
Cameroon: A “communal forest” opposed by local communities

To establish a communal forest may look like a good proposal. However, it may be not, according to many local villagers from the district of Dzeng (Center Province, Department of Nyong and So'o), who have denounced the attempt of the current Dzeng's mayor to make use of their forest lands for commercial exploitation. Some 25.182 hectares of forest lands would be classified as a "communal forest", an intermediate category between logging concessions and community forests.

Law No. 94/01 provides that classification should take into account the social environment of the local populations so they keep their traditional rights of use. Under the category of a “communal forest” a management plan is prepared by the local authority, and must also involve the participation and agreement of the local population. In this case the local communities were never consulted and mistrust arises from the fact that they were never told about the mayor's plan to classify their lands as "communal forest" thus breaking the spirit of the Law –they only got to know about it through an inconspicuous written communiqué hang on one of the walls of the municipality of Dzeng.

The local mayor has said that he plans to build a saw-mill in the area. "We firmly express our opposition to this project of forced classification of all our forests crossed by the Tofini stream as communal forest with the purpose of filling the pockets of a group of individuals that have never been preoccupied about the public interest", the heads of the Assok and Nkonmedzap villages wrote to the mayor. (1)

The mayor argues that the extreme impoverishment of his municipality is what urges him to establish a communal forest and count on resources for the accomplishment of projects. However, those forest lands have already been highly exploited by logging companies, which only brought forest destruction for the communities. The forest was left without its most valuable species and now is just regenerating from the action of corporations such as SAB and SEBC - subsidiaries of the French-owned Thanry Group, one of the largest logging conglomerates in Africa. Thanry is now controlled by the Hong Kong company Vicwood Pacific.

An open letter sent to the President of the Republic of Cameroon, Paul Biya, by Alain G. Njimoluh Anyouzoa conveys his fear “that is also shared by all the families of the aforementioned district when we are told that as a consolation prize for loosing our lands to commercial exploitation, we would get in its place a sawmill!” The letter asks for the President's arbitration to prevent “the attempted plundering of our district, as it has already been the case in other regions of our beloved country”.

An open letter was also addressed to the mayor Emmanuel Nnemde contending that it would be a manipulated classification of forest lands as a “communal forest” that would bring no benefits to the local communities. “You state that your decision for the emergency acquisition of a communal forest was motivated by the extreme poverty of your district and a great need for resources to implement projects. Your constituents whose forests had been harvested ruthlessly by the logging companies Sab and Coron in the eighties without a single local investment in return have disproved the arguments you pushed forward”, said the letter.

In his letter, Njimoluh Anyouzoa referred to the disastrous consequences resulting from the haphazard management of the existing communal forests –social problems like unemployment, poverty, famine, prostitution, serious illnesses (HIV/ AIDS), unwanted pregnancies. Those social problems that, he said, “the people of Assok, Nkomedzap and other populations have tried to tell you in their petition submitted to the relevant Cameroonian officials, as it specifically relate to law No. 94/01 of January 20 1994 pertaining to the regulations on forests, wildlife and fishery, which grants you an almost discretionary power on harvesting these forests once they become ‘communal forests’”.

He announced that he had sent a copy of his letter “to the office of the European Environment Agency (EEA) in Copenhagen (Denmark) this week intending to find out if the European Union (EU) was in any way involved in this scheme, and to vigorously denounce the policy of ‘eliminating our forests’ in which the EU has sometimes participated with the help of a few local officials.”

Sources: (1) « Dzeng : Une forêt déchire les populations et le maire », Mutations, November 27, 2008, <http://www.quotidienmutations.info/mutations/nov08/1227799736.php> . (2) Open Letter to the Mayor of the District of Dzeng – Cameroon by Njimoluh Anyouzoa, December 30, 2008, sent by the author.