The Ecological and Socio-economic Role of Prosopis juliflora in Eritrea : An Analytical Assessment within the Context of Rural Development in the Horn of Africa

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Introduction

Prosopis juliflora in Eritrea within the Global Context of Rural Development and Environmental Sustainability. To ensure environmental sustainability by 2015 is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the United Nations alongside the eradication of extreme hunger and poverty and the combating of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. They are a blue print of international development to which all countries and leading development institutions agreed. According to the MDGs, environmental sustainability includes the integration of related sustainable development principles into national policies and programmes as well as regeneration efforts regarding environmental resources. The international development community and policy makers have at last understood the close interlinkages between those goals and have - among other things - acknowledged the importance of tackling environmental degradation and improving ecological management as a vital component in the eradication of global poverty. As a result, many programmes and initiatives in recent years have adopted a more holistic and integrated approach to development. In regard to (natural) environmental sustainability issues such as natural resource management, reforestation, protection of biodiversity, resource based conflict management, and environmental education have all become common aspects in the fight against poverty.

A new major challenge is the integration of the question of climate change, carbon dioxide capture and carbon footprint reduction to which many development organisations and policy makers are only slowly adapting. The ongoing debate on climate change and appropriate measures to mitigate the effects of global warming may be slowing the adaptation process down. Nevertheless the threat is evident and therefore makes the need for the protection and regeneration of natural resources even more immediate.

To achieve this, relevant policy design and widespread mobilisation needs to take place at several levels. Planning, coordination, and implementation of sustainable and effective natural resource management will need to take place at a country cross-cutting level as well as at national, regional and community level. However progress is often undermined by a lack of necessary technologies, capacities, knowledge and research. This often leads to a mismanagement of resources, inappropriate practices or simply a sense of helplessness or ignorance.

The issue of Prosopis - at least in the case of Eritrea - seems to fit exactly into this wider picture: Awareness raising about the importance of natural resource management and protection alongside active community mobilisation has been widely and very visibly taking place at all levels and in this regard, Eritrea is ahead of many other Sub-Saharan countries. In the semi-arid areas of Eritrea however, Prosopis is now widely viewed as a threat to those resources and rural livelihoods mainly because of its invasive character at the expense of native species and land size within both range and crop lands. This research study aims to assess and analyse the impact of P.juliflora on Eritrea's ecosystems and its role in terms of both the socio-economic benefits and disadvantages it brings to rural communities. Prosopis at the moment seems a continuously spreading element at the expense of Eritrea's native environmental resource base. Therefore, the matter needs to be urgently researched, managed and integrated into related national and community-based development programmes and policies.