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Ecology

In Africa, focus on the forests

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Africa, like other continents, is facing shrinking forest cover as a result of the expansion of export farming and logging, most of which is illegal.

Africa's forests are under threat from the accelerating commercialization of the continent's land. While the focus is often on the equatorial forest of Central Africa, the dry forest below the Sahel-Saharan strip and in large parts of southern Africa is in an even more serious crisis.

African forests in danger

During colonization, the forests were exploited in the legal form of concessions. Under this system, the colonial state transferred all its prerogatives to private companies. These companies grew export crops such as cocoa, coffee, rubber, palm oil, etc., to the detriment of the forests. When African countries gained independence, this type of agricultural economy continued.

As a result, for decades the forests were decimated. Côte d'Ivoire is a case in point. Between 1900 and 2021, the country lost 80% of its forest area, mainly to cocoa exports.

Like the Amazon, the forests of Africa are a formidable carbon trap. The Congo forest stores 50 billion tonnes of carbon. They help to regulate the climate and are home to many species of flora and fauna. For almost 100 million people, they are also a direct or indirect source of food, health and building materials.

Illegal and lucrative trafficking

Every year, nearly four million hectares of forest disappear in Africa as a result of the financialisation of forests. This takes the form of land-grabbing policies that benefit the major multinationals, with the complicity of the leaders of African countries. The aim is to develop export agriculture and mining operations.

The other factor exacerbating deforestation is the timber trade. Illegal logging has exploded as a result of very strong demand from the Asian market. It represents a loss of 17 billion dollars for the continent. In Uganda, for example, illegally logged timber accounts for 80% of the total volume.

Trafficking of this kind cannot take place without the complicity of politicians and senior civil servants. In 2019, Gabon's Minister of Forests, Guy-Bertrand Mapangou, was implicated in trafficking in kevazingo, a precious wood. In Zambia, it was those close to former president Edgar Lungu who were involved in a similar affair.

User-friendly conservation

Under international pressure, the African governments concerned have introduced legal measures to protect their forests. But the results have been meagre, primarily because of a lack of resources, but also because of corruption.

Such policies encourage forest communities to take part in this trade, preferring to benefit from the financial windfall

rather than be mere bystanders. The precarious land tenure situation in which communities live does not encourage them to engage in sustainable forestry activities. As one community leader put it: "The companies come in, they operate parcels of our forests without consulting us, and when we protest, they pull an official document stating they are allowed to do it. We just stand there powerless when these forests unquestionably belong to us." [1]

The best way to protect the forests is for them to remain under community control. This means securing their land titles and respecting their way of life. As one indigenous leader put it: "We have lived in the forest for thousands of years and have always used it sustainably. Indeed, the inventories carried out show that the resources are being preserved, the result of what scientists call convivial conservation. In other words, a harmonious relationship between nature and human beings, a far cry from the over-exploitation and plundering of forest resources that currently prevails.

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).

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[1] Quoted in ["The role of the Congo's forests, peatlands and people in safeguarding the planet"](#).