

Given the discussions on the wide-ranging effects of climate change, many people are talking about the importance of trees and of their role in protecting the soil and conserving moisture.

There are stories of disaster and also stories that give hope and show what can be done in many cases due to the actions of local people using their own initiative.

The following stories will encourage others and help them to understand what they can contribute to this debate.

Please let me know of other situations where farmers are making a difference, so that we can pass on the information. We will add them to the website. Jim Wigan (address on contact page of www.farmersdialogue.org)

Here are some practical examples

Can't See the Desert for the Trees!

Extracts from an article in the New Scientist March 29th 2008.

Returning to Africa after a 10-year absence, Chris Reij could barely believe his eyes. On the arid margins of the Sahara in Niger, all he could see were trees. It was no mirage: after studying land use in Africa for three decades, he was witnessing the untold story of the re-greening of the Sahel. He tells Fred Pearce about the African farmers who are defying the experts.

What is fuelling all this tree planting?

In Dan Saga, I sat down with the villagers and asked them. They said they had nearly lost their land to the desert. Every year, they had to replant their crops several times because the sand buried them or the winds destroyed them. After long deliberation, they agreed that the only way to survive was to protect the young trees that grew spontaneously on their land. A few years later, the trees protected their crops against the winds and stopped the sands spreading. The trees are now part of their farming system, providing fodder for livestock so farmers get more manure for their fields. We have also found that in areas with trees, fewer adults leave the villages to find work elsewhere. Trees are creating more local economic opportunities.

Yet in 2005 there was serious drought and famine in Niger.

That's true, but some places seemed to escape and nobody has explained why. In October that year I went back to ask the farmers I knew how it had been for them. In the villages without trees, they told me they had run out of food and sent many of their children to the feeding centres. Many of those children never returned.

In Dan Saga, however, they told me the trees had saved them. Not a single child had died. They had pruned some of their trees and sold the wood to get cash to buy cereals. They also had fodder from the trees, so their livestock survived. This is good news because this is something developed by the farmers themselves and it shows that they have adapted to climate change better than we sometimes imagine.

"We've underestimated African farmers' ability to adapt to crises"

KENYA'S FORESTS AND RIVERS FACE BLEAK FUTURE

A short extract from a report by Busera Blasio Odima.

Kenya's forests are declining at an alarming rate and it is feared that they will be decimated within the next 50 years with conservationists and custodians tacitly admitting their impotence in checking the vice. With most of the country being arid and semi-arid, there is a lot of strain on the rest of the land since the economy is natural resource based; but for any country's ecosystem to be stable it requires at least 10 % of its land under forest cover. Unfortunately, Kenya has only 1.6 percent land under forest cover.

George Kamau Kiiru from Kenya writes-

When I talked about planting trees as I have done since retiring as a forestry officer, at first people laughed at me. Now the situation has changed! When people saw the damage to the environment caused by soil erosion and lower rain fall they came me for help. I was soon running courses for farmers and school groups. It is now fashionable to plant trees on every possible occasion such as birthdays, election meetings and marriage celebrations. People are learning about the value of trees on their farm, with efficient cookers not much wood is needed and the trees provide fodder for livestock and building material.

Actually, since 2005, farmers who have planted trees on their farms have earned a lot of money. The price of trees has risen on average from Kshs (Kenya Shillings) 2000 to Kshs 10,000 per tree. This has motivated the farmers to plant more and more trees. I am happy that they are now running TO me rather than running away FROM me as they were doing when I started the tree programme.

The challenge here is to get a balance between cutting trees and the planting them. Planting needs be higher than at present!

The Nyahururu Diocese of the Anglican Church of Kenya, which I am a member, is celebrating its Tenth Anniversary this year. One of the activities suggested by the Synod is to plant trees in its entire jurisdiction. All Parishes are holding tree-planting days. This has promoted the work.

Tree nurseries are now all over the area and this has become an income-generating activity, especially for young and retired forest workers.

This does not mean that I should rest.

