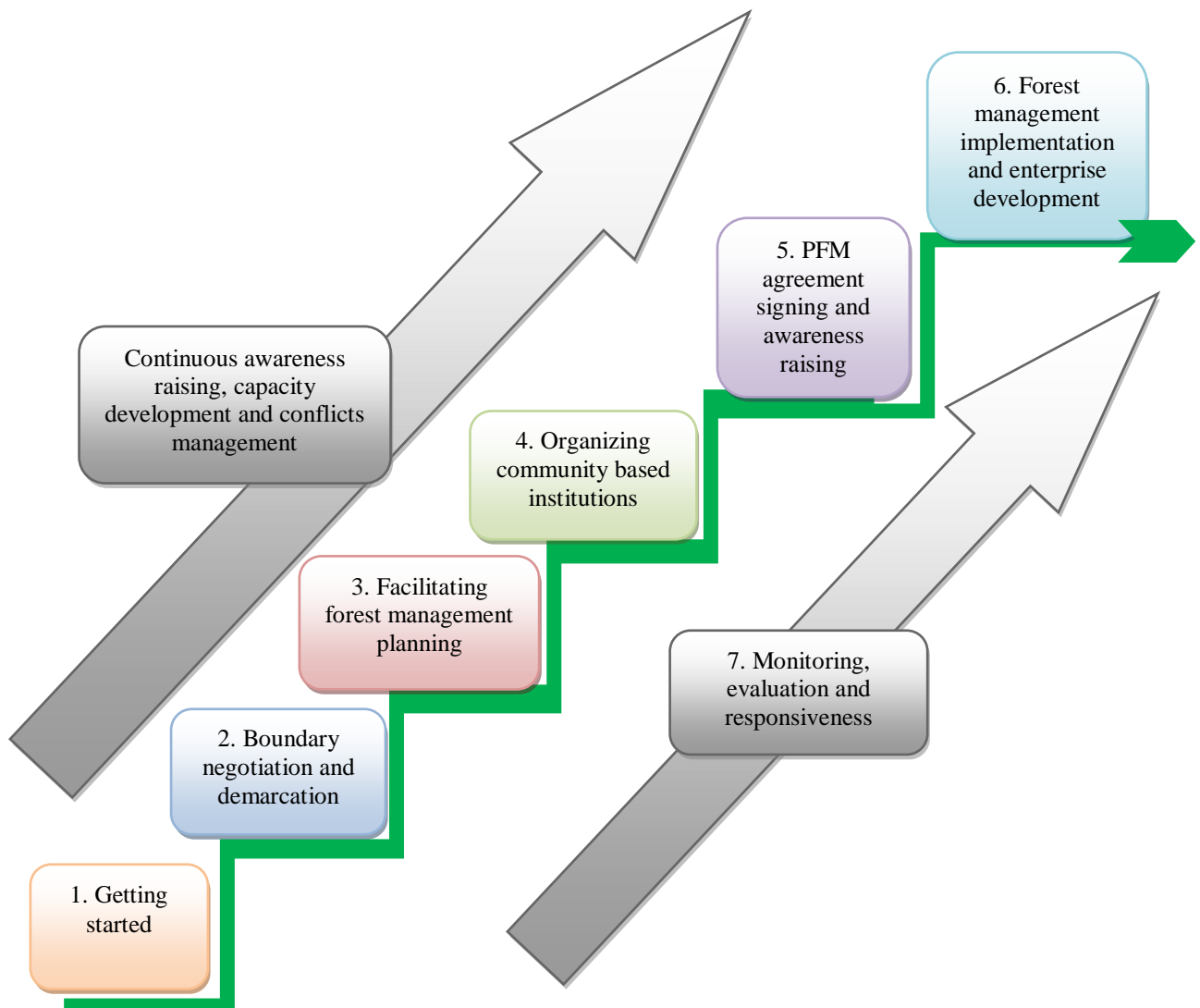


Figure 2: PFM steps at field level (Said and O'Hara, 2013)

3. Results

Policy process support by the project has resulted in a much improved revised regional forest policy. This is seen particularly in terms of recognition of community rights to the forest, as well as community empowerment. Critically, a new form of forest ownership, designated as ‘community forest’ has been recognized as an outcome of the supported policy development process.

