
Cameroon: Bagyeli severely impacted by the establishment of industrial plantations

In South-Western Cameroon, near Kribi, two giant industrial plantations cover a total area of 62,000 hectares. One of them, HEVECAM, is a rubber tree monoculture belonging to the Singapore-based GMG group, while the other, SOCAPALM, is an oil palm plantation, property of the French group Bolloré.

HEVECAM and SOCAPALM adjoin about ten communities of Bagyeli (“Pygmy”) hunter-gatherers. The latter are traditionally characterized by a strong dependency on forest resources and by a remarkable adaptation to forest areas. Bagyeli camps constitute the central socioeconomic unit from which production/consumption activities are organized, based on hunting and gathering, but also increasingly on agriculture. Traditionally however, their economy rests on natural reproduction cycles (other than agricultural). A few huts (up to a dozen) comprising a population of 15 to 70 persons form the community, whose functioning is remarkably egalitarian. Each community presents a set of customary rules regulating a given forested territory and particularly the use of its natural resources. Nevertheless, these exclusive rules are balanced by an “obligation of conviviality” based on friendship relations with persons from outside the community.

The main problems caused by the establishment of HEVECAM and SOCAPALM are linked with the vanishing of large areas of forest formerly inhabited by Bagyeli. Here are two concrete cases:

-- Kilombo I is a Bagyeli village stuck between SOCAPALM and HEVECAM. The situation of its inhabitants is particularly difficult, due to their isolated location and to the destruction of their forest. SOCAPALM forced them to leave their place of residence in order to allow the establishment of the plantation and promised them in return modern houses. But until today, no houses nor any compensation (for example for the tombs which had been destroyed) have been given. These Bagyeli are now surrounded by plantations, in which they are not allowed to enter. As a result, the population of Kilombo I has drastically decreased since the arrival of the plantation.

-- Nyamabandé is another Bagyeli community located between HEVECAM and the Campo-Ma’an national park, where the two entities touch each other. The Bagyeli were little by little forced to settle next to the Campo-Ma’an protected area in which they only recently recovered the right to hunt and collect. On the contrary, within the perimeter of HEVECAM, only adults are allowed to enter and to collect snails. Additionally, the “Convention d’Etablissement” (conditions of contract) between the government and HEVECAM (dated 15th of September 1998) does not mention a single time the interests of the Bagyeli.

The opportunities to obtain a job in the plantations are very poor: HEVECAM does not enrol Bagyeli workers in rubber tapping and neither does SOCAPALM in its oil palm plantations. On the rare occasions when SOCAPALM provides them a temporary job, the company pays them less than Bantu workers. In the same way, HEVECAM periodically appoints a subcontractor for the weeding of the monocultures; the latter sometimes hires Bagyeli but underpays them in a scandalous way.

From a health perspective, Bagyeli say illnesses are less frequent in the forest than close to the plantation. As a matter of fact, mosquitoes proliferate in the stagnant water puddles between the tree rows. Consequently, malaria and cholera affect today the local populations more than before. Our Bagyeli informants also noted that high blood pressure and depression rates are more frequent than before. The problems linked with an unhealthy food and with water pollution (agrochemical products, erosion) are worsening notably through the lack of access to their traditional pharmacopeia (frequent cases of abortion, chronic intestinal problems, etc.). Because they are not part of the wage-earning workforce, local Bagyeli do not have free access to the hospitals and schools belonging to the plantation companies.

Formerly, Bagyeli used to find in the forest everything they needed to live, but today it is only at the edges of the plantation, and above all much deeper in the forest, that animals can still be found. On the side of the Campo-Ma'an park, the fauna has become rare, not only because of the plantation, but also because of the numerous poachers living in the HEVECAM region. The protein intake of HEVECAM's workers still depends 75% on "bush meat". Illegal commercial hunting has thus considerably increased during the last few years while in the past hunting was exclusively dedicated to local household consumption. It is estimated that there are more than two thousands irregular firearms in HEVECAM's concession. This has become a major problem for Bagyeli and it will go increasing hand in hand with the intensification of industrial activities.

By Julien-François Gerber, e-mail : JulienFrancois.Gerber@campus.uab.es