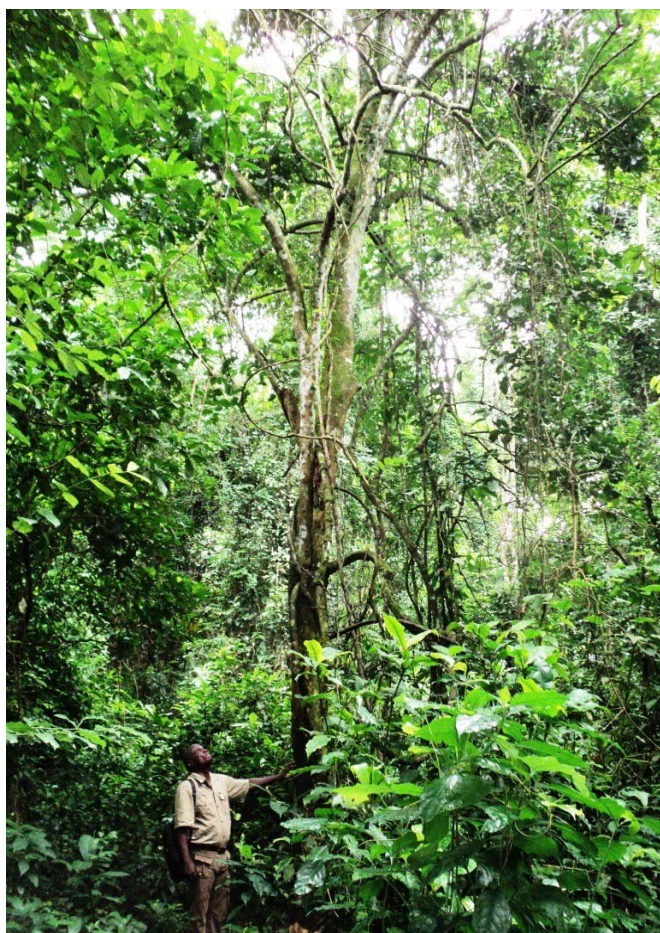


SALVAGING NIGERIA'S VANISHING FORESTS

By Matthew I. Ekeoba



A forester examining an *Okubaka aubrevillei* tree in the tropical rainforest of Nigeria

Introduction

As Nigeria celebrates her centenary of existence, its forest resources has little to be proud of. The current condition of the rainforest ecosystem and the spate of decline of biodiversity aptly portray the gloomy circumstances of the livelihood system of subsistence populations. The nation has been faced with enormous governance crisis and arrant waste of resources impelled by corrupt leadership and inspired by rent-seeking bureaucrats. At independence in 1960, the forest reservation policy of the colonial government had set aside 9,700,000 ha of the country as forest reserves. Historical accounts indicate that the country's rainforest which was over 60,000,000 ha in 1897 was reduced by less than 50% in 1960. The resource plunged to 1,190,000 ha in the late 1990s with only about 288,000 ha in official forest reserves (Blaser, et al. 2011). Beyond the 1990s, most published data and statistical information on the size and condition of the rainforest of Southern Nigeria have been based principally on simulations obtained largely from speculative reports.

For example, FAO (2010) cited in Blaser et al. (2011) claims that Nigeria's primary forest declined from 13,100,000 ha in 2000 to 9,100,000 ha in 2005 and to 9,040,000 ha in 2010. But FAO (2010) reported that the area of primary forest declined from 326,000 ha in 2005 to zero in 2010. Nigeria's forests have been on accelerated decline from the colonial era through independence to contemporary period, unfortunately, the country contends with dearth of reliable



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data on size, quality and rate of decline or degradation of the rainforest. According to Blaser et al. (2011), the most recent information on the change in forest area reported by FAO (2010) was calculated using a linear extrapolation of data of 1977 and 1994.

This policy brief outlines the past and present forest management systems vis à vis the current state of Nigeria's rainforest. It draws on the experience of sustainable forest management under a democratic system; making reasonable allusions to the autonomous Forestry Commission in Cross River State, adjudged as Nigeria's best community-based model. While exploring inclusive and participatory governance as the best approach to rehabilitating Nigeria's rainforest, this brief suggests broad institutional reforms that will usher in measures which will allow all stakeholders comprising government and non-governmental actors alike - the liberty to entrench and imbibe good forest governance practices. It also suggests the adoption of inclusive and grassroots driven governance systems aimed at rebuilding the productive and resilient characteristics of the ecosystem to shore up the wellbeing of forest-dependent populations. Forestry administration in Nigeria has, over the century, been saddled with obsolete, incoherent policies and legislations; confusing tenure and land use systems, role conflicts and excessive bureaucracy; and alienation of non-governmental actors as well as lack of transparent, accountable and participatory good governance systems.



