
Senegal: The hidden impacts of charcoal production

For many years, fuelwood use and charcoal production have been blamed for deforestation throughout the South, though this has seldom been the truth. In the case of Senegal it is clearly false. Charcoal is a major energy source in this country, where its capital city Dakar consumes 90 per cent of all the charcoal produced from the forest. However, forests are not even close to exhaustion, and regeneration after woodcutting is reported to be quite robust. But charcoal production is resulting in other types of impacts on the local communities where it is being produced, which have usually gone unreported.

It is important to highlight that in Senegal the state claims ownership over all forests and its Forest Service claims the right to manage them according to "national needs". Within the charcoal production sector, the management system put in place by the Forest Service only allows urban-based merchants to cut the forest, produce charcoal and market it. These merchants hire woodcutters from outside the area. The result is that local communities receive very few benefits from this activity, while the social and ecological costs of forest clearing are spread over the villages as a whole, disproportionately affecting women and poorer households.

In the case of women interviewed on this matter, they have recounted that before the arrival of charcoal producers, firewood had been available just outside the compounds, whereas after the first two years, firewood had to be gathered at distances of several kilometres, requiring anywhere from a couple of hours to half a day to collect. They have also explained that charcoal production has led to the disappearance of game birds and animals which are part of their diet. Additionally, they have complained that the presence of migrant charcoal producers drew down the wells, creating water shortages and water quality problems. Other concerns include social problems arising from hosting scores of migrant woodcutters in the village, harassment of women in the forest and fights over wood gathering between woodcutters and women.

Other impacts affect the community as a whole, among which the destruction of plants used for food, fodder, medicines and dyes, as well as wood for house construction. Woodcutters are also accused of starting bushfires, while heavy truckloads of charcoal are responsible for destroying the roads so badly that villagers are unable to take their products to market and to bring back the products they need.

This unfair situation, where local people receive only the impacts of a lucrative activity --some of the traders are reported to have made 100,000 US dollars in profits per year-- has in some cases resulted in organized resistance. Such is the case of the district of Makacoulibantang in Eastern Senegal, where local villagers have blocked urban-based merchants and their migrant woodcutters from working in their forests. Resistance was partly aimed at stopping the destruction of a resource on which they depend for daily needs and partly to reap some of the benefits from woodfuel production and commerce.

Unfortunately, the Forest Service has continued taking sides with the merchants, while the minister for the protection of nature has visualized those acts of resistance as "a dangerous set of events that

could spread" and adding that "if villagers were given control of the forests there would be fuel shortages in Dakar." However, the minister appears to forget that the only fuel shortages in Dakar have been purposely created by merchants to obtain further benefits. What they have done is to threaten the ministers and the Forest Service with shortages in order to eke out quotas and to keep the forest policy friendly to their interests --in which until now they have been very successful.

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