

Costs of Forest Parks on Local Community; Subba Sabbata Forest Park in Focus Bayissa Kisi Lemi, Lecturer at Wollega University School of Social Work, Ethiopia

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Received date: Feb 13, 2018, Accepted date: Mar 28, 2018, Published date: Apr 03, 2018

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Keywords: School; Education; Employee; Social; Arts

Short Communication

The main objective of this article is to examine the costs of forest park on local community with particular reference to Subba Sabbata Forest Park, located in West Showa zone of Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia. The study community is referred to as Subba Lammaffa Community and is found in the territory under the jurisdiction of Subba Sabbata Forest Park around its administration office.

The study employed qualitative case study design in which key informant interview, focus group discussion, observation and review of different documents were used as techniques of data collection. The research participants were members of the local community and staffs of Subba Sabbata Forest Park purposively selected based on the researcher's judgment. Ten key informants (seven community members and three staff members) were interviewed. This size was determined based on the principle of data saturation. Besides, two FGDs consisting of six and seven discussants were conducted. The findings were organized into different sub-themes and themes and later discussed in relation to findings of other researchers.

The findings revealed that the costs the local community incurred include dislocation, denied land use rights, poor infrastructure, restriction on the use of forest resources, declining population size and care for elderly and challenges encountered from wild animals. It was found that informants from local community and the park administration differ even sharply contrast in their perceptions regarding the costs and benefits of the forest park. In some cases, what the staff raised as benefits were found to be costs from the community's perspective while others were hardly acknowledged. There are also common understandings between the two on some other issues regarding costs and benefits of the forest park on local community.

Findings

Even though there are various benefits that the local community gains from Subba Sabbata Forest Park as indicated above, they also incur costs due to the park's presence. These costs include: dislocation, denial of land use rights, poor infrastructure, and restriction on the use of forest resources and challenges from wild animals.

Displacement

Regarding dislocation of local community from their land, my key informants raised differing experiences during the two regimes (the Derg and EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front)). There were forced removals of people from their land during

the Derg regime in order to expand the park's territory and plant more trees. One of my key informants recalled the experience during the Derg as follows.

"Many people were removed from the area and settled in the surrounding peasant associations. Then, the area was incorporated into the jurisdiction of the forest park and trees were planted. The dislocation was forceful; people had no say rather to quickly leave the area as ordered. These people, however, were given enough land for cultivation from the surrounding peasant associations (Key informant Interview April 21, 2013)."

Another key informant also told that the size of the community was more than two thousand (2,000) people before dislocation during the Derg. He further added that while most people were removed from the area, the park administration employed most of the remaining community members mainly as guards, in sawmill and nursery both as contract and permanent workers. Being taken off their land, the people thus continued making a living mainly depending on employment options created by the park.

Under the current regime, the forest park did not directly force people to move their houses from the area as key informants from the community and the park administration noted. However, migration of people especially youths from the area is still common. The main causes for migration are restriction on the use of land and forest resources, seasonal unemployment, low payment and poor infrastructure. Since these problems are mainly caused by the forest park and force people to leave the area in search for livelihood, it is said that there is eviction or dislocation of local community due to the park as my key informants stated. For instance, one key informant told the situation as follows.

"Forced removal of houses like that of the Derg regime does not exist today; but still our children are flowing from this area due to various compelling factors created by the forest park. Here, we cannot use the land for cultivation; it is also difficult to raise cattle as there is restriction on using the land for grazing. We cannot construct additional house here; we cannot also use the forest resources for sale; employment situations are mainly seasonal and the payment is too low when found. Generally, there is only limited opportunity here to make living; thus our children are forced to migrate to nearby towns (Sabbata, Holota and Alamgana) to work as daily laborers in different factories and horticulture projects. Besides, many youths are also hired as daily laborers in the surrounding peasant associations (Key informant interview April 21, 2013)."

This idea is also shared by discussants in the FGD. For instance, one of the discussants asked "what is the difference between the Derg and the current regime in the park's policy regarding dislocating local

people?" The only difference is, he added, "today their policy is too systematic; they don't tell us to remove our houses; because they know very well that we will leave the area by our own as it is very difficult to make a living here in this difficult situation".

Denial of Land Use Rights

Denial of land use rights is also another issue hotly raised by community members during key informant interview and FGD. Informants reported that they cannot use the land on which they are residing for cultivation, grazing and constructing additional house.

Regarding cultivation, the only thing that the residents are doing is that many people own 'khat' or 'gesho' plants on small plots of land in their backyard which the park administration however condemns as illegal. There are only certain areas of the forest permitted for grazing, according to key informant interview with staff members and it is prohibited to use outside these areas. The researcher has observed while one of the park administration staff was using video camera for recording cattle grazing in the forest park around the office so as to use as evidence to identify the owner/s. The researcher has also witnessed two guards bringing cattle from the park to certain confinement, looking for them there until the owner comes and takes them after signing an agreement not to release the cattle again in the prohibited areas of the park.

