
Kenya: Who favours and who destroys forest biodiversity?

Governments should be directly responsible for the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of their respective countries and people. Nevertheless, what frequently happens in the South is that the authorities act in collusion with powerful internal and external interests, and to the detriment of the country's biodiversity, and thus against the welfare of the population they are supposed to protect. This is what is going on in Kenya.

Located in the east coast of Central Africa, Kenya holds a variety of landscapes: from tropical rainforests in the coastal plains to arid areas in the dry west plateau. Such diversity in nature goes together with the existence of different ethnic groups. Deforestation and desertification are two environmental problems severely affecting the country. Logging --both legally granted by concessions and illegal-- an inadequate policy towards protected areas, megaprojects like dams and mining, are all putting at risk the rich biodiversity of Kenya. In the meantime, the government has not only proved to be unable to stop the process, but has also been active in promoting it.

The case of the highland Tinet forest area, inhabited from ancestral times by the Ogiek, is a paradigmatic example of environmental destruction and disregard to indigenous peoples' rights. In spite of having managed these forests in a sustainable way, they have been forced to defend themselves against the arbitrariness of both colonial and post-colonial governments, who have ignored them and menaced them to get hold of their lands arguing that they are within the boundaries of a protected area included in the country's Forest Act. Nonetheless it is not a preservationist interest what moves the authorities. In Kenya there is a logging ban in force but three powerful companies --Pan African Paper Mills, Raiply Timber, and Timsales Ltd.-- are exempted from it, and prepared to enter the Tinet Forests once the Ogiek are expelled. Regarding protected areas it seems that the authorities have not learnt from past mistakes. In the mid-1970s, Massai residents of southern Kenya were abruptly relocated from land that was subsequently enclosed within the Amboseli National Park, one of the continent's most visited wildlife reserves. Deprived of their lands and as a desperate way of showing their protest, the Massai reacted by killing many of Amboseli's most prized tourist attractions, including dozens of leopards, elephants, and rhinos. Both the fauna and indigenous people suffered as a consequence of a mistaken approach with regard to biodiversity conservation.

The announcement made by the government last February according to which many areas of forest reserves spread all over the country --totalling 67,150 hectares-- will be left without legal protection confirms that there is no clear policy for forest biodiversity conservation in Kenya. National environmental NGOs gathered in the Greenbelt have expressed their intention to present a formal objection to the proposed forest excisions, and the Kenya Forests Working Group is organizing an international campaign to oppose it. Severe droughts have affected the Kenyan territory in the last two years. Considering the connection existing between deforestation and the fall in rainfall patterns, the destruction of these forests would aggravate the problem and at the same time be detrimental to the flora and fauna they are home to.

Megaprojects constitute another pending menace on the country's biodiversity. For example the dam

project on the Sondu Miriu River, one of the major rivers in the Lake Victoria Basin, is threatening local biodiversity. Even though the power station is scheduled to be operational in 2003, the diversion of the river will cause the disruption of the whole hydrological basin, with negative consequences on wildlife. Rare species, like the Colobus monkeys and hippopotamus, which depend on the river for their survival will be forced to seek a source of water at the lower populous Nyakwere plains disturbing their habitat. The government is backing the project and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, together with a Norwegian and a South African company are giving financial and technical support to it. The NGO coalition Africa Waters Network has denounced this danger, and at the same time local villagers are resisting the project, which would mean the forced abandonment of their agricultural lands.

Last but not least, mangroves situated in the coast near Mombasa on the Indian Ocean are in danger because of a titanium mining project by a Canadian firm. Kenyan organizations gathered in the Coast Mining Rights Forum have recently launched an international letter campaign, targetting the government and financial partners --the World Bank included-- denouncing the expected effects of mine exploitation in the area and demanding its suspension until a serious environmental impact assessment is performed.

In sum: the answer to the question we have posed regarding biodiversity conservation in Kenya is clear. On one side there are local communities and environmental NGOs trying to protect the country's biodiversity. On the opposite site there are the authorities, transnational companies, international banks and "developers", whose actions result in its destruction.

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