

Forest and farm producer organizations in Ghana's drylands: key partners in restoration

Elvis Kuudaar, Sophie Grouwels, Pauline Buffle & Saadia Bobtoya



The ABOFA agroecology demonstration site in Forikrom, Techiman Municipality. Photo: Nana Kwaw Adams/ABOFA.



“Restoring degraded land sustainably and inclusively requires producer organizations to be at the heart from the start.”

Introduction

Forest and farm producer organizations (FFPOs) provide logical entry points for effective, on-the ground actions to restore forest landscapes. These groups provide a platform to demonstrate and lobby for improved tenure systems and access rights. They motivate implementation, facilitate access to markets and capital, and offer a structure for providing capacity-building services for members (Buffle and Buss 2015).

Building on existing experiences, interviews and local surveys in Ghana's savannah zone, this article details how FFPOs can help build climate-resilient landscapes and ensure that multiple benefits are generated for local communities. It highlights how FFPOs that implement restoration can build strong and sustainable

Elvis Kuudaar, Ghana facilitator, Forest and Farm Facility, FAO, Kumasi, Ghana; **Sophie Grouwels**, Forestry officer, Forest and Farm Facility, FAO, Rome, Italy; **Pauline Buffle**, Programme officer, IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and **Saadia Bobtoya**, IUCN/FFF Ghana office, Accra, Ghana

value chains, and promote integrated production and climate-resilient landscapes. With FFPOs driving the process, restoration can become a vehicle for creating a new natural resource asset base in rural areas.

FFPOs are crucial for restoration planning. Since their members are affected by dryland degradation, they are well placed as the primary actors to restore their landscapes, based on their local knowledge and ability to sustain good practices over time. FFPOs can be better integrated by governments and provided with the technologies they need for improved implementation. At the local level, this requires multi-stakeholder processes, innovative peer learning, direct funding to FFPOs, promotion of blended finance, and a focus on forest landscape restoration interventions that generate viable revenues. Targets should include not only the number of hectares restored or trees planted, but also the number of businesses developed to support restoration such as nurseries and new enterprises based on products flowing from restoration. These should include the number of new jobs created, for men, women and youth, and also, how community forest and land tenure and territorial integrity have been improved.

Producer organizations: logical entry points for restoration

Forest and farm producer organizations in Ghana's savannah region have long been involved in landscape restoration. Their range of action is wide, including reforestation, afforestation, agroforestry, managed natural regeneration, improved fallows, integrated agriculture, watershed protection, erosion control, wildlife protection, community forests and land management. They are often the main implementers and agents of change for landscape restoration, thanks to their roots in local communities, the multiple services they provide, and the scale of their constituencies.

Forest and farm producer organizations

Forest and farm producers are women and men, smallholder families, indigenous peoples and local communities who have strong relationships with forests and farms. They grow, manage, harvest and process a wide range of natural-resource-based goods and services for subsistence use and for sale. Forest and farm producer organizations are member-based, with internal governance that ensures that decisions are transparent and represent members' interests. They are often organized in tiers, each tier expanding the organization's influence from the local to the national and regional level. They support their members to share knowledge and experience, engage in policy advocacy, secure tenure and access rights to natural resources, improve land management, expand markets through economies of scale, build enterprises, and increase income and well-being. Village development organizations also fulfil similar roles.

Meeting community needs

In 1992, a conflict arose around a river that had dried up in Forikrom, in Techiman Municipality of the Bono East Region. It illustrates how FFPOs can create a bottom-up, demand-led dynamic, and shows that an understanding of traditional, cultural, social, environmental and economic aspects and rules is a crucial safeguard for locally supported landscape restoration.



An integrated farm at Forikrom, in Techiman Municipality. Photo: Nana Kwaw Adams/ABOFA.

After years of tensions and disagreements, it became evident that the Abrono River had become dry not because people had ignored traditional restrictions on drawing water on certain days, but because the forest protecting the river had been cleared for farming. Religious leaders, traditional authorities, local government and forest and farm producers then agreed that the solution was to plant trees. A few years later the river began flowing again and communities again had water for drinking and irrigation.

This process led to the creation of the Abrono Organic Farmers Association. The association gradually evolved into a 6,000-strong FFPO that has restored more than 12,000 hectares, improving vegetation cover, soil fertility and biodiversity. Restoration included plantations of cashew, mango and teak and 30 ha of fuelwood species as well as protection of sacred groves, introduction of agroecological farming practices and promotion of indigenous crops. Members also benefit from improved and diversified livelihoods through ecotourism in the river valley and a demonstration site that trains members in agroecological farming all year-round. The group also produces fertilizer for their own use and for sale.

Multiple services for restoration

Landscape restoration planning and implementation is a complex process. Legislation and policies influence tenure rights, which must be secure for sustainable restoration. Cultural aspects are reflected in local beliefs on land use and land inheritance. Appropriate technical services and inputs can complement local knowledge, and awareness campaigns can show reasons and ways to restore. And who will pay for restoration? Given this mix, agreeing to an integrated planning and implementation approach can be challenging. Restoration is sometimes planned in approaches that focus only on

one aspect, such as land tenure or site-level tree planting, without considering landscape dynamics, making it difficult to find common platforms that touch on multiple aspects at once. This is an additional reason why it makes sense to engage FFPOs at the outset.

