MELCA-Ethiopia

EMBASSY OF SWEDEN

FARM AFRICA

Stories of Change
Majang Project Area









MELCA-Ethiopia

Vision:

To see healthy and prosperous people that preserves their bio-cultural diversity

Mission:

To work for healthy ecosystems, resilient communities and critical young generation through developing and institutionalizing innovative approaches and experiences

Goal:

To increase the adaptive capacity to social and ecological challenges of communities and contribute to the creation of a healthy ecosystem

MELCA-Ethiopia



Project background

Majang zone is one of the three administrative zones found in Gambella people's national regional state. The zone is known for its endowments of natural resources and cultural values. It is one of few areas in Ethiopia that are still endowed with high natural forest cover. This can partly be attributed to the tradition of the local community living in the area, and managing the forest for centuries.

The "Majang" are the indigenous community in this zone. For many indigenous communities like the Majang people, forest is a primary source of income. However, with the increase in human population, the exploitation of forest and forest products is becoming unsustainable. The traditional forest based livelihood and shifting cultivation is being converted to sedentary agriculture mainly due to influx of people from highly populated resource poor and degraded parts of Ethiopia. This has contributed to the loss of vast forest areas. Destruction of forest is leading to loss of biodiversity, and ecological and socio-economic crisis in the area.

This has profound effect on the livelihoods of the rural communities and on the future existence of forest resources.

On the basis of its overall goal and objective of supporting local communities to conserve their bio-cultural diversity, MELCA-Ethiopia has started to run a project in Majang zone as of January 2014.

MELCA's Majang project has been started with the main objective of ensuring community sustainable development and promotion of the local bio-cultural diversity in the zone. The Majang project has started working towards mitigating the loss of natural resources and restoration of cultural values in the area through different approaches.

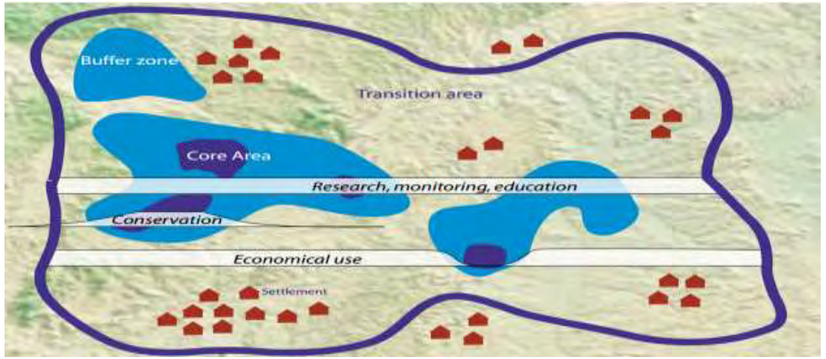
Four major approaches have been planned to put in action. They are Biosphere reserve nomination and structuring process, Sustainable forest and land management systems, Environmental education (SEGNI) combined with bio-cultural diversity promotion and Research and environmental governance through building the capacity of government officials at various levels as well as that of community members.

This project; Growth for Future (G4F) Program II: Natural Resource Management for Resilience and Economic development for rural Ethiopia, Majang Project funded by Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) through came on board to be implemented in the zone as well as adjacent zone to Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve by consortium members of Farm Africa, TechnoServe and MELCA-Ethiopia. One can understand from the name of the project that the project focuses on conservation of forest by participating communities; establishing PFM on one side and improving the livelihood of rural communities on the other side.

The Majang G4F II Natural Resource Management for Resilience and Economic Development Program is conservation-based sustainable rural development in Majang forest ecosystem and surrounding landscape, an area of high ecological and socio-economic importance facing a severe threat of deforestation and degradation where conservation efforts are highly relevant to Ethiopia's CRGE goal to contribute to reducing emission from the forest sector. Implementation of the program components will apply a shared methodology that demonstrates integrated and multi-stakeholder landscape management; testing the implementation of a standard set of crosscutting technical approaches, and synthesizing best practice, learning, and policy dialogue.

