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**Full Length Research Paper**  
**Actors and their Roles for Sustainable Forest Governance in South Eastern Ethiopia: The Case of Bale Eco-Region**

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**Abstract**

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*This study examines the roles of various actors in sustainable forest governance in south-eastern Ethiopia, focusing on the Bale Eco-Region. The study used a descriptive design with qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The findings indicate that all critical actors have the opportunity to participate in forest governance, but this has not led to desired outcomes. The government and organized forest communities have a crucial role in jointly governing the forests through participatory forest management. The government, specifically the Environment, Forest, and Climate Change Authorities, regulates and controls all forests, while Oromia Forest and Wildlife is responsible for protecting and managing forests in the Oromia Regional State. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as FARM Africa and SOS Sahel Ethiopia, indirectly influence government decisions and implement them in the Bale Eco-Region. Research institutions and media have a limited role in influencing government decisions and implementation. Despite these efforts, deforestation and forest degradation persist, and there has been insufficient improvement in the lives of forest-dependent communities. Therefore, it is crucial to empower these actors to effectively contribute to sustainable forest governance.*



## 1. Introduction

Long years ago, the customary systems of forest management were popular in Europe (Gilmour, 2016) and other parts of the world. However, these laws and institutions have been gradually faded away with the advent of industrialization and modernization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During colonial times, centralized forest management was in place by the colonial power (Gilmour, 2016). The communities, had neither legal rights nor access and economic incentives to manage and use the forests (Wily, 2001, cited in Alhassan, 2010). In the aftermath of colonialism, the state retained its authority to continue to administer the forest resources through centralized system (Arts and Visseren-Hamakers, 2012).

Currently, most countries are decentralized to improve efficiently conserving and improving rural and forest-dependent livelihoods (Hajjar et al., 2012). The transfer of the political authority from the central state to sub-national administration was a very influential worldwide happenings in the forest sector that influenced local people participation, policy effectiveness and enhanced check and balance at sub-national level (Arts and Visseren-Hamakers, 2012). Decentralization and networks of community-based forest groups (forest federations) are often viewed as a means of promoting good forest governance that is more responsive and adaptive to local needs, especially to the poor and the underprivileged (Suryanata et al., 2003). However, in practice, decentralization and devolution have only been partially realized, and many governments retain significant authority over forest management (Gilmour, 2016). Today, a much larger

number of actors have come to influence how environmental assets are used (Andersson, 2006).

In Ethiopia, the socialist regime known as Derge (1974-1991) nationalized the country's forest resources (Gobeze et al., 2009). Consistent with its ideology, the Derge proclaimed a new law i.e. Forest and Wildlife Conservation and Development Proclamation No. 192/1980 in 1980 and recognized three types of new forest ownership namely; state ownership, ownership by peasant associations and ownership by urban dwellers' associations (Nune, 2007). Generally, during this time, the forest was protected by rangers and forest guards, and the communities were not authorized to use the forests. Later on, in response to deforestation and also as a result of the political shift following the coming of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to power in the early 1990s, pilot projects of the decentralized participatory forest management (PFM) approach began to be implemented in the mid-1990s. Contrary to the former approach, PFM is known for giving more room for the participation of NGOs and local communities. Some NGOs, especially GTZ, FARM Africa, and SOS Sahel Ethiopia, had initiated the approach in most parts of the country. Nearly 40% of the country's forest resources are now under some form of PFM (Lemenih et al., 2015).

It is widely agreed among policy makers and national planners of most countries that states cannot adequately manage and policy makers of large public forestry states and protected areas without public involvement and support (Banajee et al., 1997). According to Kessler (2004), community involvement enhances

public support and commitment. Furthermore, it reduces the marginalization of the weak sections of the society, and enables interventions and technologies to be better adapted to local socio-cultural and environmental conditions (Reed, 2008); and enhances legitimacy (Kessler, 2004). Contrary to this, delayance in decision making, increased expenses, tension among different actors, and lack of consensus are the major challenges associated with community participation (Kessler, 2004). Thus, it is clear that participation alone is not a panacea that solves all forest-related problems (Banajee, 1997) unless the relevant actors effectively and responsibly carry out their responsibilities.

