
Cameroon: What poverty means to the Bagyeli people

To outsiders, the Bagyeli may appear very poor. They have next to nothing in the way of material possessions, little or no money, and are still often without a permanent house. Yet one of the most important indicators of wealth for these peoples is the access they enjoy to the forest and its resources and the amount to which they are able to participate in decision-making processes relative to their livelihoods.

In 2000, Cameroon's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper was approved by the World Bank, making the country eligible for debt relief. However, Friends of the Earth Cameroon raised concerns that the voices of indigenous and tribal peoples such as the Bagyeli have not been heard, and that their perception of poverty and aspirations regarding development are not represented in the strategy.

The Bagyeli 'pygmies' living in the Campo Ma'an national park in southwest Cameroon have sustained themselves for centuries using their vast knowledge of the plant and animal life of the surrounding forest. They traditionally survived by hunting, fishing and gathering honey, fruit, wild yams, caterpillars and snails. When they track animals, they cover themselves with a powder made from the bark of the Moabi tree as camouflage. A nomadic people until recently, they sheltered themselves in temporary huts made of sticks and leaves.

Although a few Bagyeli still follow the traditions of their elders, intensive logging, agriculture and a pipeline traversing their lands have threatened their traditional lifestyles as well as those of other pygmy groups. For the Bagyeli, limited access to the forest affects their traditional livelihoods and leads to marginalization, discrimination and impoverishment.

Since the inception of the Campo Ma'an national park, which was created by the government as compensation for the environmental damage caused by the Chad-Cameroon pipeline, the food security and even the very survival of the Bagyeli people has been threatened due to restrictions placed on their hunting activities. This area is known for its remarkable biodiversity – nearly 390 invertebrate species, 249 fish species, over 80 amphibian species, 122 reptile species, 302 bird species, and around 80 species of large and medium-sized mammals – all of which have been conserved and sustainably managed by local and indigenous peoples for generations.

Since 2003, Friends of the Earth Cameroon, the Forest Peoples Programme and the Rainforest Foundation have supported the Bagyeli in the documentation of their use of the forest and its resources through a process called "participatory mapping". Participatory mapping, widely used by indigenous communities in Latin America and Southern Asia, entails the collection of detailed information by community selected cartographers about the land, its features and its resources. The outcomes clearly highlight the importance of the forest and its resources for the subsistence strategies of indigenous populations in Cameroon.

For the Bagyeli, the creation of protected areas on their ancestral territories has infringed upon their individual and collective rights, marginalizing and impoverishing them. They believe that any poverty reduction strategy proposed by the government or by external funders must include their

participation, and must be based upon their collective right of access to land and forest resources.

“If you do not collect fruits, you cannot have soap; if you do not go fishing, you cannot eat salt; if you do not cultivate plantains to sell you cannot buy clothes. I am dirty and without clothes because I do not do anything. I have already been forbidden from entering the forest.” (Indigenous Bagyeli person).

Adapted from “Nature: Poor people’s wealth. The importance of natural resources in poverty eradication”, July 2005, Friends of the Earth International,
<http://www.foei.org/publications/pdfs/poverty.pdf>