
Congo Basin: International funding to support oligarchic logging

African logging concessions are usually seen as units of forest management. However they are better seen as a kind of currency in a larger system of power politics and exploitation.

The international community has played a key role in establishing and perpetuating the politics of 'logging-patrimony'. Probably the most important way in which northern countries promote oligarchic logging is by providing political, military, economic and diplomatic support for the oligarchic regimes it is designed to serve. Often, such support is unofficial, private or covert. International financial institutions (IFI) provide additional support by providing lending devoid of forestry-reform conditionality, by providing ineffective or misguided forestry-reform and project lending, and by providing private-sector forestry-related investments.

Despite the known problems with the forest sector in Cameroon, international funding has continued to pour into the country: during the 1990s, at least \$75 million in foreign assistance was given for forestry and conservation projects.

During the mid 1990s, Britain's Overseas Development Administration (and then DFID) attempted to implement a programme to 'operationalise' the provisions of Cameroon's 1994 Forest Law relating to the establishment of community forests. This required, firstly, establishing a clear set of rules for the allocation of community forests – which had never been undertaken by the Cameroonian government – and secondly to establish a unit within the Forest Department to administer the community forests. Community forests, as defined in Cameroon's law, are of extremely limited size (maximum 5,000 hectares) and duration (15 years renewable for a further 15). Further, they can only be established in the limited areas of 'non-permanent' forest, thus excluding them from areas designated as forestry concessions (UFAs). However, subsequent to the passing of the 1994 Forest Law, these non-permanent forest areas were becoming increasingly important to the political machinery as a means of allocating short-term, 'cut-and-run' logging rights, or 'ventes de coupes'. The forest administration thus worked actively to oppose the implementation of community forests.

This illustrates that the institutions that now administer the 'forest sector' in parts of Africa are not only primarily articulated around industrial logging but also, because this logging is linked to the vested interests of senior political figures, directly opposed to any use of forest resources – such as community forests – that might hold developmental benefits but that would potentially jeopardise the absolute discretion that those political figures have had in using forests as a means of political patronage.

Given the importance of logging concessions as the 'grease in the cogs' of political patronage, graft and corruption in all Congo Basin countries --and elsewhere: in Ivory Coast, Togo, Guinea, etc.--, it is hardly surprising that internationally funded projects to provide 'technical assistance' to improve the 'performance' of African forestry concessions have proved to be such spectacular failures.

Excerpted from: "The political ecology of the African logging concession system and the complicity of international donors", Simon Counsell and Arnaud Labrousse, sent by Simon Counsell, Rainforest

