

Ghana's efforts to employ young people and regrow forests could work better

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Deforestation has been an issue of global concern for many years. Deforestation is a major environmental concern because of its adverse effects on ecological sustainability, agricultural productivity and overall quality of life of the people. As populations increase, there is a higher

demand for both forest products and forest lands for development activities. The Food and Agricultural Organization [reports](#) that only 4 billion hectares of the 6 billion hectares of forest that existed about 8,000 years ago are now available globally. Recent estimates by the FAO suggests that, globally, nearly 10 million hectares of forest was lost between 2015–2020.

World leaders have attempted to address this issue through [global conventions](#) and goals, including the [sustainable development goals](#). Unfortunately, these substantial global commitments and investments in addressing deforestation have not been effective.

Ghana is one of the countries that has [lost forest](#) cover at a high rate. Between 1990 and 2000, Ghana lost about 135,000 hectares of forest annually. From 2001 to 2021, Ghana lost 1.4 million hectares of tree cover, representing a [20%](#) decrease in tree cover since 2000.

Global Forest Watch (GFW) [reports](#) that Ghana lost 60% of its primary rainforest in 2018, which was the highest in the world.

One third of Ghana's land area of 238,500 km² was forest at the [start of the 1900s](#) but now forest [covers](#) only 35.1% of the country . Forest resources are important in Ghana because most rural livelihoods are dependent on it for food and ecological balance.

The causes of the loss of forest cover are many. They include human activities such as logging, illegal mining and unsustainable farming practices.

The government of Ghana has over the years implemented a number of policies and programs to reduce deforestation. Still, it has remained a major environmental problem. Programs were poorly planned and carried out. They lacked sufficient logistics, funding and political

commitment. Policies changed as governments did.

In 2018, Ghana [launched](#) the Youth in Afforestation program. Its aim was to restore degraded forest cover through reforestation, rehabilitation and protection. The program also sought to create jobs for some unemployed youth in Ghana. [The plan](#) was to employ 65,000 young people to plant about 10 million tree seedlings of different varieties across Ghana within two years, with the option of an extension based on satisfactory results.

Little research has been done on the Youth in Afforestation program. We did our [research](#) to provide information about what the program had contributed to [forest resources](#) management. Our assessment of its prospects and challenges could be a guide for any necessary reforms to achieve the program's objectives.

In short, we found that the afforestation program did create jobs in the agricultural, industrial and service sectors of the economy and help to conserve the natural environment. But there's a need to minimize political interference and ensure that the requisite human, logistical and financial resources are in place. Otherwise the progress won't be sustained.

Youth in Afforestation

The current government of Ghana introduced the Youth in Afforestation program in 2018. Its challenges include financial, logistical, institutional and forest governance issues.

It has employed over 40,000 recruits since 2018. They are engaged in planting, tending, weeding, and thinning trees. But there are serious concerns about the sustainability of these jobs, because sustainable funding wasn't planned. As per the initial plan, the youths engaged in the

program were to be employed for a period of two years, with the possibility of an extension contingent on satisfactory outcomes.

Most of the forest districts exceeded their targets from 2018 to 2019. Put together, [67.4 million seedlings](#) were planted as part of the program. This must be interpreted with caution, though, because it did not take into account the seedling survival rates. We found that the program established about 525 hectares of forest in 2018 and 788 hectares in 2019. Put together, the program restored about 1,313 hectares of forested areas within two years of its implementation. This indicates that the program has been effective in restoring the country's lost forest cover.

Other afforestation programs in sub-Saharan Africa have been much more efficient. For example, the African Union's [Green Wall](#) initiative rehabilitated 3 million hectares of land in Burkina Faso from 2007 to 2019 and 15 million hectares of degraded land in Ethiopia. The same initiative led to the restoration of 5 million hectares of land in Nigeria and Niger.

The lack of sustainable funding resulting from change of governments and a lack of political commitment has led to other problems such as inadequate logistics and untimely payment of salaries to employees. We interviewed beneficiaries of the program and found that 40% of recruits and supervisors complained about inadequate logistics. Delayed salaries were a complaint among 38% of the beneficiaries interviewed.

Political interference appeared to be the major institutional and forest governance issue confronting the sustainable implementation of the Youth in Afforestation Program.

The Forest Services Division is the implementing agency for the program and is responsible for supervising the recruits. But the division

is not involved in recruiting field officers. That's done by the [Youth Employment Agency](#), whose head is appointed by the ruling party. Also, 60% of the field officers interviewed said they got their appointments through their members of parliament, most of whom were members of the ruling party.

The politicized nature of the implementation process threaten its sustainability, especially when there is a change in government.

Way forward

The rapid depletion of forest resource continues to threaten sustainable economic, social, and ecological development in Ghana. The current forest restoration strategy adopted by the government through the Youth in afforestation Program is unsustainable. To move it from rhetoric to reality, there is a need to reduce [political interference](#) and put the necessary human, logistical and financial resources in place.

The current approach should shift to a community-based and voluntary approach to forest restoration and conservation. This has been shown to work in the [Philippines](#), for example, where students at elementary and high school and college plant 10 trees as a graduation requirement. This initiative has resulted in 175 million new tree seedlings being planted every year in the country.

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