Actor's contribution to the sustainable forest governance is great. But the question here is what does sustainable forest governance means. To understand this, it is vital first to define forest governance. The term "forest governance" has various meanings: from steering in general to new modes of governance that go beyond the confines of the state, which can be multi-level in nature (Arts and Visseren-Hamakers, 2012). It is a consultative approach in which the state, the civil societies and the private sectors jointly pass and implement different forest related decisions. This can take place at national, sub-national and local level. On the other hand, sustainable forest governance is a consultative approach among those actors in governing the forest resources that considered the need and interest of the present and future generation. At the core of this, there is reduction of deforestation and forest degradation and the sustainable use of these vital resource by the authorized bodies.

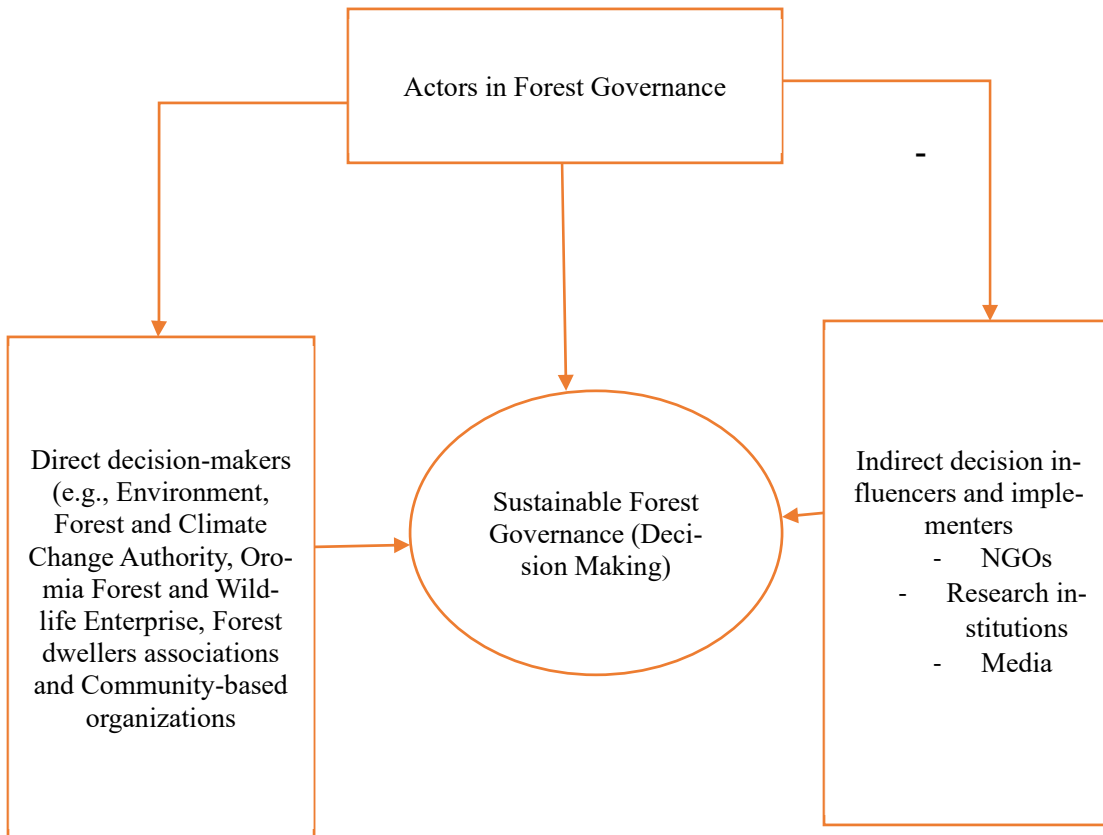
Despite a lack of effective participation by concerned actors' of forest governance, actors' participation in forest governance has not been studied so far in the Bale Eco-Region. Hence, there is a lack of substantial empirical investigation regarding actors' participation (Grimble and Wallard, 1998) particularly about their role for sustainable forest governance in the study area. Some of the existing literature (e.g.. Sagueye (2017), Tadesse (2016), Ayana et al., (2015), Lemenih et al. (2015), Ayana (2014), Engida and Mengistu (2013), Engida and Teshome (2012), Winberg (2010), Gobeze et al., (2009) and Lemenih and Bekele (2008)), have emphasized on the participatory forest management (Birhan et al., 2021a). Actors' roles for sustainable forest governance in Ethiopia in general, and forest governance Bale Eco-region, in particular, has been overlooked by these studies. Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine the roles of actors in sustainable forest governance in South-eastern Ethiopia, taking the Bale Eco-Region as a case study.

