

## **End of political interference, increase in number of forest guards to help protect forests**

Forests could be protected by eliminating political interference in forest department and by increasing the number of posts of forest guards to be appointed from within local communities.

This was demanded through a resolution adopted at the end of a roundtable discussion on “Community Participation in Forest Management” at a local hotel in Mingora on 20 October 2004. The participants at the roundtable included officials from forest department, local government, NGOs and CBOs, forest owners and users, lawyers and researchers. Facilitated by JDHR Islamabad and NCCR North South Switzerland, the roundtable provided a chance to all stakeholders to discuss issues relating to forestry and its conservation.

In his opening remarks, president JDHR Shafqat Munir said during NCCR research in Swat and other forest areas in NWFP, it was found that there is a huge gap among stakeholders associated to forestry in Pakistan. Keeping in view the situation, JDHR-NCCR has arranged this dialogue.

Babar Shehbaz, PhD student from NCCR-Agricultural University Faisalabad and Maqsood Jan from JDHR said the roundtable discussion has been part of several such consultations and dialogue among the stakeholders so that there could be some consensus on forest conservation and better management in the interest of eco system, environment and the forests communities.

Forest officials were of the view that communities and owners of forests should fulfill their responsibilities to check smuggling of wood and timber. The DFO Swat, Hashim Khan, cleared the position of forest department. He totally denied the involvement of forest department officials in logging and wood smuggling. The deficiency of forest staff (forest guards) coupled with very less budget allocation for mobility, totally handicapped the performance of forest department. He also held local influential, district government, provincial and federal governments responsible for negatively influencing officials of forest department in performing their right duties. The antique business and presence of out numbered furniture makers in Swat are also a threat to forest resources, because their main raw material is wood. Hashim said due to lack of support and meager staff, they would remain ineffective in combating unsustainable use of forests. He said that there is a need to reduce reliance of the communities on wood as fuel and commercial commodity.

The representatives from communities and NGOs complained against the officials of the forest department saying they were themselves involved with the wood smugglers and let them allow continuing with the cutting of trees. They said unless the communities are given alternate energy resources, their reliance on forests could not be curtailed. They demanded that local NGOs/CBOs and other organizations should be taken on board to protect forests. They called for ending bureaucratic practices in the joint forest management committee.

Dr. Inam Ur Rahim of Hujra, an NGO pointed out that right of ownership in forests is still not yet clear, due to which the sense of ownership is still very low

among the community. That is why people are not generally prepared to protect and manage forests at their own. Another reason is that the dependency of people on inland and out country migration, also flared up the desires of community for only male heirs. Another drawback is the stagnant role of our traditional institutions in forest conservation. Which if mobilized could play a vital role due to its pivotal position in our society. According to him the people are expecting immediate results from projects, while mostly their results appear in longer term. He said in such a situation only civil society organizations could effectively coordinate among all the stakeholders.

Jamshed Khan, vice president of Sarhad Awami Forest Ittihad (SAFI), also emphasizes the need to enhance the people's sense of ownership. He criticized the process for formulation of the forest policy, and suggested that there is still a need to review the whole process for some necessary amendments. The implementation process of forest rules is very slow. He said with the passage of time the sense among the people for forest protection has been increased. He said deficiency of forest staff especially forest guards is also a reason behind poor protection of forests. He said the new concept of joint forest management (JFM), seems to be less effective and acceptable to the community as the main role in this system has been assigned to the District Forest Officers (DFOs), rather than the community. The DFOs will not be responsible only for the establishment of JFMs but they are also empowered enough to dissolve the committees without the consent of any other members.

Malik Iqbal, Nazim Union Council Utror said that the negligence on the part of the forest department officials encouraged timber Mafia to damage local resources. He said to counter this situation, the local people have established their own initiated forest protection committees, which have been helping in reducing instances of smuggling of trees. He suggested introducing fuel gas as an alternative to fire wood among forest communities. Adding to this suggestion, another participant from the community pointed out that the total estimated expenses on Mingora to Kalam gas pipeline is approximately around Rs 960 million, while only in Kalam tehsil people use fuel wood worth around Rs 300 in one year. So if the government extends the gas pipeline to Kalam tehsil, the whole cost of installation would be covered within a time of three years.

Population explosion was cited as one of the reasons for rapid deforestation. A participant said when there would be no jobs and productive activities for the youth, they would use forest as their source of fuel and income by unsustainable logging. Due to the inappropriate farming practices, the existing agriculture lands production in mountainous areas is on decline and the people are turning rangelands and forest as well into agriculture lands. Because of the virginity of these new lands the farmers are receiving bumper crops with very little efforts, said a participant.

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