

MELCA

Report of the consultative meeting with elders on *Sacred site and Climate Change*

“When I was a child one can hardly see a donkey around my area, as the weather was too cold for them to breed. Now, donkeys are everywhere roaming the field that were areas of big wetlands and forests few decades back”

Elder from Bale

Consultative meeting with elders on “Sacred sites and Climate Change” was held on August 9 through 11, 2009 at the Ethiopian Red-Cross conference room, Addis Ababa. A total of 25 Elders from Sheka, Bale and Menagesha Suba area, where MELCA currently operates and are critical biodiversity hotspots of the country, gathered together on August 9, 2009. The workshop took place after the Inauguration ceremony of P3DM.

This workshop was specifically designed for elders to provide them a platform to critically examine the meaning and significance of sacred sites from an indigenous cultural and spiritual perspective and to develop recommendations as well as identify potential actions. On the other hand, the consultative meeting also aimed to analyze the potential consequences of climate variability and change as understood by local communities as their experience provides a unique contribution to the assessment and understanding of climate change and its versatile manifestation and ramifications.

The workshop was officially opened by the elders’ cultural prayer followed by the keynote and welcoming message of Mr. Million Belay, Director of MELCA. He extended his hope that this meeting would be successful in establishing an in depth understanding of sacred sites, its significance and the threats that they face as understood by their custodians. Moreover, he expressed the great significance of this particular meeting, which may probably be the first of its kind in Ethiopia in giving additional voice and support for the ongoing global movement of protecting sacred natural sites and territories.

In general, the meeting was very successful in creating clarity in our understanding of sacred sites and their significance backed by the sharpened skills of our elders’ observation and time-tested ecological wisdom embedded within various aspects of their traditional cultures,

which is sadly lacking in those merely concerned with the commoditization of this planet, its nature and climate.

Gain Common Understanding on meaning and Significance of sacred sites.

This was the first session where elders formed a group and identified the sacred sites of their constituencies together with their significance. This activity helped to list out all sacred sites, places that are believed to be bestowed upon them by the creator to bring healing, to replenish life, to comfort them with health, and fertility and to protect the peoples, cattle's and crops. Under this broad understanding of both the cultural and spiritual significance of sacred sites, elders enumerated several sacred sites and places where they held cultural ceremonies and paid their prayers for their creator. Such places can be dense forests, a single big tree, rivers, wetlands, mountains, hills, water falls, and caves.

Although the significance of sacred natural sites and territories are different from place to place and to each particular and specific sacred site, all participant elders agreed with the following summery of the values and significance of sacred sites to their culture, environment and spiritual well being:

- To protect and preserve the Environment, forests, rivers and wetlands
- To bring about health and fertility to the people, cattle's and crops
- To improve livelihoods
- To bring unity among people, to strengthen community governance system and peaceful conflict resolution system
- A prayer place where they praise their creator and entreat to protect their land, environment, crops and cattle's from natural disasters.

Analyzing the current situations and changes on sacred sites and its impact in their life

Each sacred site is usually associated with distinctive cultural norms, ceremonies and range of taboos that prohibits certain type of activities like cutting of trees etc.

However, participant elders from three different localities has unanimously witnessed the alarming changes and abandonment of traditional customs, ceremonies, prayers and the loss of respect for traditionally accepted cultural and spiritual taboos.

Below are some of the mentioned changes which are the sign of the current changes.

- The cultural practices, the seasonal rituals and ceremonies have stopped in many of the places and are rare in some.
- The prayer and the sacrifice that was made for the sacred sites has stopped in some places and or is not as it was in our ancestors time
- The elders and cultural leaders have lost hope and their followers have abandoned the cultural belief and joined new religions
- The reverence for cultural leaders and knowledge holders has decreased along with the respect for traditional cultural practices
- The fear and respect for the previously accepted cultural taboos has decreased
- The transfer of traditional knowledge from elders to the young generation has been seriously undermined

What are the impacts of these changes on the Culture Environment and Livelihood of the community?

The above present-day observations of the shifts in the attitude and physical phenomenon of sacred sites become the basis for additional investigation of the impacts that these changes had on Environment, Culture and Livelihood of the local communities.

Hence, the elders circled in groups again and come up with the following analysis of the versatile negative impacts that the changes are causing on their culture and environment.

Moreover, the group of elders has also reflected their worries on the pace of these transformations, where it is destined to take us and predicted what the future holds if the changes persist the way it does now.

Hence, below are some of the core points that are raised upon the three leading questions: What are the Impacts of the Changes? Where do these changes lead us? And what do you think will happen in the next ten years?

