



Rino Solberg and Jean-Paul Deprins (on the right) with the Committee members of Witu-Nyangoro Ranch, in Witu (Lamu district). (All photos BGF)

# Blazing a trail

Better Globe Forestry introduces an innovative business model for sustainable development

By Vaflahi Meite

When I met the Chairman and the Managing Director of **Better Globe Forestry Ltd (BGF)** in 2007 in my office,<sup>1</sup> I had some doubts about their project concept. Indeed, expecting European business people to invest in planting trees in Kenya, with an estimated payback period of 20 years, was very surprising to me.

Four years later, I have come to appreciate what has been achieved by BGF so far. The unique model grounded on the partnership with the landowners to develop commercial plantations on arid and semi arid lands (ASAL), where the trees are not competing with food production, is praiseworthy in the spirit of sustainable development.

Considering the global environmental challenges, the concept of sustainable development, and BGF's contribution towards the common goal at its micro level, I have the pleasure to explain below why it is my inward conviction that the company needs more support for its innovative operations. This is my personal view and it should not, under any circumstances,

be regarded as the official position of the institution for which I work.

## The global environmental context and BGF's contribution

Modern society is embedded within the environment, being dependent on it for the materials and energy needed to maintain civilisation. As shown in figure F1, all environmental problems fundamentally involve either *depletion* (consumption) of sources or *pollution* (waste) of sinks. We can hence measure the environmental impact of society by these two processes.

Depletion occurs when the accelerated cycling and flow remove matter and energy faster than natural processes are renewing them. Conversely, pollution occurs when the environmental equilibrium is no longer achieved.<sup>2</sup>

The earth has a certain number of resources - perpetual (direct solar energy, winds, tides), potentially renewable (fresh air, fresh water,

fertile soil, plants and animals) and non-renewable (fossil fuels, metallic and non-metallic minerals). These resources are subjected to the pressure of the activities and human behaviour. The management of potentially renewable and non-renewable resources requires a considerable change of human modes of production and consumption, where both *resource depletion* and/or *pollution* should be controlled.

Human population and consumption are two main forces accelerating the alteration of the natural environment: the environmental impact. The following equation is a simple way to summarise that explanation: **Impact = Population x Consumption.**

Both *worldwide population* and *consumption per person* have been increasing very rapidly. This has led to an extremely rapid increase in environmental impact. Consequently, the world faces many environmental threats. These include climatic change due to greenhouse effect, the hole in the ozone layer, acid rains, biodiversity erosion, desertification, ocean degradation, etc. For all these threats, preventive and corrective actions at all levels are essential. Thus, the need for **better family planning**<sup>3</sup> and **appropriate management of natural resources** (and environment protection) has been raised; even if it did not always receive the responses expected.

<sup>1</sup> I was then the manager of the regional office of the Centre for the Development of Enterprise (CDE) for Eastern Africa, based in Nairobi.

<sup>2</sup> McKinney M. L. and Schoch R. M., "Environmental science, systems and solutions", third Edition, Jones and Bartlett Publishers, ISBN 0-7637-0918-2, (2003)

<sup>3</sup> Although very important, family planning is not the subject of this article and will not be developed further.

Regarding **family planning**, it is not my intention to restart the debate pitting the *Malthusians* (for whom the uncontrolled growth of population hinders economic development and environmental protection) and their opponents. Nonetheless, with an estimated population density of 33.5 habitants/km<sup>2</sup> compared to the average figure of 45 habitants/km<sup>2</sup> for the entire world, Africa is not heavily populated. Africa's population is more than Oceania, as much as America, but less than Europe and much less than Asia. There is no problem from that angle.

The serious concerns regard the average growth of Africa's population, estimated at 35 per cent per year. This is three times more than Europe, a cause of concern for a continent that faces many problems such as limited economic growth, chronic malnutrition, deforestation, soil erosion and pandemics. As such, my personal view is in line with the Malthusians' theory for Africa (especially in the countries with less economical potentials). Controlling the demography is necessary.

Coming back to **environmental protection**, let us note that since the early 1970s, thousands of summits, meetings and conferences on "sustainable development" and environment management are held around the world every year. At the global level, the main environmental summits held in Stockholm (1972), Rio de Janeiro (1992), Kyoto (1997), Johannesburg (2002) and Cancun (2010) have come up with some key resolutions and recommendations. Unfortunately, the essential problems are yet to be solved and concrete results on the ground are far from expectations. The reality is that all the environmental agencies and stakeholders around the world need to appreciate the necessity for **better control of all activities** that contribute to the above-mentioned phenomena of worldwide pollution and its detrimental effects.