On the ground the projects have supported the handover of over 105, 000 hectares of forest to more than 100 legally recognised community management groups. The creation of community-based enterprises to market Non-Timber Forest Products such as honey, wild coffee and spices has improved product quality, capitalised on economies of scale and streamlined the value chain, resulting in local incomes from NTFPs increasing by 24% during the life of the NTFP project. (Conscientia Training Consultancy and Research PLC, 2013).

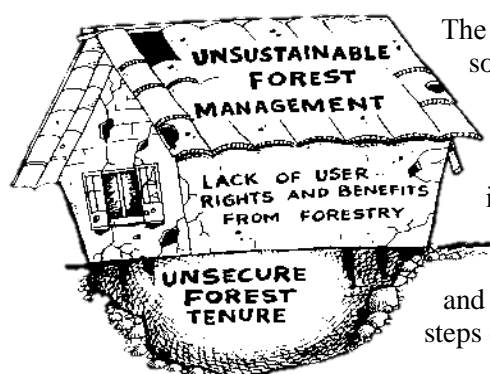
Although full inventory results are not in, it appears that within PFM forest clearance has been largely halted, degradation slowed and there are signs of increased forest productivity as silvicultural interventions such as controlled grazing, weeding, protecting regeneration, planting and selective thinning are employed in addition to the implementation of strict rules that avoid destructive practices.

Less tangible results have been related to empowerment; the voice of communities has been strengthened in terms of fending off external threats to forests such as investors or in bringing illegal encroachments to justice.

A new less antagonistic relationship has been built between government and communities with more of a partnership approach to sustainably managing the forest. Mind-sets have also changed; government professionals are beginning to see community members as the saviours of the forest not the destroyers; respect and trust is growing.

4. Discussion

PFM must be built on solid foundations of community tenure and user rights



The absolute ‘foundation’ of devolved forest management is some degree of tenure security; with that taken care of, the next priority for community members – in a house building analogy, ‘the walls’ - are forest user rights to ensure there are incentives to manage the forest. Then and only then is it possible to put ‘the roof’ on – community motivation and action on sustainable forest management. This sequence of priorities increasingly shaped the emphasis and sequencing within PFM establishment and implementation steps of the projects.

Figure 3: Sequencing is essential in Participatory Forest Management. Sustainable forest management can only be placed on the strong walls and foundations of community use rights and tenure control

The ‘PFM equation’ (Figure4) highlights the importance of getting the sequence and emphasis right in PFM. There is a need to prioritise incentives (use rights) to ensure that communities are motivated to responsibly invest in sustainable forest management. The importance of making sure that the forest ‘pays its way’ for communities has been recognised by others such as Mohammed and Inoue, (2012) and Ameha *et al*, (2014).

