

Ambassador talks about Better Globe Forestry

Bart Ouvry, the Ambassador of Belgium to Kenya, talked to Wanjiru Ciira, the Managing Editor of Miti magazine, on his impressions concerning the work BGF is doing in its plantations. Below are excerpts from the interview:

What do you think about Better Globe Forestry?

What is so remarkable about Better Globe Forestry is that they are engaged in a sustainable activity. This is not the classical cooperation that we had in the 60s, 70s and 80s. These are private people who want to invest in an activity that is important for improving the lives of Kenyans, and do so in a sustainable way.

This is a long term private investment that should bring a return on investment; it has to be a profitable venture. There should be a return both for the investor and the people in Kenya.

How would you describe what you have seen at the BGF plantations in Kiambere and in Witu-Nyongoro?

For me, my most important observation is that BGF has a very strong link with the local people. Every time I visited, we had a meeting with the local people. This is not just a foreign project bringing technology and know-how from abroad. It is a project that involves the local people. It creates jobs, supports education, and is sensitive to the security needs of the people. There is a real effort to integrate the local population into the project.

What do you think about the leadership and integrity of BGF?

I think their main strength is that they are always keen to listen. They bring technical knowledge and capital, but are always willing to listen to the local people. If at the beginning they did not listen enough to the local people, they would make mistakes that could have been avoided. They have taken in this lesson very well and are always ready to accept solutions which local people can offer.

What do you think about BGF's way of financing their plantations by selling trees as long-term investments to people worldwide?

The financing of Better Globe is a formula which is very close to crowd funding. It's not just one big investor or country bringing in a chunk of money. They really want to have as many stakeholders as possible. Everyone who invests in BGF is not just bringing in money – but is a stakeholder in terms of sustainable development and is thus committed to both the environment and the well-being of Kenyans.

BGF organises travel for their investors so they can see how their investment is faring and what it means for the people of Kenya.

What do you think massive tree-planting will do for the communities?

Planting trees bring in jobs and has long-term benefits for the environment – for example, ensuring we receive regular rains and acting as a water reservoir for the country. We need more forest cover in Kenya. Over the last 100 years, the forest cover here has diminished tremendously. This has now been stopped, to a large extent, but we need more trees to maintain the blessed climate that many regions in Kenya enjoy.

How do you think planting trees will help the people of Kenya?

Tree-planting will improve things at different levels. In the long term, it will improve the environment but it will also create new economic activities such as production of wood both for local consumption as well as for export, something that Kenya needs. Kenya needs to have more export commodities. There is tea, coffee – but there is no reason why Kenya cannot export sustainably produced timber or even other products like furniture made from high quality timber.

Why do you think BGF has MoUs with KEFRI , KFS and ICRAF?

BGF is not just a private company that wants to make profits – they also want to improve livelihoods. They do this locally through their plantations but they also want to have an impact globally, so some of their activities involve offering transfer of knowledge and experience in forestry. BGF wants other organisations to take advantage of their experience in Kenya.

What do you think about the forestry information that BGF shares with others through Miti magazine?

Growing trees is a long-term project. For that reason, it is important to share information with professionals, the youth and others about afforestation because forests are an investment for the future. Miti magazine encourages people to plant trees, shows how they can make money from trees, and informs readers about BGF's activities.

Should more people, companies and organisations support tree-planting in Africa?

BGF's model is one of sustainable development. They are creating jobs in semi-arid zones, areas where it is very difficult to create livelihoods and grow crops. They are not competing with the growing of food crops in the more fertile areas but are offering a means of earning a living to people who had none in arid and semi-arid areas. This is a model for others to follow: combine environmental action with social development.