
Tanzania: Biodiversity loss linked to IMF-promoted commercial agriculture and mining

A country with profuse forests --open hardwood woodlands being the dominant type though there are also closed forests and mangroves--, Tanzania has 33.5 million hectares of forest cover richly endowed with biodiversity, which account for one-third of the total land area.

However, this biodiversity is being threatened by several direct and underlying processes which have implied the clearing of forest land at a rate of 400,000 hectares per year during the past two decades. One of those damaging processes relates to forest conversion to commercial agriculture and mining, which in turn have to do with export-oriented policies widely applied at the national and global levels.

During the last years, the government of Tanzania has given high priority to the development of agricultural production aimed at export markets. Caught in the ups and downs of market prices established by powerful economic groups, the falling price of Tanzania's main exports, plus the growing cost of imported products, led the country to suffer the trite fate of other Southern countries. In 1986, Tanzania signed a structural adjustment agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and continued signing IMF loan agreements for the following 15 years, thus increasing its burdensome debt. In the late 1990's, annual debt servicing averaged US\$ 438 million --amounting to 37% of total export revenues.

The IMF loans associated Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) requires the implementation of a number of policies such as support to large-scale export-oriented agriculture --e.g. the elimination of a tax on agricultural exports-- and mining for gemstones and other precious minerals by domestic and foreign companies.

Between 1980 and 1993, 25% of the nation's forests were lost. Logging, deforestation and mining have been some of the major causes, but almost half of forest loss was due to cultivation of export crops. In the district of Simanjiro, for instance, over 50,000 hectares of land were cleared to give way to the production of beans. Eighty large-scale commercial farms, ranging from 90 to 13,000 hectares, produce those crops, mainly exported to The Netherlands, and have resulted in the displacement of the local Maasai inhabitants.

Meanwhile, agriculture for domestic consumption remains low and the predominant productive model has implied the displacement of thousands of local inhabitants, land-tenure problems, more poverty. Also, as mining companies have acquired large concessions, local pastoralists and farmers have lost access to land and water rights, and forests have been plundered to supply fuel related to the mines. In this way, forests are lost as both resources for local peoples' livelihoods and as habitat for wildlife.

Almost 10 years have passed since the Convention on Biological Diversity was launched. In these 10 years, SAPs have continued imposing their policies in Tanzania, reinforcing the world labour division: commodities produced by impoverished and biodiversity-rich Southern countries to feed money-rich consumerist Northern markets. Everybody knows --at least at the decision-making level-- which are the causes of biodiversity loss. The IMF and the World Bank know. The Tanzanian government

knows. Transnational corporations know. The governments of consumer countries know. However, destructive trends have not only not diminished but, on the contrary, have increased.

This scenario clearly shows that Southern countries like Tanzania, which rank on the weakest side of the “international order”, are pushed to follow policies imposed by multilateral institutions and their leading Northern countries. Those policies are inherently unsustainable since they imply at all levels the destruction or degradation of the countries' biodiversity. Political will within Southern country governments to conserve biodiversity is thus a necessary yet insufficient prerequisite for biodiversity conservation, because many of the underlying causes lie outside the country's borders. That is precisely one of the main issues that need to be addressed by the Convention on Biological Diversity. Will delegates have the necessary political courage to address it at the upcoming April meeting in The Hague?

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