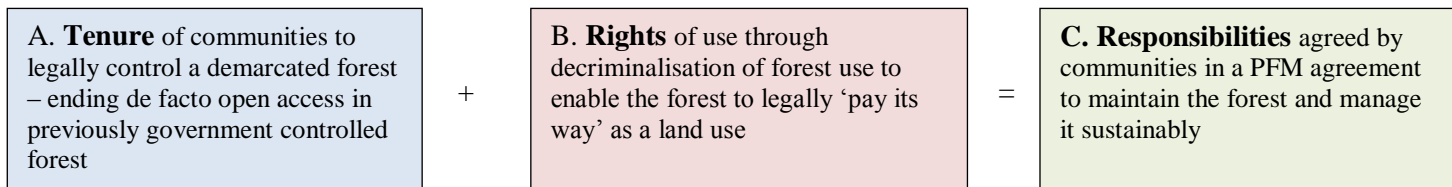


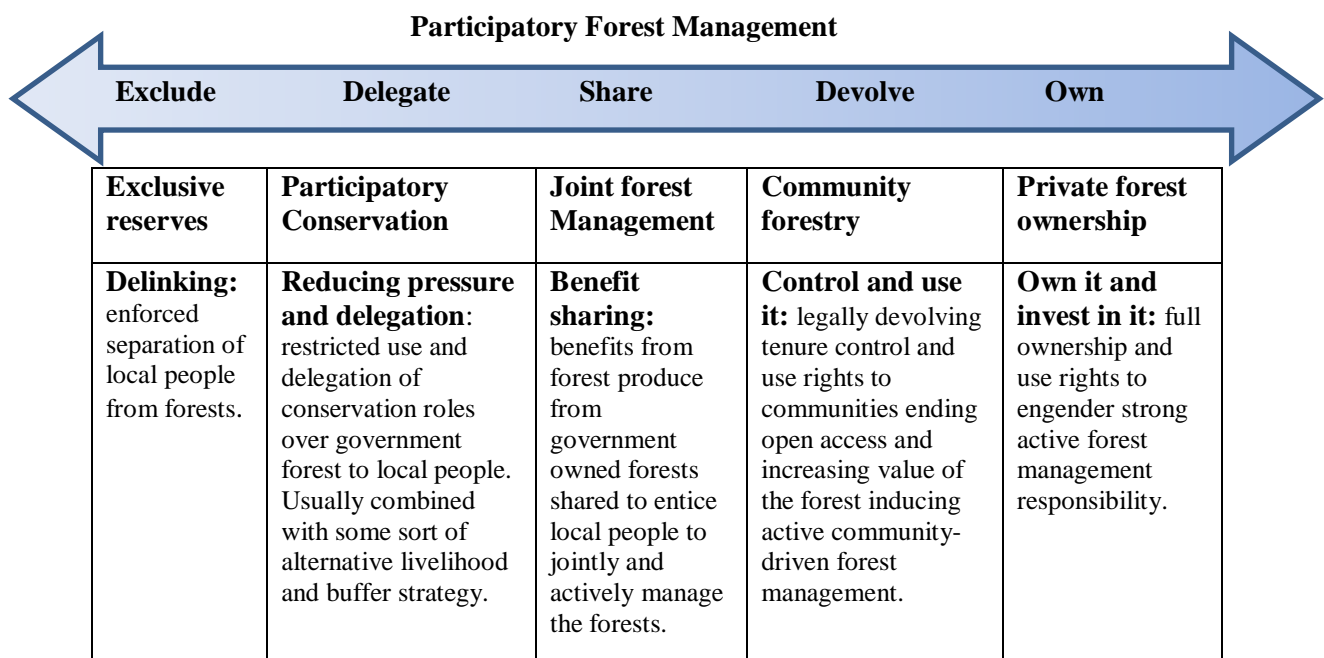
Figure 4. PFM Incentives Equation – PFM focuses on delivering A. and B; communities are then motivated on their own to deliver C. (Said and O’Hara, 2013).

To get the key incentives in place in PFM (A and B in the equation) requires a focus on the enabling environment, the policy, legislation and institutional framework that forestry operates within. In addition, two-way trust must be built; trust from government that with legal control and user rights the responsibilities over forest management by communities will grow. And from the community side, trust that the government will fully grant and respect devolved community control and legal user rights in the long term.

PFM – when a name means too many different things to too many different people.

Participation to some people implies consulting community members on an agenda set by the government e.g. delegating responsibilities for forest protection without any devolved power; to others it means enabling community members to set the agenda (i.e. devolving power). Clarity is required on where on this spectrum a PFM process sits; different interpretations lead to different paradigms and different outcomes. It is useful to see PFM within a continuum of power transfer to communities, to help define the scope of what PFM is and is not. (Table1).

Table 1. A generalised spectrum of degree of handing over power of forest management. PFM today is generally agreed to cover Joint and Community Forestry where the agenda for the forest set by community members is active productive management.



PFM is about changing the governance system to release the potential of communities

Often the only way to get the ‘foundations’ and ‘walls’ of PFM in place is to work at the policy level. Influencing policy content directly is not always welcomed by governments. However in this case

support to a policy process was welcome allowing the most affected stakeholders to genuinely have their views considered – a unique position in Ethiopia. The outcome of this more strongly supported devolved forest management was to generate a much higher degree of ownership among stakeholders. Direct engagement between forest communities and government seemed to have a much greater impact on government than simply presenting evidence and policy briefs.

PFM forest must pay its way

No significant increase in commercial use rights in PFM forests effectively lowers the incentives to join PFM and invest in the management of PFM forests. Such restrictions in use rights tie the hands of forest managers. Furthermore, in this part of SW Ethiopia, commercial use rights are currently restricted to Non Timber Forest Products. This restriction leaves the forest open to manipulation to produce NTFPs at the expense of timber products. Coffee provides a good example of what happens to forests when only one commercial product is allowed for sale: the upper canopy is left intact but other species and intermediate canopy layers are removed, to free space for more coffee bushes. (Teketay *et al*, 1998; Feyissa *et al*, 2013).

