

Bamboo - untapped green gold

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Ethiopia has the largest area of bamboo in Africa. However, this green gold is poorly managed and exploited, say expert investors.



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Bamboo Senior Expert and Technologist, Mulatu Teshale agrees with the aforesaid statement. He says bamboo in Ethiopia is not well utilised beyond the construction of a houses, boats, fencing, house furniture and equipment. Thus, its huge economic contribution is underestimated and unable to play its stake in generating foreign currency accordingly.

Bamboo cultivation potential in Africa

Ethiopia, which has 67% of bamboo cultivation potential in Africa, could have been generating 60 million Birr per annum from its bamboo forests. So far, raw bamboo has been exporting to the Middle East and in other African countries like Sudan, Teshale remarks.

According to him, in the highland and lowland parts of the country, over 15 types of bamboo plants are available. Though there is a huge bamboo potential in western parts, the resource has not been widely exploited.

Kelemwork, states that the different bamboo species, that are found in Ethiopia are proved to be stronger and more suitable for different types of purposes than foreign species. Ethiopia's bamboo species are more suitable for the production of textiles, paper and pulp production, apparel, among others.



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Environment, Forest and Climate Change Ministry Senior Expert, Bamboo Focal Person, Ashebir Wondimu opines that a decade ago, bamboo was growing highly in Beneshangul State and it was exported. Since then, there are no satisfactory improvements in exporting bamboo to the foreign market.

Conversely, the nation has now started exporting bamboo products. Indeed, there are some manufacturers who are producing various equipment for export purposes.

Adal Industries PLC is a company engaged in bamboo production for the past 31 years. Though much of its products are for local consumption, it has also been exporting toothpicks to the international market, Adane Berehe, the company's general manager states.

"The big challenge is finding an export market for our products made out of bamboo." For this, he stated that the company is conducting research on the type of bamboo products which are highly demanded by the international market.

As to Teshale, currently, three companies are engaged in the development of products made out of bamboo - Bamboo Star Agro-forestry, ADAL Industry and African Bamboo. Though these manufacturers have crucial roles in promoting the products, it is unthinkable to gain the desired foreign currency from the plant.

Vital to develop and manage bamboo forests properly

Kelemwork says, due to the gap in supply, most business persons in Ethiopia are dependent on Chinese bamboo species for their products. As a result, Ethiopia has become a marketplace for foreign bamboo products instead of utilising its large bamboo forests. To end this and tap its resource, it is vital to develop and manage bamboo forests properly, he stresses.

If the country develops its bamboo resource, it can substitute imported wooden products and become a major exporter, Wondimu reflects his idea.

"If we can produce bamboo products with the desired standard and quantified levels to the international market, there is an encouraging situation in Ethiopia to export multifaceted products," Berehe says.

Presently, the company is striving to enhance the quality of its bamboo products and export them to the international market at competitive price.



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Currently, the company is exporting bamboo sticks to Indian incense stick producing companies and factories in Egypt and Sudan will be its next market destination.

Strengthening and enhancing the sector through applying various bamboo technologies is a task that is left to investors

engaged in the sector. "If this is possible, we (investors) could generate foreign currency that is used to import raw materials," Adane says.

According to Berehe, he had travelled to China to purchase modern manufacturing equipment. This has helped him to expand his product items from toothpicks to flooring and curtains.

As a solution, practical policies should be put in place at the local, national and regional level to fully realize bamboo potential," he suggests adding that "like other countries, devising curriculum in bamboo productions is decisive to promote the sector."

Ten-year bamboo strategy

Ashebir capitalises that the Ministry is also planning to open a bamboo training centre to fill manufacturers' knowledge gap. According to him, the ten-year bamboo strategy which is going to be ratified shortly would give direction on how the nation gets benefit out of the sector. It also addresses hindrances on the value chain process among producers and cultivators.

The strategy will enable the country to properly develop, manage and utilize bamboo forests. Equally, it enables it to develop the four million hectares of land, including the recently identified three million hectares. Moreover, it is considered to attract more companies to the area, he adds.

Six of the regional states in Ethiopia - Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Oromiya, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples', and Tigray - have huge potential for bamboo cultivation.

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