

Community and civil society activists defend Cameroon's rainforests and propose rights-based solutions to forest threats

Between 1990 and 2010 [Cameroon lost close to a fifth of its forest cover](#). Much more deforestation is threatened, which will seriously affect the lives and livelihoods of the indigenous and other peoples who have lived sustainably in the country's forests for generations. Rooted in the [colonial past](#) and driven by a combination of [corrupt and mismanaged resource overexploitation](#) and non-recognition of the [land rights](#) of forest peoples, deforestation and forest degradation look set to rapidly worsen in Cameroon unless forest peoples' voices are listened to and their rights are protected.

Venant Messe and Nasako Besingi are Cameroonian community activists working to halt forest destruction and to promote forest peoples' rights. Samuel Nguiffo is a lawyer and civil society campaigner.

Pharmacy, school and market – the Baka

Venant Messe is a leading activist among Cameroon's 30,000 to 40,000 [Baka](#) indigenous people, director of [Association Okani](#) (a community-based NGO) in eastern Cameroon and a municipal councillor. The Baka, probably the oldest human inhabitants of Cameroon's eastern rainforests, traditionally rely on hunting, gathering, fishing and small-scale cultivation to maintain their low-impact livelihoods. Messe describes the forest as his people's pharmacy, school and market. Today, however, cocoa, coffee and oil palm plantations are encroaching on the forests, alongside commercial logging (both legal and illegal), mineral prospecting, the start of large-scale mining and major infrastructure developments such as road building and planned railway and port expansion.

'Baka lands are bought by outsiders for agribusiness and taken over for other large-scale developments,' says Messe. 'This reduces the forest available to us and is destroying our knowledge and our language. The Baka have less and less deep forest to practise our hunting and gathering and to maintain and educate our young people in Baka traditions.'

'Deforestation is undermining our health. As the forests are taken from us, Baka communities are deprived of traditional medicinal plants, fruit trees and sources of animal protein. Poachers use new roads into the forest to come and kill the animals that we have relied on for food for generations,' he says.

'When we lose our traditional medicines, our sick people have to travel to hospital, but they do not have the money to pay for transport. Baka people's health also suffers when we are displaced from the deep forest and have to live beside roads and drink polluted water rather than the clean water we get in the forest.'

'Some forestry developments include promises of compensation for affected communities,' Messe observes, 'but Baka rarely receive any share.' Equally, they have seen few benefits from the relatively low national logging tax, of which 10 per cent is meant to support community projects. The justification that Cameroon is using its natural resources to promote much needed national development rings hollow when local communities experience so few of the benefits and such high costs.

Many Baka are understandably pessimistic about the future of the forests and their survival as a people. They are concerned about new roadbuilding and an influx of outsiders in the [Ngoyla-Mintom](#) forests of south and east Cameroon, for example, where Cameroon's

Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife is seeking to auction off concessions to logging companies. Mining companies are also showing interest here, while conservationists are keen to safeguard biological corridors and land for carbon sequestration against global climate change.

The Baka recognize the importance of forest conservation, Messe points out. Their way of life, which has served them for hundreds if not thousands of years, involves only small-scale, localized and temporary impacts on the forest, which soon regenerates when left alone. However, Cameroon's officially [protected areas](#) often exclude the Baka from their customary territories and prevent them from practising their low-impact livelihoods. The gathering of non-timber products from forest plants and animals, mainly by Baka women, requires longer journeys than before deep into the forest, making the practice more difficult and less productive. 'Different groups of Baka are also cut off from each other, because they can no longer travel unhindered through the forest,' adds Messe.

The key problem for the Baka and for other Cameroonian indigenous forest peoples such as the [Bagyéli, Bedzang and Bakola](#) – collectively numbering 40,000 to 50,000 women, men and children – is lack of legal recognition of their collective rights to the land they have inhabited since pre-colonial times.