## **2. Analytical Framework**

Different actors play different and interrelated roles for the sustainable governance of forests in the Bale eco-region. Broadly, they can be categorized into direct decision makers which can also be called the primary actors. This includes the following: Environment, Forest and Climate Change Authority, Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise, Forest Dwellers Associations, and Community-based organizations. Secondly, there are indirect decision makers and implementers or the so called secondary actors. This also comprises the following bodies: NGOs (like FARM Africa and SOS Sahel Ethiopia), Research institutions and Medias.

As it will be discussed in details under the results section, the Environment, forest and climate change authority is the lower layer of the Environment, forest and climate change commissions were established at the federal office. Whereas, the Oromia Forest and Wildlife enterprise were established at sub-national level in Oromia Regional State. The forest dwellers association and the community-based organizations are the form of participatory forest management that were established and made

functional in the Bale Eco-region. NGOs like Farm Africa and SOS Sahel Ethiopia are active NGOs that are currently engaging on the forests in the Bale eco-region. While the direct decision makers or primary actors play a direct role in sustainable forest governance by directly making the decision, the indirect decision influencers and implementers or the secondary actors play the role of indirectly influencing decisions.



### **3. Methods of the Study**

#### **Research Design and Approach**

To come up with a detailed and relevant data, a descriptive research design and a qualitative research approach were employed based on the nature of the study. Hence, as it has been described here under in details, rich and relevant data were collected from howmany? critical actors through relevant tools such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

#### **Sample Size and Sampling Techniques**

As a primary sources, empirical data was collected from West Arsi, East, and West Bale Zones. In total, 70 respondents were consulted through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. These are 10 experts of Oromia Environment, Forest and Climate Change Authority at regional and local levels, 10 experts of Oromia Forest and Wild Life Enterprises, 5 experts of NGOs (Farm Africa and SOS Sahel Ethiopia), 32 leaders and members of Forest Dwellers Associations and Community Based Organizations, three leaders and members of Unions, three executive committees of Cooperatives, three researchers and two journalists were consulted through in-depth interviews and Focus group discussions. Forty six experts and how many leaders were selected and consulted for an in-depth interview because of their better experience and knowledge. Furthermore, four FGDs, each having six members, were made with the foresters mainly to triangulate the reliability of the data. As the study is qualitative in nature, the number of respondents are not predetermined, instead, it

has been based on the saturation of the collected data. The secondary information was used from relevant books, journal articles, and published and unpublished studies to support the argument.

#### **Methods of Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed through descriptive analysis. To do this, similar guiding questions were prepared for both the in-depth interviews and FGDs. The results were recorded using recording materials based on the respondents' consent. Then, the audio was carefully transcribed, and afterward, it was translated from the local language to English. Following this, it was repeatedly read and coded, and thematic areas were identified. Finally, the interpretation and analysis were carried out using descriptive analysis.

### **4. Results and Discussions**

#### **Trends of Stakeholders Participation in Forest Governance in the Bale Eco-Region**

With the change of regime and Ethiopia's transformation into ethnic-based federalism in 1991, the power to administer natural resources in general and forest resources in particular, was shared to regional states in general and Oromia Regional States in Particular. The federal government, of course, retained the power to establish the natural resources and forest policy and laws. Based on this, the government established Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise in 2008 and then gave it the power to administer the forests of Oromia Regional State. The enterprise was given the power to manage, conserve, and use forest and

forest products in Oromia.

Before the establishment of Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprises, the forest in Bale Eco-Region was ruled in two ways. The first was through a centralized approach, which restricted the local community from ruling and using the forests. In 1998, another approach known as participatory forest management (PFM), which gives space for community participation, was introduced. The typical example of PFMs in the eco-region are the Forest Dwellers Associations of Adaba-Dodola and the community-based organizations (CBOs).

### **The Practical Role of Actors for Sustainable Forest Governance in the Bale Eco-Region**

Different actors are playing different crucial roles that could contribute to the effective managements of these vital resources in the eco-region. Broadly, they can be categorized into direct decision makers and indirect decision influencers and implementers based on their governance roles. Direct decision makers have the power to directly participate in the governance of forests resources. As it will be discussed in detail here under, these actors are the government and the community. The indirect decision influencers and implementers are those who do not directly govern the forest resources. But, they provide support through materials and information and shape forest governance decisions and implementation. It includes NGOs, research institutions, and media. Let us see them in tandem.

