
Tanzania: afforestation, reforestation and the real causes of forest destruction

Tanzania's forests are quickly disappearing and illegal commercial logging is the main cause of the problem. Not only does the government seem unable to address the present state of things, but forestry officials themselves have been accused of being directly involved in the illegal timber trade. Other suspects in the illegal timber business are timber product dealers, private individuals, sawmillers and logging companies (see WRM Bulletin 27).

Recent news from that country say that the government has launched an ambitious national tree planting campaign aimed at "re-greening" the country by planting 100 million trees. To the official viewpoint, forest destruction is particularly alarming in the rural areas where traditional shifting cultivation and livestock keeping are practiced.

Thousands of refugees from Rwanda and Burundi have migrated to Tanzania to escape from the situation of extreme violence resulting from the conflicts that affect their respective countries. The authorities have recently urged Burundian refugees in the western region of Kigoma to stop felling trees and instead join the government's green campaign. Like their Tanzanian hosts, the refugees rely heavily on wood fuel for their daily energy requirements, since wood is by far the most important source of energy in that country, as is common in Africa.

The government's initiative deserves some comments. It is not clear if the government is envisaging a reforestation or an afforestation campaign. The difference is essential, since the former means that areas that used to be covered by forest will be planted with native species, aiming at the rehabilitation of the original ecosystem, while the latter consists of the plantation of exotic trees, usually fast-growing species. The social and environmental consequences of the two approaches are totally different and there is therefore a need for clarification on the matter. Secondly, the official analysis of the causes of deforestation seems to be clearly biased against the poor. While the emphasis is put on shifting agriculture, grazing and the use of firewood by local people and refugees, nothing is said about the intensification of export crop production in semiarid areas -which has led to soil erosion and desertification processes- or about illegal commercial logging -the main cause of deforestation in the country- which is linked to corruption within its own agencies and officials.

Sources: Panafrican News Agency, 29/11/99; The World Guide 1997/98.