Under [forestry reforms dating to 1994/5](#) that the [World Bank encouraged](#), all Cameroon's non-privately registered forest lands are controlled by the state and allocated either for forest production or as protected areas. Consultation with local communities in implementing the reforms has been inadequate. In principle, communities have the legal right to use forest resources and to [manage discrete areas](#) of up to 5,000 hectares for a maximum of 25 years, provided they can prove their customary tenure. In practice, a community seeking to exercise management rights over a local area must submit to a complex process involving management plans, surveys and legal registration of a forest management team. Such requirements exclude most subsistence-based communities on technical and financial grounds and result in only limited instances of decentralized and participatory forest management. Even then, some of Cameroon's registered community forests have still been [logged illegally](#) by outsiders.

Community struggles against irresponsible palm oil

Nasako Besingi is another of Cameroon's defenders of the forests and forest peoples. Besingi is founder-director of the NGO [Struggle to Economize the Future Environment](#) and belongs to the rural Oroko people of coastal southwest Cameroon. He has been [campaigning since 2009](#) against the development of oil palm plantations by the US-owned company Herakles that could destroy 70,000 hectares of rainforest where 14,000 people live and are opposed by most local people.

'I am very concerned about the location of the proposed plantations within protected forest, community lands and watershed areas,' Besingi says. 'Herakles has started to cut down forest for oil palm nurseries without showing respect for Cameroon's laws, because no proper environmental impacts assessment has been published and there has been no genuine consultation with local people.' The company reportedly paid several village chiefs to sign a blank sheet of paper as proof of 'community consent'.

'The plantations are at an early stage but are already causing harm,' according to Besingi. Near where Herakles has set up [oil palm nurseries](#), villages have had their livelihoods reduced because of the loss of non-timber forest products, which village women need to sell to pay for their children's schooling and other necessities. And smallholder farmers have

suffered because fertilizers and other chemicals used in the nurseries pollute local waterways.’

In Besingi’s experience, ‘Oil palm developments have led to conflict between communities and to repression and violence. Local people have protested peacefully but been intimidated by officials and company workers. Women have been threatened because of their opposition to the plantations. Some communities are now engaging in deliberate forest destruction in areas where they formerly practised low-impact shifting cultivation to assert their landownership, after being told by officials that all land not “developed” or untouched forest is government land.’

Several community members including Besingi who were planning a peaceful protest in 2012 were [arrested and detained](#) without charge for two days. In 2013 Besingi was accused of publishing ‘false news via the internet’ after he associated Herakles with a physical assault against him. Another local NGO, [Nature Cameroon](#), has been intimidated by the government for opposition to the oil palm development. International NGOs have [written to UN rapporteurs and experts](#) asking them to intervene against such acts of repression and criminalization of local organizations and activists in Cameroon who peacefully protest against Herakles. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food has [criticized the oil palm project](#) and [reminded the Cameroonian government](#) of its duty to protect human rights defenders.

The legality of Herakles’ concession is [highly questionable](#). No presidential decree had authenticated the 99-year 73,000 ha concession that the company originally claimed – which included land linking five key protected areas – as required by Cameroonian law when Herakles began to place boundary markers on community lands and to clear areas for tree nurseries. Details of the deal between the company and the government remain shrouded in secrecy, and the company has been [fined by the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife](#) for illegal tree felling. After national and international NGOs took up the matter, the lease area was [reduced by the authorities](#) by almost three-quarters.

Future threats

Forest stewardship in Cameroon appears likely to worsen as the country strives to achieve ‘emerging economy’ status by 2035 under a [government strategy](#) adopted in 2009. Official plans centre on increasing the export-oriented exploitation of the country’s natural resources and include expansion of commercial logging, oil palm and rubber plantations and other forms of agribusiness, mining of iron ore, cobalt, nickel and manganese, and large-scale infrastructure developments such as hydroelectric plants, the Kribi deep-sea port and a railway linking Kribi to mining sites in the southeast. Chinese, French, US and other foreign companies are involved. Cameroon is already Africa’s [leading exporter of tropical wood to Europe](#).

