



# Green Gold

Bamboo remains one of the great untapped natural resources of Ethiopia, which FARM-Africa is now promoting in order to strengthen rural livelihoods and to sustainably management fragile natural resources

In the Bale Mountains of southern Ethiopia, highland bamboo (*Yushania alpina* syn. *Arundinaria alpina*) has long been traded in local markets to make fences and simple furniture, but provided limited income to only a small number of people. Despite living in the centre of the bamboo trade of the Bale Mountains, Ibrahim Safi was unable to find employment and struggling to

support his wife Etenesh Hasan and their young daughter Yani.

FARM-Africa has been working with SOS Sahel Ethiopia and government forestry services in the Bale Mountains since 2006, as part of the Bale Eco-Region Sustainable Management Programme (BERSMP). One



of the goals of BERSMP is to strengthen and diversify businesses that grow, process and trade non-timber forest products such as bamboo, coffee, honey and medicinal plants.

By training jobless youth in bamboo furniture making, value can be significantly added to the raw materials and new markets developed. Ibrahim was trained as part of a three-month apprenticeship and provided with tools. As bamboo is quick growing and abundant in the area, using it for furniture making reduces the pressure on endangered native trees such as African Pencil Cedar (*Juniperus procera*), East African yellowwood (*Podocarpus falcatus*) and African Redwood (*Hagenia abyssinica*). As Ibrahim states *'Working in bamboo minimises the pressure on trees that take much longer to grow and that have been deforested in recent years.'*

After returning from training Ibrahim was able to secure orders for furniture from the Bale Mountains National Park, local hotels, a library and from private customers. His new business has been so successful that Ibrahim is currently building a coffee shop and art gallery entirely from bamboo and eucalyptus from a nearby plantation. This venture combines his two passions for bamboo and sculpting local plants, animals and people. It is the first two-story house in

the area to be made of bamboo and Ibrahim hopes it will serve as a demonstration to his neighbours of the versatility of the material: *'It will show everybody who passes that an entire house can be made simply of bamboo, which is cheap and easily available.'*

The range of products that can be produced with bamboo is truly amazing and includes woven fencing, and roofing, modern laminate flooring, incense sticks, tooth picks, venetian blinds and cooking utensils. Bamboo can also be used for food, as an animal fodder and a fuel. One of the most exciting products is bamboo charcoal, which is currently being experimented with in the country and could reduce demand for fuelwood.

But raw materials and a good idea are often not enough to find a market for these products that will result in a healthy profit. FARM-Africa therefore supported Ibrahim and others to take part in a business skills mentoring programme that introduced them to methods for assessing the market, projecting profits and understanding risks. This has helped Ibrahim take a long term view of his business and make plans for if the worst happens.

By strengthening the livelihoods that depend on natural resources, FARM-Africa's work helps to alleviate rural poverty and promotes the sustainable use of fragile forests.

