
Nigeria: Tree plantations at the expense of forests and forest people's livelihoods

The Omo Forest Reserve –located in the South west of Nigeria- was legally constituted as a forest reserve by Order No. 10 of 1925 and the Order was amended in 1952. The forest was practically unexplored by then. The forest was ceded to Government for reservation on the 8th of October, 1918. The agreement was made between the District Officer, Ijebu Ode on behalf of the British Colonial government and the Awujale of Ijebu Ode on behalf of the Ijebu Native administration. The Omo Forest Reserve, which is 1305.5km², is divided into Area J1 –J3 (519.3km²), Area J4 (565.8km²), Area J6 (220.4km²), and enclaves (65km²) (Ola-Adams, 1999).

A survey conducted in the reserve between 1916 and 1918 reported the existence of 5 villages, a total of 30 settlements and a human population of 610 (300 males, 190 females and 120 children). Settlements have continued to increase in number and sizes, and the present population of the reserve cannot be less than 25,000; and the number of people deriving benefit from it estimated at between 80,000 and 100,000 (Karimu, 1999).

The reserve lies within a tropical lowland rainforest (otherwise known as high forest). The forest in its undisturbed form had the most complex and productive vegetation type in the country. The high forest is part of the Guinea-Congolean tropical moist forest zone and it is estimated that the system supports about 8,000 species of plants. Part of the southern portion of the reserve falls within the original mahogany belt in the system.

As a result of continuous human activities especially logging and establishment of monoculture tree plantations by the Ogun State Forestry Plantation Project, the vegetation pattern in Omo has changed remarkably. The original vegetation of the reserve now occupies about 0.3 % of the total area, with the disturbed (logged) forests, monoculture plantations and farming areas occupying about 60%, 30% and 10% respectively. Not less than 35,775 logs of sixty-five tree species are removed annually from Omo Forest Reserve (NFWSG, 1994 cited by Ola-Adams, 1999).

The precursor of the Ogun State Forestry Plantation Project started in 1966 as Gmelina Pulpwood Plantation Project. The purpose of the Project was to raise Gmelina arborea plantations for pulpwood that would feed Iwopin Pulp and Paper Mill.

The Western State Government funded the project up to 1972 when a total of 2,000 hectares of Gmelina arborea plantation was established in Area J6 of the reserve. Between 1973 and 1979, the Federal Government of Nigeria sustained the project with grants for additional 6,000 hectares of plantations of Gmelina.

Ogun State through the Federal Government of Nigeria then took a loan from World Bank and utilized it to raise a further 10,000 hectares of Gmelina arborea from 1980 to 1987.

At the approach of the termination of the World Bank loan in 1987, African Development Bank (ADB) was contacted for a continuation loan to proceed with the project. The loan was granted and became

effective as from 1989. By the end of the ADB assisted portion of the project around 1995/96, the project had established 23,130 hectares of plantation. The ugly trend still continues till date with funds from Ogun State Government.

The resultant effect of these unsustainable practices is increased hardship on the forest communities. In a recent study conducted by the Indigenous Peoples Rights Crusaders (IPRC), forest dwellers interviewed in most of the enclaves reported a fall in the quality and quantity of forest resources with continuous forest degradation through over exploitation. The resources mentioned include bush meat (which constituted their major source of animal protein), timber and non- timber forest products.

Even with the presence of World Bank and ADB in the reserve, the Ogun State Government has not made concerted effort to ameliorate the sufferings of the forest dwellers either through the provision of infrastructural facilities and social amenities like accessible roads, electricity, good water supply, or the provision of alternative means of livelihood for them.

Due to the very poor state of roads in the reserve, movement of goods and people within the reserve and the nearby towns is always very difficult and expensive. This has culminated in a very high cost of living in a community dominated by very indigent people.

In the enclaves visited by the IPRC, there was no good source of drinking water. The enclaves depend on contaminated perennial streams which are becoming seasonal because of the deleterious effect of vegetation modification on watersheds. With respect to electricity, the only place that is electrified is the Grace Camp, where the Project has its offices and residential quarters.

The unacceptability of the unsustainable and non-participatory approach of Ogun State Forestry Department to forest resources management was made clear in an ugly incident that took place on the 23rd and 24th of February, 2006, when the State Government Squad led by the Commissioner for Agriculture and Forestry, Mr. Dele Odulaja went to destroy Cocoa, Plantain and Cola nut farms owned by the indigenous farmers at Ebulende enclave (along Iho area) of the reserve, claiming that the farmers destroyed their monoculture plantations to establish their farms. The farmers who came out to fight the government officials, were overpowered, their farms destroyed and some of them arrested.

It is high time Ogun State Forestry Department stopped this act of brutality and injustice. It is also high time they recognized the importance of the involvement and the integration of the indigenous people in the management of their forest resources as being preached the world over. There is an urgent need for the government to review her activities in the reserve with a view to ameliorating the sufferings of the forest dwellers and improving their standard of living.

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