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From Forest to Future: Creating Jobs and Sustainable Growth in Ethiopia through Bamboo Agroforestry

Forestry and agriculture play a major role in Ethiopian economy, employing over 85% of the population. However, the sector faces several challenges that constrain youth's ability to gain meaningful employment from it. Enter African Bamboo, a pioneer in bamboo-based alternatives to building materials. Utilising smart, energy-efficient production technology, African Bamboo integrates forestry, manufacturing, distribution, and research and development operations to create a model that balances innovation with environmental and social responsibility.

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Rural Ethiopia is grappling with shrinking land ownership due to a rapidly growing population and the highly fragmented plot ownership. Despite redistribution efforts by the government, land ownership has decreased from 1.15 to an average of 0.96 ha per household (FAO, [2017](#)). Secondly, the dilapidated infrastructure also makes it difficult for small-holder farmers to access market forcing them to remain in subsistence farming further keeping them trapped in poverty. These combined with lack of diversified employment, skills training and education opportunities, restrict rural youth's ability to find stable income in Ethiopia. The ILO's (2021) "Is the Future Ready for Youth Report" highlights the urban myth as an additional challenge, creating a misconception that better employment opportunities exist in urban areas. Consequently, rural youths in Ethiopia often migrate to overcrowded cities, exacerbating the already high urban unemployment rate, with an estimated 1 million rural-urban migrants annually.

As such, this case study explores how a community-driven agroforestry ecosystem business development, Forestry and Other Land Use (AFOLU) initiative in Ethiopia, is empowering women and youth, transforming rural livelihoods, and forging new pathways for scaling diversified employment and income opportunities.



Unlocking Pathways – Scaling Bamboo Agroforestry Practices

Africa Bamboo's bamboo ecosystem of agroforestry projects in the rural Ethiopian highlands have created significant employment opportunities, improved capital access, and enhanced market opportunities for rural youth and women. Their CFYE-supported project addresses interconnected challenges such as youth and women rural under-employment, climate change mitigation, resilience, and sustainable food production. Implemented through large-scale agroforestry in Sidama and West Arsi, this initiative also uplifts rural smallholder communities striving to overcome the poverty threshold. By fostering meaningful farming and non-farming jobs through MSMEs involved in agroforestry services, and digital MRV, biochar production, and carbon market development, the project promotes technical skill development and diversified income and job opportunities in underserved regions.

In partnership with small holder farmers (COOPs), agroforestry communities (PFM groups), youth, and women MSMEs, African Bamboo is implementing multilayered sustainable practices that deliver significant social, economic, and environmental benefits. Ethiopia's 1.4 million hectares of indigenous Afromontane highlands bamboo agroforest represent an underutilised resource with the potential to generate up to \$5 billion in annual revenue and provide over 3 million jobs by 2035 (INBAR, 2020). Seizing this vast potential, African Bamboo has developed a resilient ecosystem business model centered on bamboo



Mastering a Skill-Building Framework

The development of a bamboo agroforestry ecosystem business model represents a multifaceted approach to job creation and economic development. By integrating bamboo-based cooperatives (COOPs) and youth and women micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), African Bamboo establishes a robust framework for sustainable livelihoods. The ecosystem begins with ensuring access to essential inputs such as seedlings and hand tools crucial for successful bamboo cultivation and maintenance. Technical training spans every stage of bamboo management, from planting and after-care to harvesting, transportation, processing, and quality control. Specialised training in biochar production, composting, and digital MRV techniques also creates opportunities for new MSMEs to thrive. Overall, it is evident that sustainably cultivating, regenerating, and conserving forests for carbon avoidance or sequestration

agroforestry practices.



requires skilled labor and entrepreneurship to be incorporated across the value chain and thus presents skilled employment opportunities, especially for women – who are already highly represented in agroforestry settings.

The project is committed to enhancing these skilled employment opportunities by providing comprehensive technical training for local smallholder farmer communities, agroforest communities, youth, and women. By focusing on ensuring the sustainable growth and management of bamboo agroforestry ecosystem, African Bamboo is boosting diversified market and job opportunities and stimulating the local economy through inter-connected activities.

On top of building skills and capacity for more sustainable agriculture, the project enhances the digital literacy of women and youth entrepreneurs by teaching them how to use digital monitoring, reporting, and verification (MRV) tools to ensure the traceability of agroforestry project activities. These entrepreneurs who are part of African Bamboo's ecosystem will also be receiving training to establish bamboo agroforestry forest-to-market services, unlocking access to markets and green finance services.

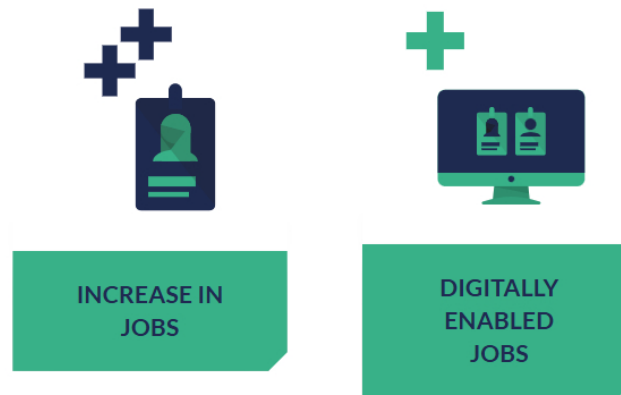
The project aims to train 45,000 beneficiaries, in line with their objective of achieving 50% female representation in accessing green finance across the bamboo agroforestry value chains. So far, these efforts have significantly increased job opportunities, providing employment for nearly 5,000 vulnerable youths,

including 66% females. This includes rural youths, single mothers, TVET graduates, and university graduates, boosting income, and fostering community development and resilience.

What's Next? Scaling a Sustainable Future for Employment

The bamboo agroforestry project across 12,000 hectares in the Afromontane highlands is poised to unlock an array of employment pathways in Ethiopia, aiming to generate 69,000 biochar jobs, 33,000 transport jobs, 21,000 harvesting jobs, 4,000 fostering jobs, 139,000 planting and aftercare jobs, 22,000 improvement jobs, 6,000 bamboo processing jobs, 10,000 MRV (Measurement, Reporting, and Verification) jobs, and 350,000 sericulture jobs.

Through these integrated ecosystem approaches, African Bamboo is establishing a robust bamboo value chain agribusiness enterprise that promotes diversified non-farming job creation and fosters sustainable economic development in Ethiopia. By unlocking these employment pathways, African Bamboo is contributing to the economic empowerment and sustainable future of Ethiopia's rural communities.





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