
Zambia: Deforestation, timber industry and free trade

The major environmental problem reportedly faced by Zambia is deforestation. A case study carried out by the European Forest Institute in 2000 gives figures: the annual rate of deforestation ranges from 250,000 to 900,000 hectares representing 0.5 to 2.0 % of the country's forest area.

Apart from other social and environmental impacts, the consequences of this process are felt on water supplies, since forests regulate much of the catchment area of the Zambezi river and are essential during the annual seven month long dry season.

The problem has reached a point where even the government has acknowledged the risk that forests may be wiped out if it does not put in place measures to stop deforestation. The Minister of Tourism and Natural Resources, Levison Mumba, said recently that the timber industry was a profitable business, but that it did not contribute to the country's gross domestic product because of lack of transparency by the stakeholders involved. He also suspected of tax evasion by the sector as well as illegal logging in forest reserves.

The government has recognised that the timber industry creates jobs, but the export of raw logs from the country deliver no benefit to the nation. The country must move away from the idea of importing furniture from other countries when it has the ability to make high-class furniture, said the Minister, who also expressed the need to support local firms that turn timber into finished goods and to look at the legislation regarding the export of unprocessed timber in order to protect the local market.

The Minister appears to be moving in the right direction in the sense of linking forest conservation and use with social benefits derived from the development of a local timber processing industry. What he may not be aware of is that these sensible ideas may prove difficult to implement within the free trade policies imposed by the industrialized world through the World Trade Organization, which may define them as "barriers to trade", thus declaring them illegal.

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