Central African Republic: Transnational loggers in the forest

Compared to other countries in the Congo region, the Central African Republic (CAR) has a relatively small area of forest --around five million hectares-- corresponding to 8% of the country's territory. Yet in terms of commercially valuable species such as Sapelli (Entandrophragma cylindricum), Ayous (Triplochiton scleroxylon) and Sipo (Entandrophragma utile), its forests are some of the richest in Africa.

The country's forests grow in two distinct areas: 1) In the south-west, where forests cover an area of 3.7 million hectares. Most logging concessions are located in this area, especially along the borders with Cameroon and Congo. 2) In the east, where forests cover some 1.2 million hectares. These forests have been spared from logging due to the isolation of the region and the associated transport difficulties.

French companies and capitals dominate the forestry sector, where almost 3.2 million hectares have been granted under concession to 3 stricly French companies (4 concessions), 1 French-CAR, 1 Malaysian-French (2 concessions), 1 Syrian-CAR, 2 Lebanese and 2 CAR. In total, French capitals are involved in the exploitation of almost half of the forests under concession. The recent arrival of WTK of Malaysia has marked a change in the pattern of European dominance, although SESAM, the company WTK acquired in the late 1990s, retains some French capital.

Total log production has increased significantly during the 1990s and is set to continue rising in line with structural adjustment policies. In 1993, total log production was 167,700 cubic metres and in 1999 it reached 552,800 cubic metres. In spite of government efforts to ensure that logs are mainly processed in the country, the majority of exports still consist of logs rather than processed timber and the gap is increasing: in 1993, raw log exports represented 56% of total wood exports and this percentage had risen to 71% in 1999.

Forestry activities are resulting in direct and indirect impacts on forests and forest peoples. Because of transportation difficulties and substantial costs, logging is highly selective and only the most valuable species are cut. But this selective logging leads to large areas of forest being opened up as companies go deeper into the forest in search of the best timber. Sapelli, Ayous and Sipo are the main species logged, but because of the damage caused to surrounding trees, some estimates suggest that selective logging in fact damages as much as 30% of the forest in CAR.

Once loggers leave the area, poachers and settlers come in on the roads built by logging companies, causing further damage to the forest. It is interesting to note that in the 1980s the French government --via the African Development Bank-- funded the construction of a road in the south-western part of the country, which facilitated the entry of logging companies into the forest. It is also interesting to highlight that most roads built by loggers in the western area of the country have been aimed at serving their interests rather than those of the local people. Roads between CAR and Cameroon, for example, run near concessions held by French company Thanry in both countries.

It is clear that logging is benefiting the logging companies, that export most of the production to the

European market where they are able to sell them at high prices. However, logging has certainly not contributed to higher living standards for the local population. In spite of wood and diamond exports, the Central African Republic remains one of the poorest countries in the region and its 3.4 million people have an average life expectancy of only 49 years.

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