MELCA-Ethiopia would like to thank partner and the project funder Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for the support of the last eight years. Some of the project beneficiaries stories are presents as follow.

Biosphere Reserve and Participatory Forest Management



Sketch of a typical biosphere reserve with three component parts
(German Commission for UNESCO, 2015)

From the definitions of some pertinent sources, a biosphere reserve can be stated as a protected area consisting of terrestrial and coastal ecosystems meant for the conservation and rational/sustainable use of the natural resources (waters, soils, plants and animals) and biodiversity of the area. Biosphere reserves are internationally recognized, nominated by national governments and remain under the sovereign jurisdiction of the states where they are located.

As defined by the Statutory Framework of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) under UNESCO, in order for a biosphere reserve to be fully operational, it shall fulfill three inter-related functions:

- **Conservation:** contribute to the conservation of landscapes, ecosystems, species and genetic variation;
- **Development:** foster economic and human development which is socio-culturally and ecologically sustainable;
- **Logistic support:** support for demonstration projects, environmental education and training, research and monitoring related to local, regional national and global issues of conservation and sustainable development.

To fulfill these functions, each biosphere reserve shall have appropriate zonation, which includes the following three legally constituted parts:

- **Core Zone(s),** which are securely protected sites for conserving biological diversity, monitoring ecosystems and habitats and undertaking researches and other low-impact activities which are not harmful to the environment;
- **Buffer Zone(s),** which surrounds or adjoins the core areas, and is used for cooperative activities compatible with sound ecological practices, including environmental education, recreation, ecotourism, and applied and basic research; and
- **Transition Zone(s),** which may contain a variety of agricultural activities, settlements and other uses and in which stakeholders work together to promote and develop sustainable resource management practices.

These days, the concepts of biosphere reserve and participatory forest management (PFM) are emerging among the national natural resources conservation and management approaches/strategies adopted by the Government and other actors in Ethiopia. MELCA has been one of the forefront advocates and actors in this regard.

Some of MELCA's contributions with respect to biosphere



A partial view of the Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve

Taking the above mentioned and other related biosphere requirements into consideration, MELCA had initiated and spearheaded the painstaking nomination and approval process of two major forest biosphere reserves (FBRs), namely Sheka and Majang, which had been endorsed by UNESCO in July 2012 and April 2017, respectively. And, they have added up the number of biosphere reserves in the country to five together with Tana Aquatic Biosphere Reserve, and Keffa and Yayu Coffee Forest Biosphere Reserves. Once endorsed, they are now part of the WNBR.

In both Sheka and Majang biospheres, MELCA also facilitated and supported the establishment, legalization and operation of several participatory forest management cooperatives (PFMCs), among other things. PFMCs are community based organizations tasked with the sustainable protection and management of the forest resources, while at the same time having the right to collect or develop and use non-timber forest products (NTFPs) mainly from the transition and buffer zones of the biosphere they protect. NTFPs that can be harvested from the biospheres include natural spices, honey production, forest residues (fallen woods, branches), etc.

The Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve is further discussed as an illustration case. This forest is located in Majang Zone of Gambella Region. The Biosphere covers an area of 224,925 hectares with the core, buffer, and transition zones taking 19.5%, 32.5%, and 48% proportions, respectively. According to a study conducted by Metu University, this Biosphere Reserve is understood to have harbored a total of 188 plant species belonging to 144 genera and 70 families.



Mr Nega Ashagre, Environment, Forest, Climate Change and Biosphere Reserve Department Team Leader

Mr Nega Ashagre was met for discussion about the Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve. He applauded the remarkable role MELCA had played in the certification of Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve as one of the world heritage sites. According to him, MELCA had also played a pivotal role in mainstreaming and institutionalization of Majang Biosphere in the Zone's government structure.



Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve Information Center, Meti, Majang

The Zone's Administration Council had decided the merger of biosphere with environment and climate change affairs under one institution, thereby creating "Environment, Forest, Climate Change and Biosphere Reserve Department", which is a member of the Cabinet of the Zonal Government, currently headed by Mr Nega. Mr Nega also indicated that such a proper biosphere institutionalization experience is so far unique to Magang Zone as it has not yet been observed in the other biosphere reserves of the country.

