
Gabon: More logging concessions in the hands of foreign firms

With a total area of 268,000 square kilometres, 80% of which are forests and many of them primary rainforests, Gabon is Africa's second largest timber producer. Okoumé and, to a lesser extent, Ozigo wood species represent the bulk of Gabon's production accounting for up to 80% of the country's total timber production.

Mostly based on natural resource extraction --including timber-- for export markets, Gabon's economy has been highly vulnerable to external factors like the Asian economic crisis, which drove it to a financial crisis in 1998, higher unemployment and increased poverty and indebtedness.

Although with the highest GNP per capita in the continent, those are void figures which do not reflect the real internal distribution of wealth since the monies go to a local elite while most of the population remain in poverty.

The forestry sector is the second source of foreign exchange after oil, and like many neighbouring countries the Gabonese government as well as international financial institutions regard the exploitation of timber as central to macro-economic development thus leading to a rapid increase in logging.

Forestry legislation in force goes in support of commercial logging, for example increasing considerably the area of concessions: from 10% of the forest land in 1957 to some 59 % in 1999. It has also promoted the dominance of overseas capital in the forestry sector.

In the coastal logging zone which is reserved for Gabonese nationals, logging is commonly sub-contracted to foreign logging companies, a practice known as "fermage", which fosters rent-seeking and involves a loss of tax revenue because the transfer of logging rights is poorly regulated. Permit owners receive large rents without feeling responsible for investing in their concessions; logging companies have no interest in doing so either.

Logging in Gabon is selective but not sustainable. It has been argued that, as only a small number of Okoumé trees are removed, they would easily regenerate. But recent studies indicate that creaming off the best trees results in lower quality timber.

Logging not also contributes to increase commercial bushmeat hunting leading to wildlife decimation, but also causes soil erosion, in particular on slopes, and pollution through the chemicals used to treat the wood.

Although a new forestry law has been drafted to be approved this year --under pressure from the IMF and World Bank-- it promotes further industrialisation of the forests and does little to address the dominance of foreign capital in the industry or to mitigate poverty.

Once again, "development" schemes generally fostered from outside and replicated along southern countries rich in natural resources, bring money to national and international elites but not for the

people.