Although it is true that environmental problems are numerous, everyone should be conscious of the fact that reacting only under pressure of serious accidents and natural disasters is no longer enough. Moreover, global environmental problems are the result of local actions of many individuals, and the problems can hence only be solved if those local issues are addressed. Therefore, **new approaches are essential** to reach environmentally sustainable development. This calls not only for technology and for scientific understanding, but laws, ethics, economics and other aspects of human behaviour will play a key role in solving current environmental problems.

The BGF project contributes to greening ASAL in East Africa and is an example of concrete actions that need to be replicated and

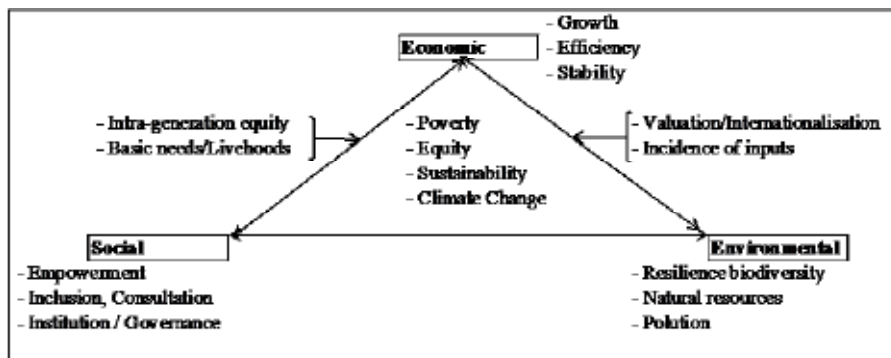
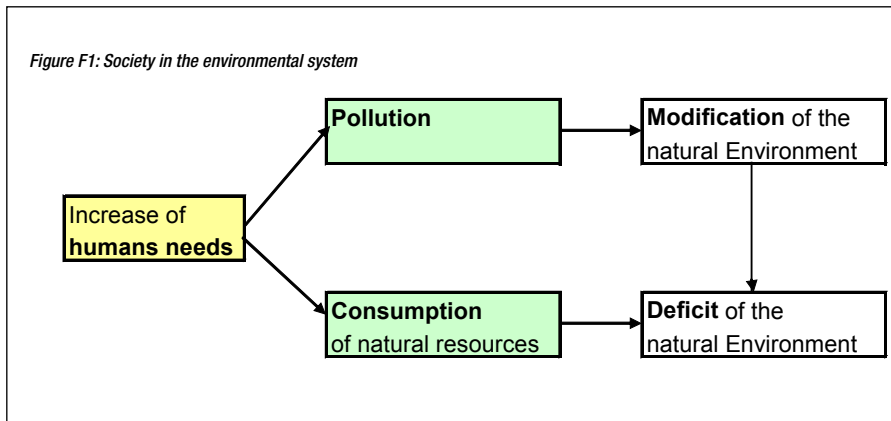


Figure F2: Concept and component of sustainable development

expanded as much as possible. By developing commercial plantations that do not compete with food production, BGF is providing an innovative and replicable model, which can be a creative answer to reducing deforestation while ensuring long-term income to rural people in ASAL. BGF's innovative business is a giant step towards **the sustainable development** of hosting communities.

### The sustainable development merits of BGF activities

Sustainable development (SD) goes beyond the static maintenance of the ecological status quo. The term was used by the **Brundtland Commission**,<sup>4</sup> which coined what has become the most often-quoted definition of sustainable development as, "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The field of sustainable development can be conceptually broken into three (or more if necessary) components parts, namely, environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and social sustainability (see figure F2 above).

<sup>4</sup> The Brundtland Commission, formally the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), known by the name of its Chair Gro Harlem Brundtland, was convened by the United Nations in 1983.

BGF operations consist mainly of "sustainable agricultural programmes through microfinance schemes, educational programmes and building schools." How many examples exist in the world of a private company promoting massive planting of trees in ASAL where the trees are not competing with food production? How many examples of such a **partnership with landowners** exist in the world whereby a company has turned its back to old and debatable practices of imposing solutions on indigenous people?