The department team leader also disclosed that MELCA had constructed an information centre for the storage management and dissemination of appropriate data on the biosphere reserve and handed it over to the Zone Administration. The centre is supplied with necessary basic materials (equipment and furniture) and consists of a meeting hall, data processing unit and office rooms. Obviously, this is an important capacity building asset for the Zone that would significantly strengthen the management of the biosphere reserve.





A small portion of Burai Lake located at buffer zone in the Majang forest biospher reserve

Participatory Forest Management Cooperatives (PFMCs):

PFMCs were learned to be one of MELCA's good attributes in its environmental governance programme. Fundamentally, these are tools that empower and entrust local communities to play most active role in the management of local ecosystems, under the banner of conservation, protection and utilization principles adopted by the WNBR. MELCA practices PFM approach in the Majang Forest Biosphere Reserves Majang project area. Participatory forest management coopratives (PFMCs) in Majang Project areas regarded.

In Majang zone there are 31 kebelles and out of the total 31 kebelles 13 PFMCs have been established in 13 kebelles, with the support of the project. The great majority, some 12, of the PFMCs are located in Mengesh District, while only one is in Godere District. Eleven of the 13 PFMCs are licensed or registered as legal entities, while the other two are still under process. The office had also helped three PFMCs established in Agnuwa Zone for the same purpose. Two particular PFMCs case stories of Gubeti PFMCs and Maki PFMCs presents as follow.



Mr Ahmed Endris, Chairman of Gubeti PFMC, Mengesh District



Executive members of Gubeti PFMC met at Gubeti Kebelle, Mengesh

Gubeti PFMCs: Three members, out of seven, of the executive committee of the Association were met for discussion. They were: Mr Ahmed Endris, chairman; Mr Ibrahim Hussein, treasury; and Mr Alemayehu Kassa, control. The PFMCs is currently housed in the premise of Gubeti Kebelle Administration. According to the persons met, the Association was legalized in June 2020) and has 158 members with 150 men and 8 widowed women.

The Coopratives is governed by a bylaw issued in line with the existing forest management proclamation of the country. It had secured the map and certificate of holding of the site, covering 380.24 hectares.

From the discussants met, the Coopratives was learned to be vigilantly preventing the forest from any harmful practices coming from individual residents and, mainly, from investment/development projects. For instance, at the time of the fieldwork, the Association was at loggerheads especially with a coffee development company extensively operating in the area and also with a road construction project both of which, the members met believe, were threatening the wellbeing of the forest. According to them, they were taking their cases as far as they could and to any stage accessible to them, even including the Deputy Prime Minister's Office. Obviously, this, by itself, irrespective of what the outcome of their contest may be, is indicative of the level of determination the Coopratives has in protecting the biosphere they have been in charge of. However, the members of the Coopratives have so far not been getting any concrete benefit in return for their struggle in protecting the forest. Basically, PFMCs are supposed to benefit from non-timber forest products (NTFPs) which they are allowed to collect from or produce in the buffer or transitional parts of the forest like spices and other crops naturally available or producing honey in the forest. But, while the members of the Association are involved in traditional honey production activity, other NFTPs like spices and other crops are not commonly practiced in the Majang Forest. In the near future, though, they are expecting to plant and produce suitable spices and also to produce honey using improved beehives in the forest as promised and planned by MELCA.