The Tele-Bere Village Savings and Loans Association began landscape restoration in 2016 across the Bolgatanga East District in the country's Upper East Region. In addition to financial services, the association provided members with 20,000 tree seedlings for planting around their homesteads, in fields and on community lands, and raised awareness of the benefits of agroforestry and farmer managed natural regeneration. This helped to restore 1,000 hectares. Additional services provided to members included support to process shea (*Vitellaria paradoxa*) nuts, and collective action towards consolidating financial inclusion through investment schemes in non-timber forest product (NTFP) value chains that promote landscape restoration. The association included training of 500 women members of Tele-Bere in shea soap production; they each now produce an average of 40 boxes of soap per year, resulting in a 25% increase in their income. Tele-Bere members are also investing in vetiver grass cultivation for weaving straw baskets, leading to further income generation and landscape restoration.

The Kassena-Nankana Baobab Women Cooperative Union is composed mostly of women members in seven districts of the country's Upper East Region. It began work with harvesting and processing baobab and shea products — value chains that are mainly women-centred — before expanding and diversifying into other crop, livestock and tree value chains. It also reintroduced and promoted indigenous, drought-tolerant crop varieties, along with training in water harvesting techniques for dry-season vegetable production. The organization was also consulted on landscape policy processes at the local level, where members' views were solicited for developing bylaws on charcoal and tree cutting, and in local dialogues on protection of shea and baobab trees and allocation of collection rights for women. Another issue of concern is the weak regulation and protection of NTFPs outside government reserves. Ongoing work is facilitating the development of a framework that provides legal protection for productive dryland resources.

Increasing impacts at scale

In response to the Bonn Challenge, the Government of Ghana pledged to restore 2 million hectares of degraded land by 2030. To meet this target, planning and implementation is needed at the landscape level, and a range of public- and private-sector initiatives need to be set up or strengthened. However, individual forest and farm producer organizations are often overlooked, thus it became important to establish a national federation, the Ghana Federation of Forest and Farm Producers (GhaFFaP).

Beginning in 2018, the federation was established by several FFPOs who wanted to maximize their strength in numbers to build stronger and more profitable forest and farm-based businesses, and to contribute to shaping national policies for sustainable development and the promotion of climate-resilient landscapes. Membership in the federation is open to FFPOs in Ghana that share its objectives. The federation is supported by the Forest and Farm Facility under a five-year programme (2018–22) involving FAO, IUCN, AgriCord, and IIED. The federation was launched in March 2020 and has a total of 167,837 members across the forest, transition and savannah zones, 44% women and 56% men, with 20% of the total being youth forest and farm producers.

The federation has four strategic initiatives. These are (i) national dialogues focusing on access to finance and markets; (ii) sustainable financial transformation of FFPOs using village savings and



A tree nursery in Kassena Nankana District, Upper East Region, that supplies seedlings for the Kassena Nankana Baobab Cooperative Union. Photo: Julius Awaregya/KANBAOCU

loans schemes; (iii) the Green Ghana scheme for promoting environmental campaigns and integrated landscapes; and (iv) including charcoal producers in forest landscape restoration to promote sustainable practices.

The latter two promote integrated land-use practices and build resilient landscapes by bringing together six FFPOs in dryland savannah areas and twelve more groups nationally. This maximizes their collective strength to affect large-scale landscape restoration by influencing policy that supports restoration and building strong and sustainable business value chains that improve dryland restoration. Ghana has no effective legal framework on charcoal and fuelwood production, but there is currently a national consultative process towards this aim. The Ghana Federation of Forest and Farm Producers is also developing a green charcoal “brand” through the Charcoal Producers in Forest Landscape Restoration initiative. This has support from key stakeholders, including GIZ-FLR and the Energy Commission, to ensure that local views are incorporated in the emerging fuelwood and charcoal framework.

Restoration challenges

In addition to limited knowledge of the technical aspects of restoration interventions, the three main issues faced by FFPOs in Ghana are (1) unfavourable land tenure arrangements; (2) weak involvement in landscape planning and decision making; and (3) lack of financial support.



Dryland restoration through tree planting by KANBAOCU members in Kassena Nankana District, Upper East Region. Photo: Julius Awaregya/KANBAOCU

Unfavourable tenure arrangements

Tree tenure regimes in Ghana, especially for timber species, have been a longstanding challenge and barrier to landscape restoration. Naturally occurring timber trees are vested in the state and do not benefit land-owners, who therefore have little incentive to protect and nurture them on their farms (although non-timber trees outside government reserves are not affected by this). Furthermore, planted timber trees need to be registered through a complicated and time-consuming process that discourages most farmers from planting, and bureaucratic requirements for obtaining timber harvest and conveyance permits discourages their sale. The traditional land tenure system in most areas in Ghana does not allow non-family members to grow timber or other trees on farmland that was originally agreed on for farming purposes. Any intended changes to land-use require renegotiation with land-owners; this is a barrier to migrant farmers who may be willing to engage in tree planting and agroforestry.

