
Equatorial Guinea: Transnational loggers in the forest

Equatorial Guinea is a forest-rich country, and its valuable species --Okoumé, Ilomba, Andouk-- have attracted the logging industry, particularly since the early 1990s. Most of the country --some 2.2 million hectares-- is covered by forests, which provide for the livelihoods of between 80-90% of the population, which obtains fuelwood, food, medicines, building materials and other products from it.

Industrial timber production has rapidly increased since the mid-1990s at rates considered to be unsustainable. As mentioned in WRM bulletin 46, commercial logging has been banned on Bioko Island (due to its high biodiversity level) but no similar measures were taken on the mainland (Rio Muni), where approximately 1.5 million hectares of productive forests have been allocated as industrial logging concessions.

The forests of Equatorial Guinea are divided into two domains: conservation forest (protected areas) and productive forest. The latter is composed of forest plots (small areas of primary or secondary forest located within farms), community forests (granted permanently to local communities because of their traditional rights) and national forests, that belong to the state and are exploited in partnership with private companies. In fact, most of the 1.5 million hectares of production forests have been allocated as industrial logging concessions.

In the continental region of the country there are currently 80 logging concessions being exploited by a number of companies from different countries such as Malaysia, Spain, France, Korea, Lebanon, China. There has however been a major shift in foreign involvement in logging. Until the mid 1990s most companies were owned by mainly Spanish capital, while now Asian companies have become dominant. Within these, a subsidiary of the Malaysian company Rimbunan Hijau --Shimmer International-- now carries out most of the logging in the country, allegedly through having strong ties with the President's son, who happens to be the Minister of Forests.

Moreover, this Malaysian logging company has been accused of being "one of the worst in the world". Richard Wilcox's study "Asian Economies Fuel Forest Meltdown", published in The New Observer, says that Rimbunan Hijau Ltd. has become one of the most ruthless logging companies in the world due to abuses of national laws and regulations, human rights violations and contractual breaches". This company is exploiting forests not only in Malaysia but also in Brazil, Russia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and a number of Central African countries.

The shift from European to Asian logging companies is also reflected in export figures. Until 1992, Europe was the destination of 85% of log production, but since the mid-1990s Asia has become the main destination of the country's log exports. In 1994, 54% of timber exports went mostly to Japan and to a lesser degree to China. On the other hand, Europe is practically the sole destination of processed wood products

Enforcement of legal requirements is virtually non-existent regarding commercial logging. For instance, total wood production had by 1997 gone up to 760,000 cubic metres per year, while the legal limit was 450,000 cubic metres. Another clear infringement of the law is related to wood

processing in the country. Although concessionaires are obliged to must process 60% of their production, in practice most timber from Equatorial Guinea is still being exported as raw logs.

In sum, the rich forests of Equatorial Guinea are being depleted, thus depriving local people of their sources of livelihood for the benefit of a few transnational logging companies and local elites.