



water & sanitation

Department:
Water and Sanitation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OPINION PIECE

Forest governance to improve rural living

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The recent World Forest Congress (WFC) 2015 held in Durban in KwaZulu-Natal has offered all and sundry the opportunities and challenges for harnessing local forest management to improve rural livelihoods in South Africa and Africa as a whole.

What came out clear is that for far too long authorities, and the communities at large has been tearing our forests apart in search for self-indulgent or fulfillments.

Rightly or wrongly, making way for new housing programmes, factories or schools, especially in rural areas has meant that many trees had to make way for the implementation of the projects.

In doing this, many people were, or say, are not aware that they are in the interim getting rid of the sources of water in those areas.

South Africa is the 30th water scarce country in the world and we need each and every drop of water available. The truth is that forests are both the users and providers of freshwater.

Their prime duties are to regulate surface and groundwater flows, transfer the atmospheric moisture, cloud formation including precipitation.

We all agree that water losses and scarcity is a menace but forests are key to maintaining the high water quality by stabilising soils, reducing surface erosion and sedimentation in water courses including filtering pollutants from upstream activities, floods and droughts as well as preventing desertification and salinasation.

We need forests because forests watersheds and wetlands supply 75% of the world's accessible fresh water. Billions of people have limited or insecure access to water resources, according to the United Nations World Water Development Report 2015. Also, about one-third of the world's largest cities such as Durban, Mumbai, Bogota and New York in the United States of America (USA) obtain a significant proportion of their drinking water directly from forested protected areas and this number will continue to rise.

But despite forests' fundamental role in the supply of freshwater, alarmingly, only 8 percent of the world's forests have protection of soil and water resources as their primary objective, in terms of the Food and Agricultural Organisation Report – 2010.

The recently launched United Nations (UN) International Decade of Water for Sustainable Development provides a structured pathway for ensuring the issue of forests and water as an integral part of international dialogues and action. The forests and Water Action Plan, a global initiative of the Forests and Water Agenda, can be a key contributor to and champion of forests and water in the international discourse and action.

The 3rd World Water Forum (WWF) and the adoption of the Shiga Declaration in 2002 marked the significant milestone in coordinated international efforts to acknowledge the extensive role of forests in the hydrological cycle at local and global scales.



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Current levels of international understanding of forest-water interactions, and of the importance of trees and forests in the regulation and supply of high-quality water, are largely a result of the Forest and water Agenda – an on-going international process of discourse and engagements on forests and water led by FAO of the UN, the international Union of Forests Research Organisation, the World Agroforestry Centre, the International Network for Bamboo and Rattan including other institutions and forests experts.

Over the course of the past 12 years, the Agenda has gained considerable momentum and now includes over 20 partners representing international organisations, academia, civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector.

These partners are working from a common platform to advocate for a better understanding of forest-water interactions and the incorporation of this knowledge in practice and policy.

The question is: can current forest governance arrangements adequately address the demands of a growing global population and the challenges of climate change? What is clear though is that the capacity to govern the transition to sustainable forestry in practice must be built, learning from experiences, in local governance.

KEY POINTS

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@ South Africa is the 30th water scarce country in the world

@ We all agree that water losses and scarcity is a menace, but forests are key to maintaining the high water quality.

Ike Motsapi is content developer at the Department of Water and Sanitation.