There are currently no adequate legal frameworks protecting productive landscapes outside government protected areas regarding the exploitation of NTFPs such as those from baobab, moringa, parkia and shea trees. This leads to competing demands and land uses and can result in further degradation. For example, the value chain for shea fruit products is dominated by women, whereas men prefer to use shea trees for charcoal production; this threatens women's business opportunities. Improving women's access to productive landscape resources remains a major challenge; their risk of being marginalized needs to be addressed in the context of sociocultural transformation. There are also other competing lands uses, such as large-scale commercial farming, mining, road construction and human settlement, that affect investments in long-term landscape restoration interventions.

Weak involvement in landscape planning and decision making

To date, the involvement of FFPOs in landscape restoration planning and policy processes has been very limited and ineffective, and the few FFPOs that have been involved were only through local-level consultations. For example, the Tele-Bere association has been engaged with the District Assembly and the Department of Agriculture, and has participated in a consultative survey by the Energy Commission of Ghana as part of the national consultative process towards the development of a charcoal and wood fuel policy and district medium-term development strategy for Bolgatanga East District Assembly.

Lack of financial support

Funding options for FFPOs are inadequate for improving their role in landscape restoration, and the few donor agencies that are ready to support them do not in most cases provide investments for efforts beyond capacity building. To promote sustainable dryland restoration, support for increasing economic returns needs to be strengthened, such as improving and diversifying income sources from a combination of products that promote the development of integrated and climate-smart landscapes. As one example, farmers could be discouraged from environmentally damaging dry-season farming along riverbanks with financial incentives for appropriate small-scale irrigation.

Conclusions

In Ghana and elsewhere, FFPOs and forest and farm producers are on the front line of the risks and impacts of land degradation. But as has been illustrated during the Covid-19 crisis, FFPOs also have a key role in supporting or directly providing services that governments sometimes find it challenging to deliver. Supporting FFPOs is thus key to building long-term resilience to risks and shocks.

FFPOs build the capacity of otherwise isolated and marginalized women, men and youth producers to achieve financial, food and fuel security, increase their resilience and adaptability to land degradation and climate change, enhance their capacity to sustainably manage their lands and farms, and boost their participation in policy processes. FFPOs are rooted in and connected among themselves, and are built on the ownership of their inter-generational assets and based on local knowledge, which is a strong basis for building additional knowledge. Forest and farm producers are the members and owners of these FFPOs, and therefore no one knows better what their needs are. If they are engaged in finding solutions, they will be more motivated to implement them because of their obvious interest in improving their own situation. Also, through their organizational structure, peer-to-peer learning can lead rapidly to a wide uptake of good practices and achieve sustained results at scale. FFPOs therefore offer services to, and leverage the role of, local and national governments since they can assess producer needs and evaluate policy efficacy in ways that governments may not be able to. They can also greatly increase the participation and influence of members in policy processes that affect them (FAO 2014).

Recommendations

A recent web consultation and conference on the multi-dimensional resilience of smallholder farmers (AgriCord et al. 2020) acknowledged the importance of recognizing FFPOs as key partners that should be able to: (1) implement landscape restoration that is rooted in local needs and knowledge; (2) benefit from an enabling policy environment for restoration, including tenure rights; and (3) obtain funding to provide multiple services at scale. The consultation resulted in recommendations for policy makers

and partners to engage with FFPOs in creating a more enabling environment so that together they can better address risks and challenges. These are relevant for issues such as land-tenure reforms, FFPO integration in landscape planning and decision making, and the need for direct funding, as illustrated by the cases of FFPOs in Ghana's drylands.

The consultation also resulted in three main recommendations for local and national governments, regional organizations, investors and the private sector:

1. Ensure a greater recognition by policy makers of forest and farm producers' significant local knowledge and expertise in restoration practices, and their contributions to local, national and global restoration efforts. For example, the GhaFFaP Agenda 2030 includes a "national dialogue series" that will further promote the agenda of forest and farm producers.
2. Ensure the inclusion of FFPOs through grassroots and national-level dialogues to formulate, implement and evaluate national restoration agendas and land management in general, and in other mitigation and adaptation efforts that respond to social and environmental crises.
3. Mobilize investment and finance to support FFPOs to deliver services to their members that are readily accessible to investments in landscape restoration. This underpins their resilience. FFPO investments in restoration interventions and innovations should also reduce their risks with government support, and scale up by developing relevant financial instruments, blended finance, private-sector collaboration, lowered transaction costs, insurance schemes, and more flexible mechanisms. Furthermore, smallholders and FFPOs need to have access to climate finance to further support their technical capacity building in restoration efforts.

Restoration targets set through AFRI00 and the Bonn Challenge are to be lauded, but the challenge remains actual implementation on the ground and at scale. FFPOs offer a way to ensure that this happens, to bring to restoration processes a connection with livelihoods and rural economies and to achieve the SDGs and climate targets. They are a natural ally and can help to lead the way forward.

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