Chad/Cameroon: Impacts and broken promises of oil-pipeline project

We have already reported extensively the pervasive environmental and social impacts that the Chad-Cameroon oil-pipeline is likely to have (see WRM Bulletins 66, 45, 41, 35, 14 and 2), but there's already a lot to be said of the present impacts of the three-year long World Bank-sponsored project to build a 670-mile pipeline. The pipeline will channel oil from fields in Chad, through thick rainforests inhabited by Pygmy people in Cameroon up to this country's shores at the Atlantic Ocean.

The consortium formed by ExxonMobil Corp and its partners ChevronTexaco Corp. and Petronas of Malaysia, came to the area with rosy promises of "development", employment and progress. However, most of the jobs have been temporary and lasted not more that a few weeks or months. Only some 400 Chadians will get regular low-paid jobs (as drivers, security guards and the like), while in Cameroon the figure would not surpass 100. Average wages for Chadians working on the pipeline reach $225 a month, much less than the income of foreign workers though three fold Chad's minimum wage. Now that the works --scheduled to be completed by July 2003-- are almost finished, the promises made about the pipeline's economic and social benefits seem elusive.

An article from Los Angeles Times journalist Ken Silverstein reported: "In Mpango, a village of about 600 people a few miles from the pipeline's end on the Atlantic coast of Cameroon, a bulletin board nailed to the wall of Chief Savah's mud-and-wattle hut offers jobs on the pipeline. But the chief, wearing the matching shorts and jersey of England's national soccer team, said only 10 residents were able to land jobs, all short-term. The consortium has promised to replace Mpango's one-room schoolhouse, a termite-damaged, tin-roofed building, to compensate the village for the loss of land to the pipeline and disruptions caused by construction, including pollution of a stream used for drinking water. 'The new school is badly needed, and that's what we'll remember most from the pipeline,' said Savah. 'There have been some positives and some negatives, but the changes have not been great. We thought this was going to be a development project, and that is not what has happened'.

Silverstein goes on to say that: the centerpiece of the consortium's social efforts is its compensation plan, which has paid $10 million to thousands of people in Chad and Cameroon. Anyone displaced by the pipeline, or whose farming is temporarily disrupted, is eligible. Recipients can take cash or select goods from a glossy catalogue of items that includes plows, carts, sewing machines, bicycles, water pumps, peanut de-hullers, mattresses, cooking pots and construction material. However, most of the compensation payments are spent to cover short-term needs.

The Pygmy living in Cameroonian rainforests have been also affected by the oil pipeline since it has disrupted their communities with negligible economic benefits on return. The referred article conveys the feelings of the Maboulo village's chief: "During construction of the pipeline, the chief said, small game fled deeper into the bush, communal fruit trees were cut down, and medicinal plants were lost. Only three men out of about 20 in the village got temporary work. The chief said the oil consortium sent representatives to Maboulo several times and has promised to build new housing as compensation. 'They have been making promises for two years, but we are still waiting,' he said. 'It's like a tree that dies and falls in the forest. You can wait and wait, but it will never rise again'."

Lately we are witnessing a sort of conjuring on the part of transnationals. It seems that now they are not profit-driven any more but go into business moved by their social commitment towards poor people. They claim to bring development projects -not business. They want to look nice.

But people are not deceived so easily. Oliver Mokum, of the Cameroonian offices of Catholic Relief Services, a U.S.-based organisation that is monitoring the pipeline, interviewed by the Los Angeles Times, acknowledges that "The consortium made all sorts of claims about this being a 'development project,' and how it would reduce poverty. In the end, this is just an oil project."

Article based on information from: "Pipeline's Profits May Bypass Africans", Ken Silverstein, June 17, 2003, Los Angeles Times, http://www.commondreams.org/headlines03/0617-06.htm