

Survival amid shortages

Timber-starved Kenya looks for alternative sources of wood

By Linus Wekesa

Currently, Kenya is experiencing what can easily be labelled a boom in its construction industry. Many reasons have been advanced to explain this state. Key among these is the burgeoning population growth and the improved economic performance of the economy.

The high population growth being experienced in the country, especially in urban areas, has caused an increase in demand for housing, resulting in the current state of increased activity in the construction industry. This is happening against the background of the government partial ban on harvesting of trees in public forests imposed from 1999.

Despite the positive impact of the ban in enhancing the conservation of the dwindled forest resources, the socio-economic impacts on the country have been negative. There is a forced shift of resources into other sectors, exacerbating the timber supply shortfalls and seriously compromising the entrepreneurship development spirit in the forestry sector. As an example, it was reported in the media that since the ban to mid 2006, timber factories worth almost Ksh 4.8 billion (US\$ 60 million) had been forced to close shop through lack of raw materials.

The dwindling local timber supplies have turned Kenya into a net importer of the product, with substantial losses of foreign revenue. For Kenya, the major source of sawn timber has been the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) followed by Tanzania. Kenya's sawn timber imports from DRC, for example, increased ten-fold between 2001 and 2010. To attest to this, the media in 2005 reported that the country was importing about Ksh 1 billion (US\$ 13 million) worth of timber each year, mostly from Tanzania, the DRC and Uganda, to meet the deficit in supply caused by the logging ban.

The COMESA and UNCOMTRADE statistics too show that the country's timber imports have grown from Ksh 240 million (US\$ 3.1 million) in 2001 to a peak of Ksh 900 million (US\$ 12.1 million) in 2004.

The main imports include sawn timber, MDF, processed timber products and plywood. The largest volumes of timber imported into the country have been of MDF and plywood followed by processed timber products. However, Kenya also exports some timber products especially MDF and plywood to other regional countries, including DRC, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.

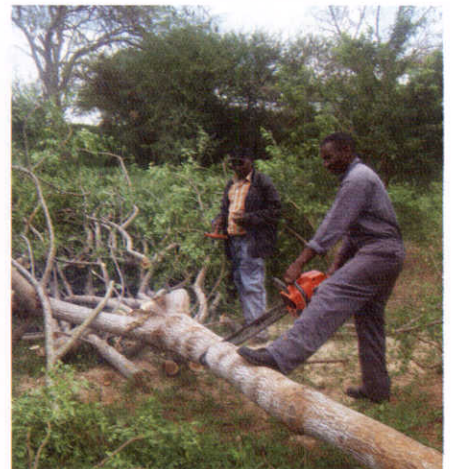
The country imports both softwood and hardwood. Although such statistics are not readily available, a review by Cheboiwo and others (2010)



A *Melia volkensii* woodlot for on-farm timber production in the Kenyan drylands. (Photo KEFRI)



Chainsaw operators have increased in number, to split trees on-farm. (Photo KEFRI)



Timber processing on-farm. (Photo KEFRI)

of the timber industry showed that a total of 21,199 tonnes of softwood were imported in the country in 2004, mostly from Tanzania (76 per cent) and Uganda (24 per cent). Similarly, the review observed that in 2005 some 27,484m³ of softwood timber was imported from Tanzania (98 per cent and mostly pine-sawn wood) and Uganda (2 per cent).

Softwood imports have also originated from other countries including Malawi and Zambia. On the other hand, studies done show that the origin of the hardwood timber imports into the country include Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, DRC and Sudan.

Reviews of the timber industry by Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI) and other players show that there is potential for trade between Kenya and other countries within the East and Central African region due to different production and consumption patterns. This trade has grown in quantity and distances covered to include COMESA countries Malawi and Zambia, and even West African states.

The market reforms carried out by many of these countries are enhancing efficiency of markets for timber, increasing timber trade flows into Kenya.

This emerging trade scenario is good for Kenya in that it eases the pressure on local tree products supplies, although it exerts pressure on the timber resources of neighbouring countries. In addition, the logging ban is increasing the demand for timber from farms, creating avenues for marketing of on-farm timber in the country.

The Kenya Forestry Master Plan (KFMP) predicted that farm and private forestry would grow from 690,000 hectares in 1994 to 830,000 hectares by 2020. Indeed, the acreage under trees on private farms is growing, but so is the number of chainsaw operators that split the trees into timber.

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