Impacts on Environment

- Climate change and extreme weather variability
- Shortage of rain
- Deforestation
- Drying of wetlands
- Loss of some plant species

Impacts on Culture

- Lack of respect for traditional customs, beliefs and values
- Loss of social norms and reverence for cultural and spiritual taboos
- Loss of arts, artifacts and traditional ecological knowledge
- Many records of illegal acts due to loss of fear and abandonment of traditional community governance systems
- Loss of harmony, fulfillment and inner peace

Impacts on Livelihood

- High cost of living
- Poverty, and malnourishment
- Loss of productivity(high size of arable land but few yield)

Where do these changes lead us?

- More poverty, loss of livelihoods
- Loss of identity and culture of local communities
- Prone to natural disasters
- High pace degradation of Environment and biodiversity
- Lack of the feeling of fulfillment in life

What will happen in the next 10 years?

- Complete loss of traditional belief on sacred sites cultural leaders and cultural taboos
- Fall under the overwhelming domination of big religions and swallowed by the western cultures
- Loss of traditional medicinal plants
- Complete loss of wetlands that are an indicators for a healthy ecosystem
- High encroachment and pressure on Forests

The way forward: What is expected of the local communities, Government and CSO's.

The discussions on sacred sites come to an end by outlining the actions that should be pursued by different stakeholders to halt the dire consequences that the local communities and the whole nation might face as a result of the ill protection of our culture and sacred sites.

Hence, below are the common accords of the elders view of what should be done by the Government, CSO's/NGO's and by the local communities and custodians of Sacred sites.

Local Communities/Custodians of Sacred Sites

- Organizing visits to their children and schools to sacred sites. It should also include the education of children at home level.
- Educating religious leaders – they are causing the problem.
- Fencing sacred sites and working for their protection. Working with government on this.
- Elders and Spiritual leaders being exemplary to others.
- Planting indigenous seedlings at areas where the sacred sites are degraded.
- Restarting cultural ceremonies and inviting others to take part.
- Working for the implementation of their constitutional rights
- Working with government to help them protect their sacred sites.

Government

- Implementing laws related to sacred sites.
- Government should give attention to sacred sites as it is giving to other issues. Government should have a special policy for this.
- Giving preferential treatment to people living near sacred sites.
- Giving priority to development projects which does not oppose to forest or protected area.
- Encouraging people who are involved in protection of forest.
- Organizing meeting between major religions and custodians of sacred sites.
- Benefit sharing – this including a percentage share from tourism revenue. Encouraging participatory tourism.
- Implementing EIA
- Educating the public about these places.

CSO's

- Organizing trainings for government bodies from the lowest to the highest level
- Creating environment for exchange visits among people who are custodians of sacred sites.
- Consulting elders for these places

Discussion on Climate change

The discussion on climate change focused on three driving questions: How was the climate some decades ago? How is it now? What do you think will happen after 20 years?

The purpose of such dialogue is to gain a deeper understanding of the context by which climate change is understood by the local people and the effects that it had in amplifying the stresses affecting the social systems, the environment and livelihoods of local communities.

Elders who came from three different parts of Ethiopia has spared no time before they start sharing us many interesting, often times very gloomy and condescending living examples that shouts a lot about the felt effects of climate change at their respective constituencies.

Signs of Impacts of Climate change

- Drying of water points, rivers and streams
- Loss of wetlands
- Extreme variability in the annual rainfall amount
- Deforestation and soil erosion is increasing
- Kind of disease has also changed. Typical low land diseases are coming to high lands
- Loss of medicinal plants along with the knowledge holders
- Productivity has decreased.
- Whirl wind and hail with out time is damaging houses and bee hives.
- There is increase in heat/ temperature.
- Grasses are drying and we hardly get enough grazing lands to feed our cattle. Hence the amount of milk has decreased.

Here are few words from elders about climate situation of their localities while also reflecting on a comparative analysis of the past few decades.

"There was a typical grass that usually grows near a big tree called KORO. One day my father took me near the tree and advised me to cautiously follow that typical grass type, saying when you no longer see this unique grass under that tree, it means that our territory is becoming hot. Now it has been 10 years since my father died and I lived to witness the vanishing of the grass and the warming of our place as well."

"When I was a child one can hardly see a donkey around my area, as the weather was too cold for them to breed. Now, donkeys are everywhere roaming the field that was areas of big wetlands and forests few decades back"

"It used to take us 8 months to harvest barley some decades before, now it only takes 5 months."

"When I was a child, it was so common to see a cow bearing one calf a year. Now, it is hard to find one calf in three years."

"There were herb types that have medicinal value for specific diseases. Now they have disappeared because of draught and spread of lowlands. There were also some trees which need lots of rain to grow. We used to get those trees nearby, now it needs a two or three days traveling."

"We usually used to get 8 months of raining season in a year, now it has reduced to 5 months."

"Our fertile land has disappeared together with our culture and traditional belief"