
Cameroon: Bagyeli struggling to be heard

Since the 19th century the land rights of forest dwellers in Cameroon have not figured in the major decisions by the rulers. All forest lands, defined as vacant and without owners --“vacant et sans maitres”-- became property of the state, and many forests were then opened for timber exploitation, which closed those areas for hunting by Bagyeli, Baka, and other so-called "Pygmy" hunter gathering communities, whose presence across Southern Cameroon predates the colonial State.

When France became the dominant colonial power earlier last century virtually all lands in Cameroon became property of the State, even though almost all land in Cameroon is held under customary principles. This system has persisted to the present day --only 2.3% of Cameroon's lands have been titled since 1974, and most forest lands located outside of protected areas remain extremely vulnerable to outside exploitation of one form or another. Local people are rarely consulted over how these lands are to be managed, and indigenous peoples are particularly marginalised in the few public consultations which do take place. For instance, now in the Ocean Department of Cameroon local communities are coming to terms with the many impacts of an oil pipeline that now traverses their lands, facilitating the export of oil from the southern fields of Chad via an offshore pumping station near Kribi, Cameroon.

The installation of the much-criticised, World Bank-backed Chad-Cameroon pipeline through this forested region of South West Cameroon has led to land and forest loss for many different communities, and it is now well-documented how indigenous Bagyeli communities have lost out in two different geographical areas. First, in the pipeline zone, construction has left a 30 meter wide gap through the forest, traversing land where Bagyeli hunted, gathered and cultivated, and this has led to the loss of land and access to resources upon which Bagyeli livelihoods have traditionally been based. The compensation programme for the pipeline exacerbated these losses because some Bagyeli were removed from the lands they were occupying by other local people, who then stole their compensation, by claiming the pipeline was taking land which they used for agricultural production. Not one Bagyeli has received individual compensation for the losses that they experienced due to the pipeline's construction.

Secondly, new restrictions on hunting and forest access in Bagyeli traditional areas near the border with Equatorial Guinea were brought about by the gazettment of Campo Ma'an National Park. The protection of this important area, which is traversed by a road used to export timber, forms part of the environmental compensation for the pipeline. However, its new status as national park means that Bagyeli hunting and gathering communities who have operated there since recorded history face being criminalised for continuing to pursue their livelihoods. These examples illustrate a total disregard of local land tenure and livelihood systems by those who prepared the pipeline plans.

Bagyeli do not possess identity cards --a requirement under Cameroon law--, they face severe social discrimination, and they have poor access to health and education services. Most do not possess farming land of their own, and cultivate that of their stronger neighbours in exchange for food. Bagyeli's social marginalisation and the increased suffering their communities have experienced since the pipeline was proposed has led them to engage with national and international support

NGOs to develop strategies for their communities to assert their rights with conservation authorities --who have joined in dialogue with Bagyeli representatives from around Campo-- and with local government and pipeline agents, who have previously been unwilling to solicit to Bagyeli's views.

With support from the Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) and two local NGOs (Planet Survey and the Centre for Environment and Development-CED), Bagyeli are beginning to secure identity cards and engage regularly with government officials, and representatives from the pipeline project, who have recently agreed to meet with them over their plans for regional compensation measures. FPP and its partners will also support Bagyeli to generate their own data for community based maps of land use, using Global Positioning System technology and working in collaboration with the majority Bantu communities, and final maps will be produced for them by CED. These maps will form the basis for future dialogues between Bagyeli and Bantu communities, protected area managers, government agencies and pipeline authorities to attain secure, communal land rights for the Bagyeli.

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