#### **Direct Decision Makers**

##### **1. The Government**

The government in general and the Environment, Forest, and Climate Change Authorities

in particular are playing a leading role in the governance of forest resources in Bale Eco-Region. Generally, the government engaged in the management, conservation, protection, and facilitation of the legal use of forest and forest resources. However, it is widely agreed among the respondents that the government has given less priority for the forests (in terms of allocating the required funds) than other sectors. Contrary to this, the governments are directly planting and also influencing the plantation of trees under the green legacy projects since 2018. To further elaborate it, it is vital to discuss the role of two institutions associated with the government here under.

##### **i. The Environment, Forest and Climate change Authority**

As shown above, the government sector that contributes greatly to the forest governance in Oromia Regional State in general, and Bale Eco-Region in particular is the Environment, Forest and Climate Change Authority. This sector has offices at Regional, Zonal, and Wereda levels. Regarding forest, it is concerned with the protection, development, and sustainable use of forest and forest resources and biodiversity. In other words, it regulates the forest and forest products and the biodiversity.

As one of regulatory body, it is responsible for monitoring and auditing the Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise and PFMs activities. If they fail to carry out their responsibility as per the agreement, the office is authorized to take corrective measures. However, the office has not yet made auditing. This is due to a lack of financial, material, and human resources attributed to its recent establishment in 2017. Hence, the state of the forest after it has been

transferred to these two institutions is not well known.

The sector is authorized to give legal permission to those forest products harvested, keeping the forest law of the country in general and the regional law in particular. The Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprises, the Forest Dwellers Associations and community-based organizations (CBOs), are required to receive pass permits from the Environment, Forest and Climate Change Authority to transport and sell forest products.

The authority takes legal measures against contrabandists. Furthermore, it protects against deforestation, coordinating with other sectors such as Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise, the police, the prosecutor, and local administration. Using forests for construction, illegal settlement, expansion of agricultural lands, and conversion of forest land to grazing lands are the significant causes of deforestation. For instance, according to the respondent, an illegal settlement within the forest boundary is high in the Bale Eco-Region. To handle this illegal settlement, a task force committee, which is composed of nine sectors (Wereda courts, Police Officer, Justice Office, Environment, Forest and Climate Change Authority, Forest and Wildlife Enterprise, Bale National Park, Woreda Administration, Agricultural Office, and Land Administration Office) was set up.

## **ii. Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise (Public-Private Partnership)**

The Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise is another office working on forests in the Bale Eco-Region. It is a manifestation of a public-private partnership. After it had taken part of

the forest through concession in 2008, the enterprise began ruling over the forest under its jurisdiction. The enterprise founded nine branches and thirty-eight districts throughout Oromia Regional State to ease the administration of these vital resources. It is authorized to manage, conserve, and sustainably use the forest and forest products.

In the Oromia regional state, most plantation forests are found under the rule of the Enterprise. After assessing the existing market demands, the office sells the forest and forest products. The key informant indicated that the Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise sells forest and forest products, keeping its scientific procedure. It recovers areas formerly under plantation with new plantation forests. The fundamental question here is whether the enterprise balances the utilization with the plantation and conservation. Regarding this, most respondents estimated that the utilization is more than plantation and conservation. This, however, has a great effect on the sustainability of these vital resources.

This enterprise performs every one of its activities based on the income it generates from forests. The plantation, management, conservation, and protection of forests undertaken by this office are done by the revenue that it generates from the sale of plantation forests.

## **iii. Community through Participatory Forest Management**

### **i. Forest Dwellers Associations**

Forest Dwellers Associations are responsible for protecting the forest, planting trees, and keeping the forest from illegal destruction and grabbing. After fulfilling these, the Forest Dwellers Associations are given the right to sustainably use forest resources. The members

are allowed to sell and use aged trees, use grazing lands, and undertake beekeeping activities inside the forest.

