

# MELCA-Ethiopia



## Improving livelihood of the community and Conserving the environment in Majang zone

### *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.



## Majang forest biosphere reserve nomination and structuring process

The initiative to get Majang forest registered as a biosphere reserve came from communities in the zone and government officials at regional and zonal levels. Government officials at Gambella National Regional State and Majang zone administrations have officially invited MELCA-Ethiopia to facilitate adoption of Majang forest by UNESCO as a biosphere reserve.

Accepting the invitation MELCA started the facilitation soon after opening a project office in Meti town of Majang zone.

Major actions undertaken to get the Majang forest registered, by UNESCO, as one of the world's biosphere reserves include hiring of professional consultants to prepare the Majang zone biosphere reserve nomination document, organizing series of consultative meetings with the community at grass root level and government officials at zonal and woreda levels as well as formation of a task force at zonal level to identify core and buffer zones of the biosphere reserve.

Accordingly, a draft nomination document has been prepared to be discussed on and developed together with local government officials and the community.

A task force to suggest areas to be tentatively designated as Core zone, Buffer zone and Transitional zone of the biosphere reserve has also been formed at zonal level. The Vice Administrator of the zone chairs the task force.

Then second round consultative meetings were held at zonal, woreda and kebele levels to discuss on the nomination document, proposed designations and the overall directions of the nomination process.



Then, consultative meetings were held, again, at Zonal, woreda and community levels to agree on the final contents of nomination document and endorse it by the relevant government officials. As such, the document has been developed to its final stage through the inputs from these meetings and finally endorsed by the concerned government offices at Zonal and woreda levels.



*Consultative meetings*

## Environmental Governance Capacity building activities

The second result anticipated in the project is protection and promotion of bio-cultural diversity of Majang zone through the awareness and involvement of the community and officials. Awareness raising and capacity building trainings on regional, national and international environmental laws and governance systems were organized for government officials from regional to woreda levels as well as the community at grass root level with the purpose of materializing the result.

A Participatory 3 Dimensional Model (P3DM) of Majang zone has also been with the participation of the community, youth and government actors. The purpose of the modeling is to enable the community and government officials realize the status of their bio-cultural resources and use it as a reference for future planning and action.



A community member in Majang, who was a participant of the P3D modeling process expressed his feeling about the mapping as follows: "I was a participant when MELCA was facilitating participatory mapping and gave training in Sheka zone about a year ago. Our knowledge regarding protection of the forest and culture has shown much improvement after that. We have done multiple things after we returned to our kebele in protecting the natural biodiversity, our culture and water shades. Now we have seen positive changes in the community regarding forest conservation and coffee plantation without cutting trees. At that time we have asked MELCA-Ethiopia to do the same thing in Majang zone. Accepting our invitation the organization is now doing the same thing in our zone. I hope we will do much more in protecting our culture and nature here after."

Law enforcement training is also another approach to environmental governance capacity building.

The purpose of these trainings is to raise the awareness and build the capacity of law enforcement organs in the government structure as well as the community regarding national and international legal and policy frameworks arranged for protection and conservation of bio-cultural resources of the community so as to strengthen enforcement of the laws on the ground. Accordingly, the training has been provided for judges, public prosecutors, police officers and administration office personnel both at zonal and woreda levels.



Similar training has also been provided for community representatives and community militia members at grass root level.



## Social Empowerment through Group and Nature Interaction (SEGNI)



MELCA's environmental education (SEGNI) program has also been started in the schools in the zone with the aim of creating youth who understand the value of their culture and nature and actively engaged in promotion of conservation of their culture and biodiversity.

SEGNI is a unique approach to youth empowerment that includes the following key elements: creating awareness about ecological issues; experiential learning in an environmental setting; learning from elders about traditional knowledge systems; practical application through youth-led local project development; individual personal development; development of empowerment projects in the greater community, responding to local needs and input led by the youth themselves.



*SEGNI process being led by elders*

Aynalem Legese is an officer and SEGNI focal person in Godere woreda education office. He says the following about SEGNI program.

"SEGNI is the most exciting program from among

the various programs MELCA has started to implement in Majang zone. SEGNI means seed in Oromiffa language. It is Weyikon in Majang language. Just as a farmer gets good harvest by planting few seeds, we hope the students in SEGNI program will bring lots of changes in promoting the culture and biodiversity of the people.



*Mr. Aynalem Legese*

The program is especially important for our community as the culture is being eroded and the forest is being lost at an alarming rate. It will make them think of the value and beauty of their culture and the environment instead of being taken by the culture of others in the name of modernization. Though the time is short, we have already started to witness some changes. "

A cultural-biodiversity (CB) celebration, jointly organized by Sheka project and Majang project areas was colorfully celebrated on 27th of December 2014 in Tepi town. About 200 students from 12 schools in Majang zone (Gambella) have participated on this celebration.

In addition to these, representatives of students and relevant government officials from the project area have participated on the celebration. The celebration was an exciting one attended by about 4,000 people including, students and teachers from Sheka, Bale and Suba-sebeta project areas, communities of Tepi town and its surrounding kebeles, government officials, journalists and invited guests.

The celebration was organized with the purpose of allowing SEGNI club member students to showcase the different activities they have been performing in their respective schools in relation to conservation of culture and nature of their communities through dramas, poems, traditional songs and dances as well as exhibitions to the wider public. It was also intended to create a forum on which youth from different areas, cultural backgrounds and SEGNI experiences can exchange experiences and learn from each other.

