
Congo: Forest communities and forests destroyed to pay debt

Like many other Third World countries pushed by the global policies of colonialism and later neocolonialism to poverty and indebtedness, Congo has a current debt of \$4.9 billion. Like many other southern governments, too, advised by multilateral agencies to commerce their wealth –natural resources-, the government of Congo has been placing greater emphasis on the growth of the timber industry in the Congo Basin, which has the world's second largest stretches of virgin rainforest after the Amazon in South America.

Ba'aka pygmies, the indigenous population of the forest, have their traditional lifestyle under threat as the forest opens up to intensive logging, both legal and illegal. Certainly, trees valuable to the Ba'aka for their fruits, oil, medicinal bark and for the construction of pirogues are rapidly disappearing under the loggers' saws. For example, the Sapelli, an African mahogany, is one of the most highly-prized trees on the world timber market - and it is also host to a species of caterpillar, an essential food source, that emerge towards the end of the rainy season when hunting and fishing is limited. A sack of smoked caterpillars can sell for up to \$100, and just one tree can provide up to five sacks per year. This money remains in the local economy, whereas a large proportion of the money from logging leaves the country.

An initiative to protect the forest area was launched in 2002 with the creation of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in South Africa. The CBFP has planned a network of new and expanded national parks which will cover 40% of the entire Congo Basin. But such conservation policy has been criticised for often having little regard for indigenous populations - for example, the Ba'aka have not yet been informed about the CBFP national parks development.

"Local forest communities and civil society groups have so far been completely excluded from the initiative, which is primarily about 'partnerships' between international conservation organisations and international loggers," said Simon Counsell, director of the Rainforest Foundation.

Meanwhile "eco guards" police the forests to stop illegal hunting and trade in bush meat, which is the staple of the Ba'aka. Though, these regulations are undermined by corruption as the trade is organised by members of local elites who ensure that "their" bush meat sellers are not targeted by the eco guards - and instead, the eco guards have been accused of victimising the Ba'aka.

"We get so much suffering because of eco guards," Nyaku, a Ba'aka from Mbua, near the administrative centre of Pokola in northern Congo, told Focus On Africa. "We can't go and find things in the forest as we used to. All we hear is hunger."

Should any debt be paid by destruction, dispossession and hunger?

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