
Congo, Republic: Foreign loggers deplete forests and livelihoods

The Republic of Congo, often referred to as Congo-Brazzaville, has a total area of 342,000 sq. km, 60% of which is covered by rainforests (21.5 million hectares), mainly located in the scarcely-populated north of the country. The forest and its resources are the main source of livelihood for most of the rural population living there.

As part of structural adjustment policies and under the macro-economic reform policies prescribed by multilateral lenders, privatisation of the former forest parastatal institutions is taking place and is increasing the penetration by transnational corporations in the forestry sector. Some of the foreign companies operating in the country are Danzer (German), Rougier (French), Feldmeyer (German), consortium Boplac (Dutch-Danish-German), Wonnemann (German). Timber exports --mostly raw logs rather than processed products-- represent the country's second major source of export revenues after oil. The forestry sector provides 10% of formal employment and its contribution to GNP increased from 1% in 1982 to 5% in 1996.

Approximately half of the country's forests are classified as productive forest suitable for timber exploitation, mainly operated by multinational logging companies under concession. Low forestry taxes, weak monitoring and enforcement capacity, irregularities and corruption in the awarding and exploitation of generous concessions have allured companies and boomed forestry operations. Main tree species targeted are Okoumé, Limba, Sapelli and Sipo.

Exploitation of the forests has facilitated commercial bushmeat hunting, which is decimating wildlife in a number of areas. The loss of biodiversity which results from logging has long-term consequences both ecologically and socially. Although the country has protected areas, the capacity to monitor them is minimal.

The practices of forestry companies have also had social impacts, including discrimination against local people who usually have not had access to an adequate education so they do not possess the skills required by the logging companies. Pygmies in particular, who are forest dwellers and use forests for their subsistence activities, are twofold negatively affected: their livelihood is being destroyed and they find it difficult to obtain reasonably remunerated employment because they are perceived as unreliable by logging companies.

Companies do not listen sufficiently to local people, whose needs are rarely taken into account or respected unless they take direct action, such as blocking the loggers' roads with barricades.

As usual, the sad story goes that profit led activities which benefit only a rich transnational elite with their local cronies disrupt the environment and the livelihoods of ancient dwellers and guardians of the forest.

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