Before developing the plantations, BGF engages in comprehensive memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with the landowners. To the best of my understanding, BGF has "developed a whole range of interventions to cooperate with communities and individuals neighbouring its plantations"; with all the company's transactions being conducted with integrity and in accordance with business ethics and practices. There is here a strong case of three-dimension sustainable development – in the economic, environmental and social dimensions.

**Economically**, even if at present there is not yet such income mainly due to the nature of this business, both the indigenous community and BGF will increase their earnings in years to come. Indeed, the species selected and planted will produce economically strong products for high-quality timber, gum arabic and energy.

At the macro level, the country will get the

related benefits such as the foreign currency earnings that will be generated by exporting the products and job creation for local transformation. However, for me, the most important aspects are the socio-environmental sustainability dimensions.

The **environmental** merits of the BGF business model are enormous. From *Miti* issue No 001, we note that *“the desert in Africa is moving south very fast and without massive forestation, in the next 20 - 30 years, most land suitable for farming will be gone.”* Moreover, as in many sub-Saharan countries, the Kenyan forest cover is very low. It stands at less than two per cent in comparison to the internationally accepted 10 per cent. Thus, it is almost, if not already, a critical case.

Knowing the ecological advantages of tree cover such as water catchment, soil conservation, biodiversity, etc, the contribution of BGF to environmental sustainability in its operating countries is self-explanatory. Indeed, the **environmental sustainability** focuses on *the overall viability and health of living systems, defined in terms of a comprehensive, multi-scale, dynamic, hierarchical measure of resilience, vigor and organization.*<sup>5</sup>

Equity and poverty alleviation are the key social sustainability components of this operation. **Social sustainability** usually refers to improvements in both individual well-being and the overall social welfare. By empowering the local communities and landowners in decision making, strengthening social cohesion and networks of relationships and reducing the occurrence of possible conflicts, the BGF approach ensures the social sustainability of its activities.

In view of the above, I must re-emphasise that BGF needs additional support. At this stage of its life, the company operates with limited financial means, human resources and technical capability, while it must pursue imperatively the operations so as not to lose all the assets and investments made to date.

### International support

*“Before proper planting can start, various studies need to be done. These include feasibility studies, an environmental impact assessment, a soil survey, a topographical survey, a baseline to establish existing vegetation, a baseline in buffer zone for defining community development action and an overall management plan.”*<sup>6</sup>

5 Costanza, R. 2000. “Ecological sustainability, indicators and climate change” in M. Munasinghe and R. Swart (eds) *Climate Change and its Linkages with Development, Equity and Sustainability*, IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland.

6 Cf M. Rino Solberg, Chairman of Better Globe Group in MITI 001



Farmers around Mboti Primary School (Nguni, Eastern Mwingi) during a meeting to discuss an out-growers project for mukau trees. Profitable growing of trees is one of the few options for sustainable farming in ASAL.



Rino Solberg of Better Globe Forestry and Elias Musyoka, chairman of Sosoma Ranching Society and a respected local elder, share a relaxed moment at Mboti Primary School in Nguni

(All photos BGF)

This statement shows the necessity of additional support in terms of technical assistance. Nonetheless, there are many multilateral and bilateral development organisations and agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGO) dealing with the thematic *“... multifunctional sustainable forest management and its enabling legal and financial environment, the conservation and sustainable development of forest resources, the development of the institutional framework of the public and private forestry as well as the forestry cooperation with countries in transition forestry administration, the increasing of public awareness of forest issues, involvement of the public in forestry matters and recognition of the cross-sectoral nature of most forestry issues.”*<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the European Union funds **many**

7 *Forestry cooperation in countries in Transition, Status report 2002, prepared in accordance with MCPFE Resolution H3, “Cooperation with Countries with Economies in Transition”, by Dr. Peter Csoka for UNECE/FAO, Geneva, UNITED NATIONS*

**technical assistance instruments and programmes** for private sector development, agricultural and rural development, capacity building and strengthening of national expertise in this wide field of agriculture and forestry, environmental engineering etc. To provide more information on these facilities is not among the objective of this article. However, the BGF management is invited to investigate this further and to identify the most relevant partner to enlarge its pathway towards its noble objectives. The BGF model is replicable in many other ACP countries as a creative answer to reducing deforestation while ensuring long-term income to rural people in ASAL. Let me conclude by just saying *“asante sana”* to BGF and *“kila la kheri”*.

*The writer is the Manager of the Operations Department, Centre for the Development of Enterprise (CDE).*