
Cameroon: Social and environmental impacts of industrial forestry exploitation

In Cameroon, as in many other countries in the South, a process of deforestation is taking place directly and indirectly caused by intensive industrial logging. This process is generally promoted by political reforms and by loans from the European Union, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund or the World Trade Organisation for the construction of mega-projects such as highways or dams.

As a consequence of this “international development aid,” illegal exploitation of wood and commercial hunting have rapidly been added to “legal” logging, using the new highways as an access to the forest. Experts foresee that some of the large mammals in Cameroon will shortly disappear if this hunting is not put to a stop. Nearly all types of mammals and reptiles are exhibited on the urban markets. Gorilla and elephant meat is sold at high prices in the best restaurants. Theoretically it is forbidden to hunt these species and sell the meat or other parts of gorillas and chimpanzees, but this prohibition is widely transgressed.

Industrial exploitation of forests has been the real priority of the structural adjustment programmes promoted by the World Bank. Based on the promotion of products for export (in which, wood ranks very highly) and on the decrease in export tariffs, these programmes have played an important role in the increase of wood exports. The results have been the expansion of poverty, the increased power of foreign industry and the lack of State control over resource exploitation. Corruption and illegality in forestry exploitation in Cameroon are widespread and scant control favours illegal activities in the forestry sector: illegal logging (outside boundaries, without authorisation, using sub-contracting, cutting trees of a smaller diameter than permitted, disregard for local restrictions), false declarations (on the quantities of wood production, on the volume of wood in inventories), illegal recovery of wood that has been confiscated.

Although the production of wood has undergone major growth, tax income from activities in the sector has dropped. To carry out monitoring in the field, the officials often depend on trucks belonging to forestry companies to take them to their concessions, which obviously does not favour independence of controls.

In some villages, the inhabitants block wood transport because the companies are not fulfilling their promises to build and/or to improve local facilities. The law foresees that the forestry companies are obliged to organise a meeting with the local population before exploitation can start. During these meetings, forestry companies make promises to the population (construction of a health centre, repairs to a bridge, fitting out a foot-ball field). But very often these promises take a long time to materialise, they are only partially fulfilled or they are simply badly implemented.

Direct employment generated by forestry companies is very limited for the Baka “Pigmies,” often employed for a few days by the company as prospectors to indicate the species of trees of commercial interest. In this way, they are unconsciously participating in the destruction of their own environment. Workers operating in the parks for stocking wood and in the sawmills are provided with

very little or no protective clothing (gloves, helmet, masks against the dust). Very often the wood at the sawmills is treated with toxic products against parasites and fungus. Very often this treatment is done with pesticides with a lindane and pentachlorophenol base, that are prohibited in Europe and whose use is subject to very strict security measures. Workers operating with these products are not usually equipped with protective clothing or they are insufficiently informed on the risks of these toxic substances. The remains of these toxic insecticides and fungicides are simply thrown away after use. Although evident, the importance of water and soil pollution from these products has never been investigated.

Due to their strict dependency on primary forests, the “Pigmies” are the main victims of forestry exploitation in Cameroon. According to estimates, at the end of the nineties, approximately 3,400 Bakolas lived in the South West and 40,000 Bakas in the Equatorial forests in South and South East of Cameroon. In the Yokadouma-Moloundou region, the Bakas are even more numerous than the Bantu. As their territorial rights are not recognised by the authorities, they cannot defend themselves against the present expansion of industrial logging in Eastern Cameroon.

Wood-related activities, developed both by national and foreign companies are centred on a few high quality wood species (ayous, sapelli, azobé, tali) that monopolise 60% of wood exports. Some tree species, such as the moabi and the bubinga, are frequently an important reference point in the forest (because of their great height), in addition to the traditional cultural uses that the villagers or the “Pigmies” attribute to these and other species of trees. The law prohibits logging of maobis in a radius of 5 km around the villages, but this is openly violated by the logging companies. The oldest bubingas play an important social role in village life: popular meetings and local assemblies are organised under these trees, where the problems of the villagers are discussed. The moabis produce a high quality oil, the only food oil produced in this forest region. The production of this oil provides greater benefits than wood logging. The bark of these trees is used to make many drugs to cure hernias, back-ache and other diseases.

Summing up, commercial logging in Cameroon (legal and illegal) is seriously affecting the ecosystem and therefore the peoples who live in the forests. Benefits to the local population are minor and even compliance with the promises made by the companies regarding improvements to local infrastructure depend on people getting mobilised. Employment generated is scant and dangerous. Those who benefit are obviously the forestry companies and the intermediaries between logging and European consumers. And this is called development.