According to the informants, the Forest Dwellers Associations were relatively effective in the year before 2015. But, starting in 2015, the Forest Dwellers Associations began to face two challenges: political instability and demographic pressure. Because of the political instability, people began highly violating the laws and, destructed the forests, particularly during the transition. The non-members began to claim the use of forests arguing that nature has equally provided us with these vital forest resources. Another challenge is demographic pressure within Forest Dwellers Associations. When the Forest Dwellers Associations were first formed in 1998, it was decided that the capacity of one association is 30 households. Due to this, the excess households were obliged to withdraw from the compartment. The early settlers were given priority at that time. The children of the members had grown and claimed membership in the Forest Dwellers Associations. Initially in its formation, the government promised to arrange ways in which those youths can be withdrawn. However, the respondents confirmed that the government failed to keep its promise. Furthermore, their withdrawal will separate families apart. Hence due to social reasons and the low commitment of the government to enforce, the resettlement of part of the community was not achieved. They married each other within the boundaries of Forest Dwellers Associations which in turn contributed to its failure. Hence, the capacity-based Forest Dwellers Association failed because of more households than its initial capacity.

The local community mostly engages in the

management of natural forests. Nevertheless there are also plantation forests that are currently being managed by the local community. In areas where the community carries out the protection of such forests, they are authorized to sell and share 50%. In this way, some members accrued many benefits from plantation forests. This has taken place in some kebeles of Adaba and Dodola weredas. In the same way as Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise, they are supposed to replace and plant trees which is vital for the sustainability of those resources. However, the lack of solid protection and conservation of the planted trees is highly observed in those areas.

## **ii. Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)**

Unlike the forest-dwellers associations, membership in the CBOs is open to everyone living in the kebele. CBO is different from Forest Dwellers Associations in that it does not take into account the forest's carrying capacity. Furthermore, unlike Forest Dwellers Associations, the CBO is not allowed to sell the aged trees and share the dividend among members. The CBO is expected to protect the forest and use forest products only for home consumption. They do not drive direct benefit from the selling of the forests. NGOs such as FARM Africa and SOS Sahel Ethiopia have been providing different technical and material supports to the CBO's.

## **Indirect Decision Influencers and Implementers**

### **i. The Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)**

While it is widely agreed that there are only a few NGOs that are interested in working on the forest in the country in general and the Oromia



Regional state in particular, different NGOs are currently participating in the protection, conservation, and management of forests in the Bale Eco-Region in one way or another. For instance, before the coming of FARM Africa and SOS Sahel Ethiopia, GTZ was working on the conservation, management, and sustainable use of forests in Adaba and Dodola. It was GTZ that initiated the formation of Forest Dwellers Associations in these two Weredas. After working with Forest Dwellers Associations for brief years, the GTZ had withdrawn.

The NGOs currently actively supporting the protection, conservation, management, and sustainable use of forests in the Bale Eco-Region are FARM Africa, SOS Sahel Ethiopia and Frunk Furt (active around the Bale National Park). In 2006, FARM Africa and SOS Sahel Ethiopia had initiated the formation of CBOs in the Bale Eco-Region. Initially, four CBOs were formed. After that, the Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise and these NGOs have established more CBOs in priority areas with more forests. Currently, there are around 64 CBOs in the Bale Eco-Region. The FARM Africa and SOS Sahel Ethiopia are working together and are active in 11 Weredas in Bale Eco-Region: four Weredas from West Arsi and 7 seven Weredas from Bale Zone.

These NGOs had first designed the Bale Eco-Region Sustainable Management Program (BERSMP). Under this, they gave capacity-building training and established the CBOs in the East and West Bale Zone. With the support of Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise, CBOs were established to ensure government-community joint administration of forests in

the area. This, creates created a sense of ownership in the community that was not observed before. Because it allowed the community to use forest resources sustainably without harming them.

The capacity-building training was directly given to the CBOs and government sector workers. It capacitated leaders of CBOs, members of Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise, members of the agricultural office (because the forest sector was under them before the establishment of the Environment, Forest and Climate change authority), land administration office, and cooperatives promotion agency. However, it is widely agreed among the members of the CBOs that the training is frequently given to the same leaders who failed to transfer down to the grassroots level. In addition to these, FARM Africa and SOS Sahel Ethiopia have also given materials support (computer, GPS, Motorbike, and others) to both the CBOs and the government bodies. However, some of these materials, especially nursery materials, were not made functional. Because the community did not establish nursery sites.

The NGOs also trained the community on how to diversify livelihoods and how to boost productivity, particularly coffee. However, no significant changes were observed in the lives of the community mainly because of poor implementation.

