

MELCA's Menja Home Garden Project

MELCA's horticulture training in Sheka, southern Ethiopia, is alleviating human pressure on the land and providing local people with vastly improved livelihood options which have a lighter impact on the Earth.

Ato Dihacho Gaweto's home garden consists of mixed agricultural plots and yellow bee hives. In fact, this home garden is more of a growing, pristine and fully developed forest ecosystem than anything else you'll find in Southern Ethiopia.

Prior to receiving training in horticulture and forest conservation, Gaweto relied on selling fuel wood and charcoal, gathered from the Sheka Forest, to generate income. This practice, commonly employed by many members of the Menja group within the Sheka Zone, had a devastating impact on the forest. Fuel wood harvesters have collected resources from the area until it became sufficiently degraded as to no longer be economically profitable. Harvesters then moved on to another patch of forests to repeat the destructive cycle.

However, with MELCA's assistance and support, Gaweto has made the transition into a successful home gardener, relying on income generated through the production of agricultural products, rather the consumption and degradation of Nature, to support his family and himself. Gaweto is a product of MELCA's Menja Home Gardening initiative, conducted in Masha on May 22-24, 2008. Through this programme members of the marginalized Menja group have received the training and materials necessary to alter their lifestyle and thereby improve their social standing within their communities. Thirty people participated in the initial training session, twenty-five of which have been successful in agriculture and have stopped gathering wood for use as fuel. As another participant, Ato Abate Asseta, stated: *"Before this training and MELCA we were in the dark, this organization is our light... This training has changed my life in so many ways."*

The positive impact of MELCA's program has not stopped at the initial thirty participants either. These trainees have made it their point to teach their neighbors, relatives, and children what they have learned through MELCA's home gardening workshops. Many of them have used their initial success to expand the scope of their agricultural operations; as Gaweto notes, *"My thought now is to increase my economy and to have cows and oxen and also I am involved in beekeeping training. This is a great chance for me"*.

By providing these groups with a feasible, alternative livelihood, MELCA has successfully supported communities to reduce environmentally destructive practices. For this reason, every new home garden can also be seen as a tract of untouched rainforest that has been saved from the wood stove.