Corruption, incoherent policies across sectors and [conflicting laws](#) make matters worse. Large-scale development deals between foreign investors, politicians and officials lack transparency. With few effective monitoring mechanisms in place, [illegal logging](#) has long been a problem. New projects bring access roads, migrant populations, disease, poaching and unauthorized land clearance in their wake, as well as oppression and harassment of civil society and communities when they are seen as standing in the way of national development.

[Mining permits](#) – mainly for exploration, but implying extraction if significant deposits are found – have been issued for almost a fifth of Cameroon’s total land area, of which the vast majority overlap with forested areas, almost half coincide with designated ‘permanent forest

estate', and nine concessions overlap with national parks including part of the [Dja Biosphere Reserve](#) UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Cameroon's national law currently [conflicts with the national constitution and with customary and international law](#) in its failure to recognize the [right of communities to own land, territory and resources that they have traditionally used or occupied](#). With this lack of legal protection at national level, opaque and top-down forest, mining and agribusiness concessions enable a form of land grabbing by foreign companies and domestic elites that excludes local communities from consultation, consent or a fair share of benefits. [Poor inter-ministry coordination](#) is a contributory factor.

Cameroon's flawed and destructive economic growth model, with its disregard to forest peoples' customary rights, dates back to colonial times and has been encouraged for several decades by the World Bank. The Bank has itself [recognized](#) the failure of approaches to tropical forest protection that exclude local communities. In reality, there can be no ['quick fix'](#) solution to development in Cameroon or anywhere else. With more than half of the country's poorest people living in forested zones with very little land tenure security, the price to pay if land grabbing and deforestation are allowed to increase will be huge.

Wider civil society view

Samuel Nguiffo, a Cameroonian lawyer and secretary-general of [the Centre pour l'environnement et le développement / Centre for Environment and Development \(CED\), Cameroon](#), was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize in 1999. His perspective fully supports the views and arguments of the forest communities.

'Forest people rely on forest space and resources for their livelihoods and cultural identity,' Nguiffo says. 'If their access to forests is restricted, or the resources are destroyed, this can bring about drastic deterioration in their quality of life. The threat to Cameroon's forest peoples is that they will be displaced away from their traditional territories and will come into conflict with other communities over the limited areas of remaining forest. Several communities have already been displaced by plantations and infrastructure developments.'

'Underlying the threats to Cameroon's forests', in Nguiffo's view, 'is a development model imposed by the Western industrialized countries that is built on the destruction of natural resources and the negation of community rights. Economic growth is perceived as important for a country like Cameroon, and this explains investment in the natural resources sector, but this is too often at the expenses of community rights. Neglect of forest peoples' rights is the main reason why the country's forests are being destroyed. The Western economic model is falling to deliver sustainability or equity in Western countries, yet it is still imposed in Africa.'

Nguiffo's NGO, CED, is concerned about [illegal logging](#) and mining: 'Illegal logging takes place near where forest communities live. The government has failed to enforce logging regulations or hold the companies to account. Little tax gets paid, and forestry workers are badly exploited – all in violation of the law.' As to mining: 'Cameroon passed a new mining law in 2001 to make the country more attractive to investors. More than 160 exploration permits have been issued as a result, overlapping with community forest and many with logging zones and protected areas. Major mineral discoveries will lead to clear-cutting of Cameroon's forest.'

With regard to palm oil, Nguiffo and CED worked with forest communities to secure a reduction in Herakles' land lease from 73,000 ha to 20,000 ha in a [campaign](#) that helped create more awareness among communities and the authorities about the issues at stake.

'Herakles has so far shown insufficient expertise to grow oil palm sustainably,' according to Nguiffo. 'Yet it still has the right to clear-cut forest for 20,000 ha of plantations over the next three years, after which its permit is almost certain to be extended in time and possibly enlarged.'