In the other phase of the project, FARM Africa and SOS Sahel Ethiopia introduced the REDD+ (Reduction of Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) project in to the eco-region. It was aimed to increase the carbon stock through forest plantation and conservation. The community had successfully contributed to the success of this goal in a year

between 2012 and 2015, expecting the promised financial benefits from the international community. However, it did not bring the expected financial benefit to the community on the targeted time. This resulted in further deforestation and forest degradation particularly in a year after 2015. Recently, the official indicated that an attempt is undergoing to finance the REDD+.

### **ii. Research Institutions**

Some known research institutions in the Bale Eco-regions are Madda Walabu University, Sinana Agricultural Research Institute, and Wendo Genet College of Forestry and Natural Resources. However, these institutions played a limited role in carrying out the study, proposing alternative ways of tackling the problem, publicizing results, and providing capacity-building training on the forests. While it is evident that the universities have been conducting a study on various issues in the eco-region, more emphasis is given to the other aspects than PFM in particular and forest governance in general.

### **iii. The Media**

The media is also playing a limited role in sustainable forest governance in the Bale Eco-region. According to the informants, some active Media, such as OMN (Oromia Media Network), Shashemene FM, and EBC (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation) have been contributing in educating and creating awareness about the current state of deforestation and forest degradation. For instance, the informants indicated that the Oromia Forest and Wildlife Enterprise has sponsored OMN to discuss forest issues in Oromia Regional State. Some of the issues are the existing legislation, causes of

deforestation, best practices in forest governance, and the measures taken to correct the behavior of the individuals. Furthermore, the Shashemene FM has also been serving as a platform for discussion regarding forests. Besides, the experts asserted that documentaries were done on EBC (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation) through the initiation and support of the government.

Despite these, however, the community has asserted weak coordination between media and responsible government sectors. Because, primarily the media is not willing to approach the issue of forest and forest governance unless invited and sponsored by the government or other concerned actors. On the other hand, the concerned government bodies, mainly the Environment, Forest and Climate Change Authority, lack enough budget to invite and let them produce news on the issue of concern.

### **Discussions**

Different stakeholders are currently active in the governance of the forests in the Bale Eco-region. While the participation of the critical actors is indispensable, participation alone is not enough unless they have effectively and responsibly discharged their responsibilities. It is concluded that the existing forest decentralization is the transfer of authority and responsibilities down to the organized communities. However, the communities are not empowered well enough to be in parallel with the government on decisions, but decisions are not made excluding them.

The intention of sustainable forest governance in general and PFM in particular, i.e sustainable forest management and livelihood improvement (Chhetri et al.,2013; cited in Tadesse et al.,2017) have not been realized in

Bale Eco-Region. Deforestation and forest degradation have persisted, and the forest-dependent community livelihoods have not been improved as expected (Birhan et al., 2021b). Only a limited member of the Forest Dwellers Associations, they have got limited direct financial benefit. Currently, the Forest Dwellers Association itself is endangered. On the other hand, in the community-based organization, the members have no direct financial benefit from the forest apart from using the forest for home consumption. Contrary to this, Gobeze et al (2009) argued that participatory forest management has improved the state of the forest and the living conditions of participant households, at least within the project lifetime in Bonga, Ethiopia. However, this has not happened in the Bale Eco-Region, particularly in a year after 2015. Of course, between 2012 and 2015, under the REDD+ project, 5.5 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent were produced within three years (Birhan et al., 2021b). This internationally certified amount of reduction has got no international market. The community has no financial incentive for generating this amount of carbon dioxide equivalent. Probably, the absence of incentives, along with the political instability during the transition and the inability of the actors to effectively and responsibly carry out their duties, contributed to the worsening of deforestation in the area.

### 5. Conclusions

Generally, the intention of sustainable forest governance i.e., reduction of deforestation and forest degradation, and improvement of forest-dependent communities' livelihood, is not attained as expected because of the following principal reasons. Firstly, the Oromia Forest and Wild Life Enterprise has focused more on

utilization than the conservation and development of the forest. Secondly, the Environment, Forest, and Climate Change Authorities have not yet evaluated and audited the status of forest resources transferred to Oromia Forest and Wildlife enterprise and the community through agreement. Thirdly, the capacity-based PFM (the so-called Forest Dwellers Associations) is failing mainly because of demographic pressure which means that more households were emerged with in the delineated forest areas than which was recommended. The fourth reason is that the capacity-building training provided by the NGOs has not reached the grassroots community. Finally, the community has minimal or no economic benefit from forest conservation and management due to the failure of the expected carbon trade.

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