Majang zone former vice administrator, Mr. Tomas Yemalo, who made an opening speech on the occasion, said "I want to appreciate what MELCA-Ethiopia is doing in schools especially in Majang and Sheka zone. SEGNI program is playing great role in educating and shaping the generation regarding their culture and environment. As MELCA-Ethiopia defines seed, seed is the sign of continuation of a generation. There is no future generation without seed. So the youth has to learn about the value of conserving their seed and related knowledge. I would like to say thank you to MELCA-Ethiopia and I, as a representative of the government, would like to express our commitment to support what the organization is doing in our zone."



*Mr. Thomas Yemalo*

As such, various plays, dramas, traditional songs and dances as well as exhibition of traditional artifacts reflecting the culture of Majang, Shekacho, Sheko and Oromo tribes have been presented by the students. It has been a fascinating celebration filled with traditional dressings, songs and dances of Majang and Shekacho communities in the southwest Ethiopia and Oromos of Bale and central Ethiopia.



*A scene from the first CB celebration*

The second Majang zone CB celebration has been organized in Meti town on the 27th of December 2015. Though the second, this CB celebration is the first to be conducted in Majang as the first one was conducted in Tepi town jointly with CB celebration of Sheka zone.

The compound of Akashi primary school, where the celebration was organized, started to be alive and busy starting from as early as 7:00 am. SEGNI club members of participant schools from both Godere and Mengeshi woredas of Majang zone started to flow in to the compound early in the morning. Community members interested in attending the celebration followed them and the school compound looked full of people just before 9:00 am. Finally invited guests, including government officials at zonal and woreda levels and NGO representatives took their places and the celebration started to unfold.

The celebration was officially opened by an opening speech of Ato Muse Gajet, administrator of Majang zone. In his opening speech Ato Muse stated that culture and biodiversity are like two sides of the same coin; any change in one will result in a change in the other. If we lose our cultural values the consequence will definitely be losing our biodiversity.



*Ato Muse making an opening speech*



He further stated, "...this celebration is special in that we are about to get our forest registered, by UNESCO, as a biosphere reserve. The celebration is an event on which the youth show and share what they have learned about their culture and biodiversity as well as their commitment to play an active role in conservation of bio-cultural diversity of their community. The forest is an invaluable resource we received from our fathers. We also have to conserve and transfer it to the next generation. So a lot is expected from the youth who are the main actors in this celebration.

I would also like to thank MELCA, on my own and on behalf of communities in Majang zone, for the supports it is making in our zone to promote and conserve bio-cultural diversity of our zone and bring a better life for our communities. I would also like to say our administration is ready to render any support required of it to realize the objectives set by MELCA.

The celebration was exciting and full of various festivities related to promotion and conservation of bio-cultural resources of Majang zone. SEGNI club members from a total of 14 primary and secondary schools presented dramas, traditional songs and dances, poems, cultural dressing styles of various ethnic groups, traditional conflict resolution and wedding ceremonies.



Some of the shows presented at the celebration

Three SEGNI club schools from Godere and Mengeshi woredas each, which have performed best in preparation for the CB celebration at Zonal level, have been awarded different mini-media materials on this celebration.



Award for best performed schools



## Livelihood Improvement Activities (IGAs)

Various capacity building trainings, including entrepreneurship training have been provided for more than 270 community members selected from the two woredas of Majang zone to be engaged in environment friendly livelihood improvement activities (IGAs). These trainings were organized with the purpose of moving toward the other anticipated result, which is enabling community members, especially those who are mainly dependent on the forest and forest products for living, generate better income through engagement in alternative income generating activities and thereby decrease their impact on the forest.

Formerly 31 cooperatives working on seven types of income generating activities were organized by the project. The objective was to support the livelihood of low-income earning families who depend on the forest and forest products to support their income. But there was an understanding that rushing to start 30 coops at the same time goes against all the grains of establishing a cooperative and it was decided to reduce the number to 10, one per each in the ten selected kebeles. Currently three of the 7 types of Income Generating Activities (IGAs) namely animal fattening, shoat production and vegetable production are active.

Even though it is a little earlier to record an impact that each of the IGAs brought to the lives of the beneficiaries, encouraging results are observed particularly on animal fattening, shoat production and vegetable production.

Seyiba Zelalem is one of the beneficiaries of the livelihood improvement program. She is a resident of Fejeji Kebele in Mengeshi woreda. Seyiba is a poor widowed mother that lives on a subsistence income she gets by being engaged in pottery. She said she gets no more than 200 birr in a year from the pottery as the demand for articles from traditional pottery is so less. She also tries to get some income from home gardening.



She was selected, at the beginning of 2015, as one of the beneficiaries of MELCA's livelihood program in her kebele. She became a member of a small ruminant breeding cooperative formed in her kebele. She got entrepreneurship training together with her fellow co-operative members and received two goats as a starting capital. After nine months, the number of her goats reached six.

W/ro Seyiba says she has now learnt she can live better by working on the resources available around her area. Speaking of her future plans, she said "...after some time, I will sell some of the goats and buy a cow. That will give me additional cattle and also some milk that I can sell and get money from. And hope that will make life for me and my children still better"

Another cooperative under the livelihood program is the animal-fattening cooperative formed in Yeri kebele of Mengeshi woreda. Ato Adugna w/mariyam is one of the members of the cooperative.

He witnessed about the benefits he got from the program as follows: "I was a poor living by working for others on a very small daily payment. When MELCA comes to Yeri kebele I was selected to be included in the cooperative.

After the selection was completed MELCA give us capacity building training and one bull per individual. We started fattening nine month ago. On the six month I sold one of the bulls for birr 4000. Then I bought two smaller bulls by that money. The bulls have now become fatter. On the current market I can sell each for 3000 birr. So I am seeing positive changes in a short period of time. I think there will be many more to come in the future if we keep working hard."







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