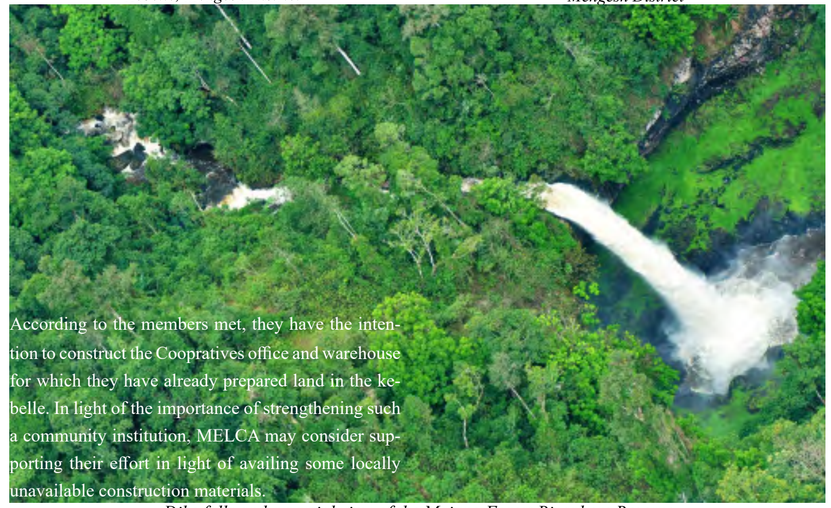
Mr Markos Gnogniro, Chairman of Maki PFMC, Maki Kebelle, Mengesh District



Members of Maki PFMC met at Maki Kebelle, Mengesh District

Maki PFMCs: Three members were met from Maki PFMC including Mr Markos Gnogniro (chairman), Mr Ibrawiyan Gnogniro (control), and Mr Yonas Gnogniro (member), all of whom are brothers from the indigenous Majang community. The Coopratives had been formally established around 2019. It is legalized and issued with the map and holding certificate of the site, which covers 375 hectares. Currently, it has 51 members, increasing from the previous 21.

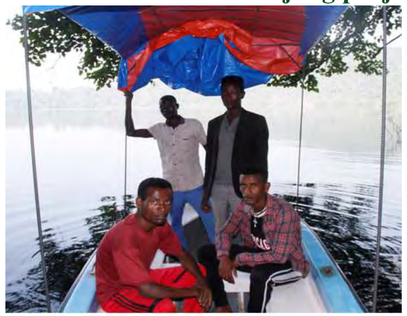
As their normal practice, the members of the Coopratives produce honey using traditional beehives hang inside the forest. They said that they are keeping the forest because it is their life. They do not think life without the forest. It is everything to their community, from food to shelter and cloth to medicine, etc. In the future, they would like to get external support to provide them modern beehive for more honey production and income generation. The Coopratives was sharing office space with Maki Kebelle Administration. According to the members met, they have the intention to construct the Coopratives office and warehouse for which they have already prepared land in the kebelle. In light of the importance of strengthening such a community institution, MELCA may consider supporting their effort in light of availing some locally unavailable construction materials.



Dike falls and a partial view of the Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve

Livelihood interventions in Majang project area





A small portion of Burai Lake and members of Burai Eco-Tourism Group met

Two potentially promising livelihood support activities were encountered in Mengesh District of Majang Zone engaging youth groups, although they were yet in a piloting stage. They were eco-tourism youth group and horticulture production youth group, each of which is elaborated as follows.

Burai Eco-Tourism Youth Group established and operates under the umbrella of Gubeti Kebelle PFMC. It has 15 youth members (10 males and 5 females). The Group is named after a very beautiful lake called Burai situated at the heart of the Majang Forest Biosphere. Four of the members were met for discussion, namely: youth Hassabewerk Kero (chairperson), youth Melkam Emato (vice chairperson), youth Asegahegn Tamiru (secretary), and youth Amanuel Telma (control). Initially MELCA-Ethiopia had approached Gubeti Kebelle Administration and initiated the idea of organizing unemployed and interested youth living in the Kebelle.

The Kebelle Admin had welcomed the idea and subsequently organized the youths and handed them over to MELCA for subsequent activities. Then, MELCA had given them necessary orientation and guidance.

Subsequently, as a startup, it had supplied them with a small manually operated boat that can carry four persons to generate some income from recreational service which they intend to provide to some potential visitors coming from within or outside the area to enjoy Burai Lake and its breathtaking scenery. It also helped them construct a hut on the bank of the Lake in which they would cater for incoming guests with some foods or refreshments.



The boat which MELCA provided to the Burai Ecotourism Youth Group

Although the Group is still at a preliminary or establishment stage, the members met said that they see a glimmer of hope at the end of the tunnel, that one day their fledgling 'duck' would stand on its own feet and fly.



