
Ghana: "Promissory" reforestation plans end up in unemployment

Burdened by a mounting foreign debt and pushed by globalisation and trade liberalisation, Ghana, as many other West African countries, has had its ability to finance domestic public spending severely constrained. In addition most of the exports of African countries suffer decline in prices leading to overall poor returns in revenue and contributing to huge budget deficits. In a desperate bid to service debt and face their deficit, many countries in Africa including Ghana have been relying on the aggressive extraction of primary resources and not only plunder forest resources but also neglect budgeting for sustainable forest management practices.

Timber exports have been a major "commodity", leading to the depredation of Ghanaian forests. Nearly half the country was covered with forests, which included 680 species of trees and several varieties of mahoganies. Most of this wood has been cut. By the early 1990s, only about one-third of the country's forests remained.

Also, indigenous lands have been massively converted into logging and mining areas as well as into agricultural crops cultivated to meet external needs, mainly under extensive monoculture plantations. In the quest for foreign investments to come in, local people's land rights have been denied.

After losing some 70% of the forests, heavy restrictions on logging have been imposed in the country and an afforestation (more precisely reforestation) programme was put in place. However, such endeavour has been developed under the same pattern of supplying primary products to support unsustainable livelihoods elsewhere and also as extensive monoculture plantations. In this case of trees with commercial value generally to feed pulp paper mills. Amazingly enough, these plantations qualify as forests in some circles!

The plantation syndrome is epitomised by perverse incentives being provided by governments. Ghana for example has advocated the setting up of a fund to support the promotion of tree plantation establishment by individuals and companies with appeals being made to poor community land owners to release land for that purpose. The FAO has supported the provision of plantation incentives. The afforestation and reforestation scheme --which implies a narrow variety of species and is being done by the Ghanaian Forestry Department and some sawmills-- has been promoted as an important "development project" which will provide jobs for an impoverished population.

However, the Ghanaian publication Chronicle has recently revealed that about 150 people engaged by Asuowam Complex (AC) Ltd, a timber firm at Wamfie in the Brong Ahafo Region, for a reforestation project at the degraded forest reserve of Pamu-Brekum have been redeployed. Since the project took off in 1998, AC Ltd has been able to plant trees covering about 400 hectares. Out of the total of 150 people engaged by AC Ltd as the labour force for the project only a skeleton staff of 15 are now left to hold the fort. The decision by the management of AC Ltd to terminate the appointment of 135 people stemmed from the fact that the company had run out of funds as a result of lack of logs for its operations. The company first revoked the appointment of its work force at the timber firm and later topped it with those working on the reforestation project.

At the end there is a desert of trees and no work for people. A bad balance, indeed, that deserves more than a second thought.

Article based on information from: "The Bane of Sustainable Forest Management in Africa: The Case of Ghana. A Discussion paper", Lambert Okrah, ICA-Ghana, e-mail: icagh@ghana.com ; Country Study & Country Guide for Ghana, <http://www.1upinfo.com/country-guide-study/ghana/index.html> ; "Dark Clouds Over Gov't Afforestation Program", Dominic Jale, Ghanaian Chronicle (Accra), <http://www.ghanaian-chronicle.com/220624/>