Financing Sustainable Forest Management in Trinidad and Tobago

Trinidad and Tobago, the “twin island” state of the Caribbean, distinguishes itself from other SIDS. It is home to the second highest per capita income in Latin America and the Caribbean due to an economy that has experienced considerable growth from 1995 to 2008. Most of the income comes from the exploitation of natural resources, in particular oil and natural gas. The trend in agriculture, the aggregate sector that includes forest sector jobs, has a steadily declining employment rate. Despite rising income per capita and low unemployment rates, there is a growing imbalance in the way income is distributed and a growing class of unskilled and unemployed poor has developed.

Deforestation is mainly caused by forest fires, strip-mining of sand and gravel, illegal logging, natural disasters like hurricanes, infrastructure and other secondary effects of development. A major issue is the non-legal settlement (squatting) of forests, often by the poor, which causes authorities to blame the poorer segments of society for the destruction of forest reserves. Effective measures to address this problem require coordinated action by a number of different government agencies and such inter-agency collaboration has been difficult to achieve.

Most of forest land is managed by the government. There are some multi-sectoral committees and civil society organisations that have an advisory role and some civil society organisations informally manage State lands. These include the Fondes Amandes Community Reforestation Group, The Fondes Amandes Community Reforestation Project (FACRP) is a community-based agroforestry project that began in 1982 by a group of farmers living in the Fondes Amandes Watershed. The group manages and conserves a portion of forest, protecting it from deforestation and forest fires.

The majority of the projects are funded by the government by generating tax and non-tax revenues, primarily from the energy sector among other mechanisms. Some of them receive funding from local private companies and international agencies, indirectly or directly. The GEF for example supported a number of community based organisations involved in forestry. Other projects are supported by national organisations like the National Gas Company which promotes reforestation and has a “no-net loss of forest resource” policy. Community involvement is very important for this company and the community is actively involved.

In this respect, one major initiative hailed as a success is the establishment of a national Green Fund, capitalised by a 0.1% levy on gross sales from mining activities, including oil and natural gas, and is allocated to environmental projects. Both the Fondes Amandes Community Reforestation Project and the Nariva Swamp Restoration, Carbon Sequestration and Livelihoods Project have benefited from this initiative which could act as a source of inspiration for other countries.

Different programmes integrate the link between forestry and poverty reduction. An example is the Forestry Development Programme which includes community-based forestry and agroforestry programmes, community empowerment, production of pine seedlings, a teak nursery, a wetlands management project and the reforestation of the Northern Range, one of the oldest protected forests in the Caribbean.
As one successful example, the Matura Turtle Conservation Project set up a formalized arrangement with communities on several beaches in north-east Trinidad. People have been employed as guides and collectors of basic data in terms of tagging of turtles. This conservation and ecotourism project has also seen the plantation of natural forests along the beaches to block out town lights that would prevent turtles from laying their eggs, thus constituting an innovative means of cross-sectoral forest financing.

In addition, opportunities exist for multilateral funding from the FAO, Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank. Although Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) schemes are acknowledged to be important areas of raising finance for sustainable forestry, discussions with forestry stakeholders have suggested that there needs to be a preparatory stage before PES can be implemented. This preparatory stage would include education and awareness of the merits of PES and pilot PES initiatives throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

In order to provide better coordination of forest financing efforts, it is important that the new Forest Policy includes provisions for monitoring and feedback mechanisms to determine effectiveness in accomplishing policy goals and objectives. Moreover the institutional framework should be referred to in the forest policy, as this can aid in changing the attitudes and perceptions of stakeholders towards SFM. As law enforcement by the current Forest Division is weak, some observers have claimed that it is not taken seriously by the public. The forest should indicate the need for adequate funding of the Forestry Division.

Finally, the harmonizing of different sectors with links to the forest sector should be another key part of the forest policy. These include the energy, water, tourism, land use, agricultural and transportation sectors. The role of forests should be identified in each sector, as harmonization is possible among the forestry and other sectors, especially agricultural and tourism sectors. The latter can provide opportunities as tourism is the main sector in Trinidad and Tobago and ecotourism has a major potential.