Nguiffo has also been subject to reprisals and intimidation. 'At the request of the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife, the Prime Minister's office arranged for the police to start a legal action against me after I exposed illegal logging,' he says. 'There is little political will to prevent deforestation or protect forest peoples, and we must therefore suspect that this is largely the result of corruption among our political elite.'

Ways forward

For Messe and the Baka, for Besingi and the Oroko, for other forest communities and their civil society allies, dialogue and the recognition of [customary land rights](#) are essential if deforestation in Cameroon is to be slowed or halted.

'Baka need to be represented in decision making,' Messe says. He advocates 'multi-stakeholder dialogue at local, regional and national levels involving government, companies, conservationists and the forest peoples to agree plans of action. We need information to engage in advocacy with those whose actions affect the rainforest, and we demand the right to participate in decisions that affect our lives.'

The Baka also want education and their own media, so that the community can speak for itself and communicate its views nationally and internationally. 'With a radio or television station we can voice our concerns and influence the debate.'

As well as seeking permits to enter protected areas to maintain traditional Baka practices while respecting the forest, Messe argues that 'Our collective rights to live in our ancestral forest areas must be safeguarded.'

Besingi agrees: 'We need full legal recognition for traditional community land tenure to prevent deforestation. Financial institutions and other international actors should publicly oppose land grabbing and the felling of virgin forests. Instead forest communities should be helped to develop better farming techniques and to gain access to markets so that they can maintain and develop sustainable livelihoods and strengthen domestic food security. The government should also ensure that forest communities have access to information about the forests and about government development plans.'

Under the 2007 [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) and other international standards, which Cameroon has endorsed, indigenous peoples have rights to the sustainable use of their traditional lands, territories and resources, to participate with [free, prior and informed consent](#) over decisions regarding how their lands and resources are developed, not to be displaced from their lands, and to share fully and equitably in benefits derived from their lands and resources as legitimate stakeholders.

Solutions must be rights-based to succeed, respecting the fact that Cameroon's forest peoples have the greatest stake in the forests' survival, have been proven the most effective forest stewards and cannot be left out of the equation. This will require Cameroon's lawmakers to [elevate existing customary community land claims into the formal legal framework](#) and make customary collective landownership rights equal in weight and validity to documented private and corporate landownership claims, in accordance with the national constitution and with regional and international human rights standards. Alongside painstaking legal reform, Cameroon needs to build a political culture of [transparency and](#)

[accountability](#), and to develop participatory sustainable forest management and technical capacity at subnational and national levels, with support and involvement from communities, civil society, companies, investors, donors and intergovernmental organizations.

Nguiffo concurs: 'Three key steps will help defend Cameroon's forest peoples and prevent deforestation. First, the state should recognize community property rights and resource ownership on forest land. Second, the government should develop a national land use plan that takes account of all needs but prioritizes community rights over the demands of investors, because development should be for the people. Third, Cameroon needs an inclusive public debate about what form of development will benefit the country and its people, with forest communities encouraged to express their vision. These steps are likely to lead to greater emphasis on small-scale, localized and more sustainable forms of development that help us protect our forests.'

Further information

Interviews

Forest Peoples Programme is grateful to Venant Messe, Nasako Besingi and Samuel Nguiffo for being available for interview via Skype during February 2014. Venant Messe was interviewed in French, and his words have been translated into English. Nasako Besingi and Samuel Nguiffo were interviewed in English. The following are available to be contacted in connection with this briefing:

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International workshop and Cameroon case study

[Forest Peoples Programme \(FPP\)](#) and [Pusaka](#) are co-organizing an international workshop on [Deforestation Drivers and the Rights of Forest Peoples](#) in March 2014 in Palangkaraya, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. The workshop will bring together forest peoples, governments, NGOs, international agencies and forest scientists from Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America to discuss new research-based case studies documenting the direct and indirect drivers of deforestation in specific countries – including a new case study on Cameroon – to share and update insights into the causes and consequences of deforestation, to discuss how to stem deforestation, and to promote forest peoples' rights and livelihoods. The following are available to be contacted in connection with this story:

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