Cameroon: Research questions myths about fuelwood use and deforestation

A study, published by IITA and CIFOR in 1997, on the production and consumption of firewood and the relationship between this use of wood and deforestation in southern Cameroon shows interesting results, which question some of the myths related to the responsibility of the rural poor in forest destruction as well as on the alleged benefits of plantations to counteract it.

Previous studies in Africa showed that agriculture contributes as much as and even more than the use of firewood to forest destruction. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example 5 million hectares of forests were converted to croplands between 1966 and 1980 and some 3 million cubic metres of wood were destroyed --not even used as firewood-- which was more than the total volume of wood exported during the same period. Recent research focused on the issue of energy concluded that agriculture is the main cause of deforestation in Africa. A study by the World Bank dated in 1987 even asserts that although deforestation is usually linked to the cutting of trees to obtain firewood, the opposite is what usually happens: firewood is the by-product of land-clearance for agriculture. This is true to the rainforest area of Cameroon, where vast areas have been cut down, ploughed up and converted into croplands. Firewood is collected from the remainings of such trees. On the contrary, in the Sahel region of the country, where shrubs dominate the landscape, firewood is obtained from cutting the branches of the scarce trees while ensuring their conservation.

The research proves that urbanization, extension of areas occupied by crops, and deforestation for the obtention of firewood are correlated. In the densely populated areas of Yaoundé and its surroundings, where firewood consumption is high and where there has been a strong pressure on forests by agriculture, forests have almost disappeared. However, in the more rural area of Ebolowa, forest reserves are more abundant since firewood supply is by far greater that its demand. Additionally, the work confirms that the consumption of firewood by rural households for cooking and heating does not pose a threat to forests, since volumes used are reduced and there is a quick regeneration of the resource.

The study clearly shows that generalizations about the relationship between firewood use and deforestation cannot be made, because many variables need to be taken on board, such as population density --both rural and urban-- the nature of the activities carried out by small farmers, the proximity of urban centres, urban demand for firewood, the quality of highways, etc. For instance, villages near the main urban centres sell large quantities of firewood, both obtained from agricultural land-clearances and from wood cut from forest reserves. On the contrary, fuelwood is not at all sold in distant rural areas, where wood supply is far greater than fuelwood demand and wood from land clearance --the main cause of deforestation in this case-- is left to rot in place.

Confirming the conclusions of previous studies, the author also show that plantations for firewood are not an adequate measure to provide this resource and to diminish the pressure on forests. This type of solution was promoted by governments and development agencies considering that it could also bring with it positive side effects, such as job creation and income generation. None of this ever happened in reality. Small peasants in Cameroon as well as in India, for example, prefer to set up

multiple use plantations --whose products can be sold at good prices in the market-- than plantations merely aimed at obtaining firewood.

In sum, deforestation processes in Africa cannot be explained by simplistic analyses too often used to put the blame on the poor. The same is applicable to solutions. There are enormously different situations in Africa and within African countries and those different situations need to be taken into account before making generalizations and implementing solutions.

Article based on information from: Adrienne Paule Demenou, “La place du bois de feu dans un systeme agroforestier”, IITA/CIFOR, Cameroon, 1997.