
Ghana: Protected areas at the expense of people do not guarantee conservation

Ghana has created a number of protected areas --managed by the Forestry Commission and the Department of Wildlife-- as a means of ensuring biodiversity conservation. However, the process of creation of some of those areas has generated a number of problems which explains the failure of many protected areas to fulfil the objective for which they were established. Among other problems explaining such situation, mention must be made of issues relating to land tenure, land rights of communities and law enforcement.

The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) conducted a research in a protected area in Ghana --the Kalakpa Reserve-- located in the Volta region of Ghana, a few kilometres from Ho, the regional capital. Before the park was created, the land was occupied by migrant farmers through an arrangement with the land-owners. The farmers have lived there legitimately for generation after generation.

The study has proven that a main problem and challenge at the reserve --created through an agreement between the government and the land-owners-- is that the communities living in the reserve were not consulted about its creation. As long as the interest of the migrant families was not taken into account at the outset, it has been very hard to move forward. So while there is a tripartite interest in the area --the local landowners, the settler farmers and the government-- the negotiation for acquisition totally ignored the interest of these settler farmers. They have farms in this designated protected area, settlements which keep on growing and even cattle farms.

The government is now describing the settler farmers as squatters and sees as its responsibility to get them out, although without any appreciable success. But they are not squatters, they are long-standing inhabitants who must have a voice in land use activities and changes.

The farmers are challenging the authorities; they want to continue carrying out their economic activities; they want to see their rights to remain in the area respected. The government has responded by attempting to compensate the people monetarily. But the whole process of valuing a supposed protected area and the payment of compensation continues to be an impossible exercise. As long as the government affixes arbitrary values which are low and have no relationship with the livelihoods of the people, compensations will continue being rejected by many farmers. Those who accept the compensation are unaware of the conditions at the place they are relocated or intend to be relocated to. As a result, they either don't go at all or, if they do, they return almost immediately to their original home.

As in many other similar cases, this experience clearly shows that the whole process of creating and maintaining protected areas should be addressed taking into account the interest of all relevant stakeholders, and the implementation of the law must attend to the needs and rights of holders. The establishment of protected areas must not be antagonistic to local peoples' livelihoods, and fundamental human rights cannot be violated in the process. Unless the creation of a reserve is done properly, you may have a protected area, but biodiversity conservation will not be at all guaranteed.

