DEFORESTATION AND POVERTY IN THE RURAL ZONE OF CAMEROON

Eric Etongwe
Sumy State University, Sumy, Ukraine

Whereas forests play a very important role in the genesis and maintenance of the production potential of soils and watershed protection, harbour large proportions of the world is plant and animal species, serve as a reservoir of resources in the form of food, medicinal plants and wood. Over one half of the world is living species are found in tropical forests that only occupy seven percent of the total land surface. Unfortunately, most of these species are not found in any other type of ecosystem. It has been estimated that 25 percent of the species which existed in the mid-1980s may be extinct by 2015. If tropical forest conversion continues unabated, the world may lose between 5 and 15% of its total plant and animal species between 1990 and 2020. More than three quarters of the world's population depend directly on plants for medicines, many of which are extracted from tropical forests.

In Cameroon, the supply of fuel wood from forests accounts for over 60% of the energy consumed and has been increasing at a rate of 2.5% per year since 1974-1976. The forestry sector occupies the first place in export tonnage and third place in foreign earnings. It accounts for about 4% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and offer about 40,000 jobs . Cameroonian forests contain an estimated 300 different tree species and the country can be said to have a forest based-economy. With her potential, Cameroon is at the second position amongst forestry African countries after the Democratic Republic of Congo. Furthermore, forests serve as a habitat for primitive populations. They live in and near tropical forests and are for the most part very poor. It is then clear that the immediate survival of these people is threatened and their poverty trend is aggravated when and where forests are damaged through inappropriate development. The survival and sustainability of forests is crucial and perhaps obligatory for the interests of both the present and future generations of pygmy. Cameroon has some of the greatest biodiversity in Africa, and also has the highest percentage of logged forest of any African nation with substantial rain forest. In addition, Cameroon is one of the Sudano-Sahelian countries in Africa that show signs of some desertification. The northern part of the country was previously under forest, and due to the extreme degradation of vegetative cover, it's now under savannah grasslands. It appears therefore that deforestation in Cameroon should be the preoccupation of environmental and human resource economists, ecologists as well as policy makers because of its threat to ecological sustainability and socio-economic development in the long run.

The causes of deforestation have been attributed to several factors. The most important categories are the immediate and the underlying causes. In Sudan, Stryker et al (1989) found that increased producer prices of export crops encouraged woodland clearing for crop cultivation and this resulted in significant deforestation. Based on the market theoretical approach, Angelsen. Et al (1999) statistical analysis in Tanzania showed that the increase of agricultural output prices, in particular annual crops is a major factor behind deforestation. The results of these authors were confirmed in Ivory Coast where the effects of price increase of export goods contributed to deforestation but to a lesser extent than the lack of a consistent and secure land tenure system. Osei Asare and Obeng Asiedu (2000) found in Ghana a long-run equilibrium relationship between the producer prices of cocoa and coffee, fertiliser prices, food crop prices, agricultural wages, timber prices and agricultural credit on the one hand and deforestation on the other hand. In this country, higher levels of fertiliser prices, food crop prices and coffee producer prices stimulate in the long-run higher levels of deforestation whereas higher levels of agricultural wages precipitates lower levels of deforestation.

Although Cameroon is the central African country that has attracted most attention from researchers and environmentalists, very few econometric studies on the causes of deforestation are available. Ndoye and Kaimowitz (2000) look at the influence of macroeconomic and agricultural policies, market fluctuations and demographic changes on the humid forest zone of Cameroon between 1967 and 1997. To capture deforestation, they use increases in perennial crop area and in the combined area of annual crops. The results indicate that cocoa, coffee and food production have a strong impact on forests and that pressure on forest areas increased after the oil boom, the Structural Adjustment Program (S.A.P) and the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994.

However, one aspect often overlooked is the environmental consequences of misguided government policies on deforestation. The effects of such policies are often indirect and unintended. With respect to social and economic costs of forest destruction, it is fundamental for tropical forestry countries to establish policies that counteract the opportunities of deforestation in situations where forest clearing is inappropriate. These policies have as goal, to make forest conversion less profitable, or other alternatives (either based on retaining forests or completely outside forest areas) be made more profitable. They can be grouped into six categories. Deforestation can be made less profitable by: Reducing the demand or prices for products produced from newly cleared land; Increasing the unit costs and riskiness of activities associated with deforestation; Eliminating speculative gains in land markets. Alternatives to deforestation can be made more profitable by: Increasing the income stream to be obtained from maintaining forests; Reducing the costs of maintaining forests; Increasing the opportunity costs of labor and capital that might otherwise be used in activities associated with deforestation.

The effects of deforestation in Cameroon such as the erosion of agricultural lands, drying up water bodies during dry seasons, desertification, disappearance of plant and animal species, modifications of both local and regional climatic conditions and global warming through its effect on the global carbon cycle are likely to affect agricultural activities and economic growth and therefore aggravate poverty in the rural zone.

Supervisor: Nataliya Vernydud