The hut which is MELCA constructed to the to the Burai Ecotourism Youth Group

The other group met in Mengesh District was Epelori Horticulture Production Youth Group at Kumi Kebelle. Four members of the Group were available for discussion. They were youth Yaket Abrar (M), youth Wegene Abraham (M), youth Nikodimos Abiyot (M), and Mrs. Rebeca Yotaka (F). The Group had been formed with 15 members (9 males and 6 females) all from the indigenous Majang community.

They were observed engaged in banana plantation on about half a hectare plot of land. At the time of the visit, the plantation was only six months old. MELCA Majang Project Office obtained the banana seedling (which is Arbaminch banana variety) from Mekane Eyesus Church, Meti branch.

The plantation was observed to be on a pretty good and promising stand. Besides the banana farming, the group members were also observed practicing small beekeeping activity. Like the Burai Eco-tourism Youth Group, the Epelori Group members also disclosed that they were quite optimistic of harvesting some product from their plantation and beehives and getting some income after a couple of months.

Moreover, according to its Majng Project based in Meti town, the capital of the Zone, MELCA, like in the other project areas, distributed fuel wood saving stoves in the last couple of years to reportedly as many as 1,170 households residing inside the Majang Forest which covers both Mengesh and Godere Districts.



Epelori Horticulture Youth Group members met at their banana plantation site to tell their story

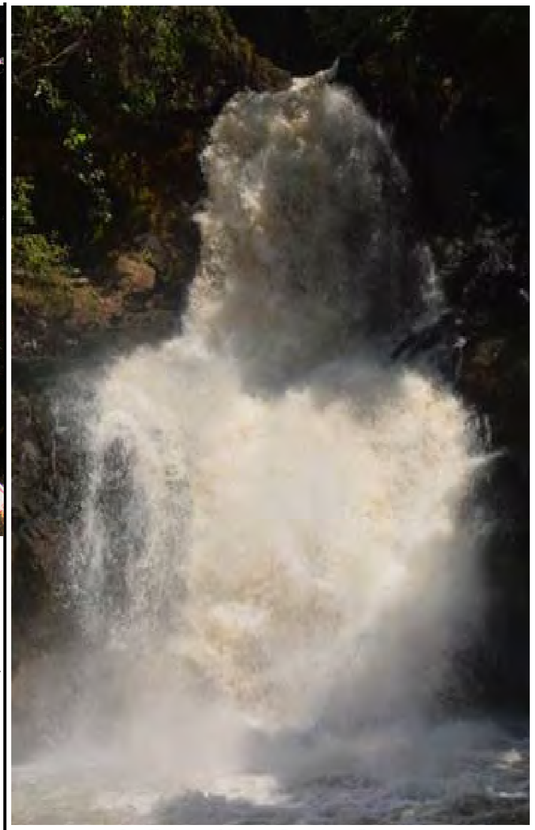




Mrs. Meriya in her kitchen with the fuel wood saving stove she received from the project, Shone Kebelle Mengesh District

Mrs. Meriya Ojelle, one of the stove recipients at Shone Kebelle, Mengesh District, was met at her house to tell if the stove has been of any advantage or benefit to her. She witnessed that the stove is fuel efficient. Mrs. Meriya said " When I began using the fuel efficient stove I can reduce the consumption of firewood used before and I can save my time spent for collection of wood. And besides baking foods the stove can be simultaneously used to cook other things, such as boiling water and making wot (sausage).

Not only did Mrs. Meriya witness about the fuel efficiency of the stove she received but also about its convenience to use and its safety from excessive heat and carbon smoke, and associated health problems, which the users (largely women) used to suffer from the old stoves.



Jey *Falles at Majang Biosphere Reserve*



Natural Bridge a partial view of the Majang Forest Biosphere Reserve



Manmade traditional bridges at Majang forest biosphere reserve



Traditional Beehaving in the Majang forest





Majang community youths extract drinking water from a tree root and harvesting coffee





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