A recent tour with a few farmers to the Mount Kenya Region has even motivated me more than before. The site and beauty of grevillia and fruit trees has made me want to take more farmers there, to see the GREAT ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE that has been made by the trees.

Jamil Ssebalu (Uganda) writes-

Thank you for this report. The issue of tree cutting has become very bad in Uganda. Nearly all forests in Buganda have been cut down by people from Western Uganda most of whom are armed and cannot be arrested.

The people have complained but the government is just quiet.

To me now I don't see any solution unless Governments get interested in protecting nature.

The other option is to intensify the campaign for tree planting right from the schools and villages. In this way, it will be difficult for trees to be cut down in the presence of the owners. The situation now is that trees can be cut down because the people who would have protected them didn't plant them.

At one of our schools in Kawami, our students plant trees. Thus there is ownership. The whole program is assessed by the teachers at the end of the term and finally the year. It's a friendly exercise and is working. Could your friends try out this?

Martin Simtenda (Tanzania) writes-

TREE PLANTING PROGRAM IN TANZANIA

The central part of Tanzania Dodoma region is a semiarid land. Mwanza, Shinyanga, Mara and Tabora are the regions in Victoria Lake Zone. Due to tsetse fly infestation before independence, farmers were advised to cut down the trees and burn the dry grass, as a result some parts of these regions become bare with no trees and received minimal rainfall as a result water became a problem for Livestock. After independence many farmers were not aware of the importance of trees and conservation. Most regions in Tanzania used to receive sufficient rainfall but due to the removal of trees rainfall has become unreliable.

The Government decided to raise the awareness to farmers and farmers themselves came to realize the importance of trees comparing the amount of rain they used to receive with that received over the last few years. In Tanzania we have a special day in January, where every Tanzanian is encouraged to plant at least one tree. This is called A NATIONAL TREE PLANTING DAY. Children from all schools are taught to plant trees which they plant at school and in their homes.

Farmers are advised to harvest water during rain season and to construct dams with government assistance, although there are still very few dams in Tanzania. At the BUHURI Livestock Institute where I work we have a dam which is used by 800 cows from the Institute and more than 2000 from nearby villages. If such dams could be constructed in other regions it would reduce the shortage of water for Livestock and crops. We have also a tree nursery for production of trees, which are sold and supplied to schools and churches and other organizations which have planted about 20,000 trees for timber and fruit.

We train farmers in tree planting and natural conservation when they attend dairy husbandry courses at the Institute and these skills are then disseminated to other farmers when they go home, to date we have trained more than 6000 farmers. When the trees have grown enough we train farmers to keep bees using simple hives.

I have just been to visit my parents and have been very encouraged by what I saw, there is more water in the river which was formerly at the point of becoming dry. There is a bylaw in my village that it is strictly prohibited to cut trees, the villagers themselves are keeping an eye on this to make sure nobody cuts trees and they contribute to pay the watchmen. The village is surrounded by small mountains, they were bare, but now covered with beautiful trees. Thank God this year, farmers in Mbeya region and in my village in particular received good rains and they got a better harvest and better yield per acre (average of 25 to 30 bag per acre = each bag 100 kg)

Sopheanroth Met (Cambodia) writes-

Some years ago the forest covered 73% of our country but now it has changed. Powerful men have cut down the trees to make money. Right now, the forest cover is down to 30%. The climate is changing and the temperature is increasing. The poor people cut down trees and take the land for farming but this is a very small in comparison.

The government celebrates one day each year that they call Trees Planting day but the trees are still not increasing. It is not easy to explain the benefits of trees. For example my neighbours who live near me don't understand the need to plant trees, they cut and burn. But now all their land is becoming barren, their home looks like it's in the middle of the desert. In my family, my grandfather and I have an idea, which is the slogan of our family "**In one life plant at least one tree**". If the 14 million people in my country each plant a tree that would be 14 million trees.

Since 1998, I have been trying to teach people around my village the benefits of planting trees! It has taken 7 years to show results. Now the villagers agree with what I have done. They are planting trees and are learning more about their value as each day passes.