Projectization of PFM

PFM is effectively legally backed devolution of forest management which in the long run aims to be self-sustaining, the implications of which should last decades if not longer. Results of PFM are often slow to arrive at as governance reform and the changing relations and associated trust building takes time. Projects last a few years, often have objectives related to the current donor fashion, and require tangible results related to those objectives in the project time frame. The short term needs of the ‘project’ for results combined with often rigid predetermined plans do not fit comfortably alongside what is a complex and responsive process of forest devolution. Donor education and donor coordination are important to ensure the PFM process is properly understood and that projects with contradictory approaches are not introduced in the same area (as was the case in South West Ethiopia).³ Furthermore, there is a need to move away from reliance on donor funding for PFM, manifested in the project approach, to a more sustainable funding mechanism and long-term government support, something recognised by others (Ameha, *et al*, 2014; Mohammed and Inoue, 2012).

REDD+ friend or foe for PFM?

Looking forward, the introduction of the climate finance mechanism REDD+ in the area brings new challenges to PFM. A fundamental challenge in combining the two is that REDD+ is based on a premise that maintaining and managing the forest is an opportunity cost for communities, whereas PFM is predicated on a premise that under a conducive governance environment forest value itself can induce forest maintenance and management. PFM provides the incentives (tenure and user rights) for forest management. REDD+ on the other hand provides financial compensation for the assumed opportunity cost of avoided loss. To put it simply, PFM assumes that communities see the forest as a benefit. REDD+ assumes communities see the forest as a burden. Merging both potentially conflicting views will need to be negotiated carefully.

5. Conclusions

There is currently a wide range of interpretations of the term ‘PFM’; a name change to ‘devolved forest management’ would underline the fact that the approach is fundamentally about handing over power to communities in a similar vein to land reform programmes.

³ Two versions of PFM were operating side by side in several woredas, confusing communities, undermining trust in the process and resulting in a reversion to ‘open access’ in one part of the forest.

The voice of communities in PFM needs to be strengthened. PFM organizations need to be supported to become self-financing and to have a voice at regional and federal levels to speak on their own behalf. NGOs have their own agendas and do not always ‘speak on behalf’ of communities. Appropriate processes, platforms and forums need to be created for exchanges between community members and key decision makers.

Alongside this, PFM needs to not only be scaled up on the ground but ‘scaled deep’ within government at the policy, legislation and institutional levels with roles and responsibilities of government actors revised to ensure mainstreaming of PFM and professional re-orientation towards the ‘hand it over and use it or lose it’ rather than the ‘save the forests from the people’ paradigm.

Support for enterprises, marketing and active forest management needs to be strengthened to ensure communities are able to make the most of forest use rights. Alongside this, decriminalization of a broad range of PFM forest products is needed to release the full value of the forest. Legal PFM-linked forest product enterprise development and marketing will provide an alternative to the unregulated and uncontrolled illegal forest product sector. This can be initiated at a controlled pilot scale first to build trust in a ‘seeing is believing’ way. Encouraging legal commercial use of natural forests within the controls of PFM will lead to forest enhancement in the long run.

Donors and government need to be made better aware of the subtleties and complexities of PFM to ensure new approaches are complementary and better coordinated. For example extreme caution needs to be taken over the implementation of Biosphere Reserves and REDD+ in the same areas as PFM. If applied in an inappropriate way they can undermine the incentives within PFM, threatening PFM sustainability and undermining the restored links between people and forests in SW Ethiopia.

Notes

South West Forest and Landscapes Group (SWFLG) is an informal grouping of organisations which are interested in the development of an ecologically sound and socio-economically sensitive approach to the management of the south west landscapes of Ethiopia. The members of the grouping to date are: University of Huddersfield (UK), Ethio-Wetlands & Natural Resources Association, and Sustainable Livelihood Action/Wetland Action EEIG (the Netherlands). They have been partners in projects funded by the EU and several other international donors since 1996 and have built up specific expertise in the areas outlined above. For further details see: www.hud.ac.uk/wetlandsandforest/ Southern National and Nationalities People’s Regional State (SNNPRS) was also an implementing partner in the projects covered in this paper.

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European Union, Environment Budget



Royal Netherlands Embassy, Ethiopia



Royal Norwegian Embassy, Ethiopia



Canadian Development Agency



Horn of Africa Regional Environment Centre and Network

The views expressed in this information product are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of FAO.

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