Kenya: The roots of the current drought

Ongoing heart-rending stories of starving people in Kenya are highlighting the problem of drought and its causes. Kenya, east Africa's richest nation and a top attraction for tourists who flock to its reserves and parks for safari holidays, is under a severe crisis of poor rains that hits its harvests. The number of people who face starvation is spiralling ever higher: from 2.5 million in December to 4 million now, according to Kenya's minister for emergency operations.

Drought has been a feature of the region, a natural climatic phenomenon. However, two things have changed: deforestation and the emergence of global climate change.

Large scale destruction of forests, where evapo-transpiration from their dense vegetation contributes in a great percentage to rainfall -even more than oceans and seas- is the local source of the current drought crisis. The precise area of forest lost from Kenya over recent decades is partially known. It is estimated that the country currently has under two per cent of the original forest cover left. Clearing forests to establish industrial tree plantations using mainly exotic species, conversion of forests into agricultural land, logging, forest excisions with the intent of converting the area to other land uses like settlement or private agriculture are some of the underlying causes of deforestation in Kenya.

Notwithstanding destruction of the forest has come from outsiders, mainstream approaches try to put the blame for deforestation on indigenous people, proposing their eviction from the forest. Such has been the case with the Ogiek, that have lived in and from the Mau forest since time immemorial collecting honey, wild fruits, nuts, and game meat. While other Kenyan forests were being destroyed by “development”, Ogiek traditional forest management ensured the conservation of the Mau forest. If Kenya is to reverse deforestation, the country should learn from the Ogiek’s traditional forest use practices and try to replicate them in the rehabilitation of the remaining forest areas –instead of trying to evict them from their forest.

On the other hand, global climate change is also almost certainly at the heart of the current drought. It has long been predicted that climate change will result in more extreme weather events like droughts, floods and hurricanes. Within that context, extreme droughts such as this one should not come as a surprise.

It is also important to underscore that both deforestation and climate change can be traced back to the industrialized North, whose wealth and power arose –and still arises- from overexploitation and overconsumption of natural resources from forests and forest lands –particularly in the South- within a fossil fuel-based energy economy. Both processes –deforestation and fossil fuel burning- result in increasing amounts of carbon emissions that further contribute to global warming. For many Southern countries, like Kenya, the result is extreme climatic events such as the current drought that lead to increased poverty, suffering and hunger.

Article based on information from: “Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Kenya”, Lynette Obare and J. B. Wangwe, http://www.wrm.org.uy/deforestation/Africa/Kenya.html; “Hunger kills in Kenya's north as drought takes toll”, January 20, 2006, Nita Bhalla, Reuters News

Service, http://www.planetark.org/dailynewsstory.cfm/newsid/34595/story.htm; “Deforestation, Climate Change Magnify East African Drought”, ENS January 16, 2006, http://earthhopenetwork.net/Deforestation_Climate_ Change_Magnify_East_African_Drought.htm