
Cameroon: structural adjustment promotes deforestation

Logging is one of the most important direct causes of the accelerated loss of tropical forests. However, macroeconomic strategies implemented by Southern countries' governments under the pressure of powerful actors such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) provide an even stronger incentive for increasing unsustainable logging practices. Cameroon is but one of many examples showing the impacts of such policies on the disappearing rainforests.

Cameroon is known as one of the most ecologically diverse countries on the African Continent. Between coastal mangrove swamps and Mount Cameroon, West Africa's highest mountain, lies a hot and humid southern region of dense tropical forests of mahogany, ebony and obeche trees. There are over 9,000 plant species in Cameroon, 150 of which are found nowhere else in the world. Cameroon's forest resources are estimated at 22 million hectares of which 14 million are tropical rainforest. Intensive logging, encouraged by IMF policy reforms, now threatens the country's tropical rainforests and the habitat of over 40 species of wildlife including black rhinoceros, gorillas and elephants.

In the late 1980s, the IMF imposed a structural adjustment programme on the government, which was supposed to solve the country's critical economic situation. Part of this programme relied on the promotion of non traditional exports -timber included- which was fostered by the devaluation of the currency. The IMF-recommended export tax cuts also played an important role in the increase of timber exports. Between 1994 and 1995 the number of logging enterprises increased from 194 to 351, while lumber exports jumped a 49.6% between 1995/96 and 1996/97. It is estimated that 200,000 hectares of forests are destroyed annually in Cameroon.

The destruction of natural resources resulting from such policy goes together with poverty. Already in 1991 a report of the World Bank stated that by 1985, long before adjustment measures hit many incomes -many of them related to the direct access to forest products and services- 40% of the rural population were in a state of absolute poverty. A decade of structural adjustment has not but aggravated the situation of forest and forest-dependent communities. In a recent report the IMF itself has acknowledged the precarious nature of Cameroon's export strategy.

Sources: Friends of the Earth, "Environmental consequences of the IMF's lending policies", "Underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation in Cameroon" by Wilfred J. Awung