
Gabon: The new Forestry Law and transnational companies

The draft Forestry Law being discussed by the Gabonese Parliament encourages the industrialization of wood within the country. According to the Ministry for Waters and Forests, the new law will establish more strict rules concerning the exploitation of the country's forests. Concessions to private companies will be granted for a longer period of time, allegedly to favour the regeneration of the forest. The government elected in December 1998 argues that its policy tries to conciliate the interests of different agents involved, with the aim of protecting the forests, and at the same time diversifying its products. The Gabonese forestry sector has until now strongly relied on the export of a single product: okoumé roundwood.

Even though this initiative, which tends to the diversification of the country's economy, can be considered positive from a macroeconomic point of view, capital questions remain unsolved. One of them is that of public control over the use of natural resources. In Gabon, as well as in other African countries, due to institutional structural constraints protection norms are poorly implemented and enforced. Does the new legislation create financial mechanisms to ensure that the companies' operations are effectively controlled on the ground?

The second relevant point is that of the so-called "stakeholders". While transnational logging companies, responsible for the destruction of tropical forests in the country, remain the most important actors, forest dwelling peoples continue to be ignored. Alternatives such as community forest management and locally-based processing facilities are not taken into account. Additionally, the new law appears to benefit specially --if not solely-- large logging companies. In fact Société Forestière des Bois Tranchés, Leroy Gabon, Thanry, Groupe Rougier, Société de Grumes de la Ngounie and other important companies will be granted concessions for even longer periods, and will almost certainly be the ones industrializing roundwood, thus reaping the benefits of added value to the product.

In the context of an economy heavily dependent on the exploitation of natural resources, massive foreign debt, and weak organization of rural communities and civil society, the colonial vision prevails of the forest as a mere source of wood managed and exploited by foreign private companies. The new Forestry Law does not seem to help to revert this situation.

Article based on information from: "Vers l'adoption d'une nouvelle loi forestière", Panafrican News Agency, November 3, 2000; "Slave and Enclave. The Political Ecology of Equatorial Africa", Marcus Colchester, WRM, 1994.