

COMBATING DESERTIFICATION – THE WULUGU EXPERIENCE

By George Bright Awudi
Friends of the Earth-Ghana, Ghana

In Ghana, the impacts of desertification are being harshly felt in the northern parts of the country, comprising the Northern, Upper East and Upper West regions, which together constitute more than 30 percent of the total land area of the country. These areas are naturally savannah. Aside from the harsh climatic conditions, a high level of human activities such as bush fires, bad farming practices and overgrazing, have further exposed the environment to land degradation, deforestation, loss of biodiversity and a decrease in soil fertility, leading to low crop yields and large-scale hunger among the people.

Wulugu is a small but growing farming community in the West Mamprusi District of the Northern Region of Ghana. There are about 4,000 inhabitants, who are subsistence farmers, mainly involved in the cultivation of cereals such as maize, millet, guinea corn, sorghum and rice. A few are raising animals like cattle, sheep, goats, as well as chicken and guinea fowls. In addition, some are harvesting wood from the savannah woodlands for sale, as firewood and charcoal constitute a major livelihood activity and a source of income for the people - mostly the poor women. Bush fires started for the purpose of bush-meat hunting and land preparation for farming, are rampant and often burn out of control.

Like most communities in the savannah, Wulugu fell prey to the reality of a looming scourge of desertification, which ravaged the community, leaving in its trail barren land, scaled landscape and devegetated land. It exposed people to hardships that they hardly dreamt of, much less prepared for, such as food shortages. Longer than expected dry seasons as well as dying and withering plants and fields became their lot. Firewood, which used to be gathered from just the surroundings of settlements, became scarce. People, particularly women and children, had to travel over long distances in search of firewood. Also as a result of fuelwood scarcity, agricultural residues like corncobs and millet stalks, and other biomes like cow dung were increasingly being used as cooking fuels, thereby depriving the soils of natural organic nutrients these residues provide. The fuelwood scarcity severely affected income generation from fuelwood by the local women. Most of the community wells and bore holes, which were dug several feet deep, became dry, forcing women to trek on foot in the scorching sun for hours in search of water for both humans and animals. Under these unfavourable and hopeless conditions, some people had to migrate to urban centres for survival, notwithstanding the social and economic implications that migrating people sometimes have to face.

Conscious of these hardships, the people of Wulugu readily took up the challenge when help came, through Friends of the Earth-Ghana from the Japan Fund for Global Environment (JFGE) in the year 2000. They marshalled forces with the leadership of the area's assemblyman. About 60 people came together - women, men and children - to engage in a community wood lot and afforestation project. They formed two groups, one group worked in the eastern part and the other in the northwestern part of the Wulugu community. The two groups managed to secure about 13 acres of land through the goodwill of a generous landowner in the community and cultivated over 2000 seedlings of acacia to



provide an alternative source of firewood for domestic use and for income from sale, as well as to reduce pressure on the rural savannah woodland in Wulugu. The groups, which are 95 percent women, were trained by Friends of the Earth-Ghana on nursery, wood lot and project establishment and management.

The determination and enthusiasm of the people is now paying off. The more than 2,000 seedlings planted on both projects have grown beautifully. They have inter-cropped the acacia with locally known edible and medicinal plants called “Bunghun”, and with soybeans. People working on the project are hopeful that the benefits of the project will be to the entire community. They are confident that the project will help check and control desertification as well as supply their fuelwood needs. It is also an income-generating project that will bring in some extra income to improve their standard of living. They hope to sell seedlings as well as impart the knowledge they have gained to surrounding communities in the future so that they can collectively combat desertification.

They have a long-term vision for the project. One of them puts it aptly in these words “we want to do our part now and leave something behind for posterity”. The children working alongside their mothers and grandmothers are happy and excited about working on the projects, and they seem ready to take over after the older generation is gone.

Workshops organized by Friends of the Earth-Ghana for the Wulugu community and its surrounding villages, with funding from the UNCCD secretariat and the JFGE, created the enabling environment for the participation of civil society in the implementation of the UNCCD in Ghana. The level of environmental consciousness and community participation in desertification issues has risen. Most local women involved in the project have now witnessed that indiscriminate felling of trees is bad. Bush fires are no longer common in the community. The Wulugu community made valuable inputs towards the participation of civil society in the preparation of the Ghana National Action Programme (NAP).

The Wulugu experience, repeated in other communities, can be a sure guarantee for combating desertification in this country, Ghana.