It is prohibited to construct additional house in the area. What is permitted is only to renew the existing one or expand it only if the family size is large through the park administration's permission. In addition, it is also prohibited to use the forest resources for charcoal and sale even though some people reported that they are doing it illegally due to lack of other options to earn income. With regard to land use rights, what most informants mainly emphasized is that they are not paying tax for the land they are residing on. The people have been constantly requesting to pay tax and given land use certificate. However, they were refused under the reason that the land is in the territory of the forest park. This created a fear among local people that one day they will be dislocated from the area by the park. One key informant from the community said *"this forest is becoming a threat for the community; our life is insecure; because we are afraid that one day we might be forced to leave this area as we are denied to pay tax for the land we are residing on."*

Similarly, one of the discussants in the FGD asked *"what does their denial to give land use certificate indicate in spite of our continuous request since many years? By this, they are telling us that this land is not ours; so, we are unsure what the future might bring."*

Key informant interview with the park administration also indicated that the people should not be allowed to pay tax on the land which is not theirs. For instance, one staff said the following:

"The people are not paying tax because the land is in the territory of the park. The land is not theirs; it belongs to the park; so the tax is being paid by the forest park administration which is the legal owner. Actually, there is no intention from the park administration to dislocate this people. But, I think this is a critical issue that has to be addressed especially by the higher body. Otherwise, I fear that it will cause great conflict between the park and the people (Key informant Interview April 28, 2013)."

Another staff who was my key informant, on the other hand, argued that many individuals in the community are employees of the park administration, especially they work as guards. He said

"They are staffs like us; many of the houses they reside in are also constructed by the park administration; even I can say that they are beneficiaries. How do they claim ownership of land being employees of the park?" However, key informants from community members claim that the land is theirs. They argued that people did not encroach to the park's territory rather the park expanded and confiscated their land; recalling how they lost their land to the forest park during the Derg regime.

Lack of Infrastructure

Lack of different infrastructural services is another problem that the researcher observed in the area. The community has no school, clinic or health centre, transportation and electric services. Lack of water and road facility was also raised by informants from the community.

With regard to road infrastructure, there are two roads (one from Subba to Sabbata and the other is from Subba to Holota) which were constructed during the reign of Emperor Haileillassie following the establishment of the Sawmill factory. There are no other transportation types coming to the area except those for transporting sawmill products and stems to other places and those serving the park administration staff, as my informants told. During his stay in the community, the researcher has also witnessed stems being daily transported from the area. One of my key informants from the community told that *"we are suffering due to lack of transportation services even for emergency causes; the existence of the road is nothing for us; its importance is only for the forest park."*

Another infrastructural problem observed in the area was lack of school. There is no school (primary or secondary) in the community. Children of the community had to go to a nearby small town of Asgori for primary school and Holota or Sabbata towns for secondary education. As my key informants recalled, there was a school called Sahlesillassie Primary School established before fifty (50) years in the community. The school was taken to Asgori (a nearby town) six years ago. According to one of my key informants, the reason given for eviction of the school was absence of play field in the school, difficulty of expanding the school as the area is under the park's jurisdiction and declining number of population. Another key informant recalled that the communities of the nearby peasant association also complained that they fear to send their children to the school as the area is in the forest. As these are consequences of the forest park, the community argued that the school is taken from them because of the park.

Lack of water was also raised as one of the problems in the area. There is one source of drinking water constructed by the park in the community. During interview with the park administration staff, this was raised as one of the park's benefit for local community. However, the community members argued that it is constructed to water the seedlings as the nursery station is located in the area of the community's residence. To justify this, one key informant said "priority is given for watering seedlings after which the community is allowed to use; usually it stops after watering seedlings is over". She concluded *"if they are giving priority for plants when we are thirsty, it is clear indication that construction of the water pipe has nothing to do with benefiting local community"*.

While the nearby rural communities have got electric services, the Subba community, however, is denied the service as key informants from the community told. They noted that the community has requested the woreda administration for the services many times; but

they were denied under the reason that since the area is in the park's territory, they can only get the service under the park's permission.

Declining Population Size and Care for Elders

Decline in the size of population was also raised as one of the impacts of the forest park on the local community. Key informants from the community told that there is huge migration of youths to nearby towns which caused decline of population size in the area. As indicated above, declining population size was also raised as one of the justifications for the eviction of Sailessillassie Primary School from the area to a nearby town called Asgori. This migration is mainly caused due to lack of job in the area, low payment, lack of land and infrastructural services.

According to key informant interview with community members, since youths mainly migrate from the area, the population is becoming predominantly elderly and adults. The researcher himself witnessed that it was so rare to find young members in the community. This migration of youths has left elderly without someone to care for them in the family. Many households consist of only elder husband and wife while children are somewhere else in search for means of livelihood. One elderly key informant told “

“I and my wife are living alone. I was a guard in the park and retired eight years ago. We have four children and three of them are daily laborers in Sabbata and Alamgana whereas one is married and resides

in Holota. It is very difficult to live as such at this age without someone to provide support when needed. Collecting firewood, taking grain for grinding to a nearby town of Asgori and fetching water are becoming difficult tasks for my wife as she is also getting older (Key informant Interview April 22, 2013).”

One of the discussants in the FGD also said “our youths are forced to leave their parents alone here when they should have taken care of them at their old age”. As noted both from FGDs and interview with community members it is inevitable for someone to leave the area as it is also prohibited to construct additional house here in addition to other factors.

Challenges Faced from Wild Animals

Informants from community members also complained that they are facing challenges from wild animals. Prevalence of different wild animals in the area is hindering them from using some coping strategies they want to use to overcome the difficult life situation in the area, as key informants noted. One key informant said, *“for instance we want to raise sheep and goats even if there is restriction from the park administration; but it is impossible due to wild animals; let alone this we could not raise hens. Generally, we are in a difficult situation.”* In addition to this, they noted that their children are afraid to move alone in the forest and to go to school.