On-site chainsaw lumbering

Most forest reserves that were intensively managed for timber production in the past have since become deforested and fragmented through de-reservation and conversion to other land uses while the forests in off-reserve areas have been turned into fire-climax forest re-growth, marginal and unproductive landscapes. The Nigerian constitution grants the state governments the exclusive rights over the management, protection and use of forest resources in their domains.

Being the major player of internally generated revenue (IGR) in most rainforest States in the south part Nigeria, the governments operate disparate and stand-alone forest policies and laws which bear little or no relationships with what operates in other states or at the national level. With a population of over 65 million (density: 324/km²; national average: 150/km²), the south, which constitutes 28% of total land area of the country and is subdivided into 17 states and 355 Local Government/Areas or Councils, is presently confronted with increasing anthropogenic forest challenges. The rainforest ecosystem supports the socio-economic, cultural, recreational and medicinal needs of the forest dependent communities. These include populations living in forest reserve fringes and enclaves as well as in far-flung off-reserve areas and peri-urban settlements.

Approach

The Nigerian rainforest ecosystem is an important component of the Guinea-Congolian phyto-geographical region of endemism and continuation of the western block of the African rainforest formation. It is located between Latitudes 40N and 90N and extends from the coast to about 250km inland (Ola-Adams and Iyamabo, 1977). The forest originally spanned the entire 17 southern states. Secondary data for study was restricted to literature on the rainforest ecosystem and government published documents – including national and state policies, incentive systems and tenure and land use codes and maps.

Reforms in the Forestry Sector: Striving for the Entrenchment of Good Governance

The Federal Government of Nigeria is exclusively responsible for the control, protection and management of all National Parks while the state governments have the constitutional prerogatives with regards to the management, conservation as well as control of forest/game reserves and sanctuaries. Sadly, communities and other non-governmental actors are not assigned any role. In Southern Nigeria, all Forestry Services (except in Cross River State which is managed by a commission and speculated to host Nigeria's remaining forest) still operate in line with the provisions of the 1988 Agricultural policy, regardless of the existence of a new national forest policy since 2006.

Box 1: The basic instrument of authority over the management of forest estates in most countries is the Forestry Act; unfortunately Nigeria's forest policy is not backed by a Forestry Code or Act (FAO, 2010 and Blaser, et al. 2011)

The demand for a shift from centralised to a multi-actor governance system although relatively recent in Africa is gradually gaining currency in most countries with federal systems of governance. Spurred by daunting environmental challenges arising from human-induced impacts and problems associated with extreme climate events, extant institutional frameworks in these nations are undergoing rigorous reviews. In Nigeria, statutory forest governance is in the hands of agencies and task forces who lack the requisite expertise. The rainforest, a renewable resource, which can be utilised and still retain its diversity and richness – could be rapidly transform into a non-renewable resource and its future existence jeopardised (Gomez-Pompa et al., 1972); particularly when the “intensity and scale of perturbations transcend the limits of persistence and resilience”.

Recent environmental shocks associated with extreme climate events and issues of externalities witnessed across the country, and particularly in the rainforest region of the south succinctly suggests a need for change from the centralised ‘fences’ and ‘fines’ forest management approach - which is characterised by poor role definition and weak devolution among government actors and aggravated by the exclusion of the civil society, private sector and forest-dependent communities –

to a good forest governance model where the rainforest resource can be managed sustainably for its ecological integrity and the livelihood security of forest-dependent populations. There is an implicit argument in the literature which suggests that *no best-fit forest governance model readily applies in all situations or possesses adaptive mechanisms for adoption in specific localities, regions or countries*. Any model found feasible would arguably draw upon the political system - notably on features of the contemporary policies and institutional arrangements as well as the characteristics of the population and ecological conditions of the forest and associated resources. According to Szaro (1992), “the best time to restore a species or ecosystem is when it is still common”.

Box 2: Studies and experiences from several countries and regions have shown that the top-down ‘straitjacket’ forest management paradigm under the rigid civil service bureaucratic system which is prevalent at the national and state forestry services in Nigeria, especially in the lowland rainforest states, has not only become unfashionable but demands critical review and substitution by grassroots and community-driven inclusive governance.

Inclusive governance traverses the many ways in which the government and non-governmental actors (Federal, States and Local Government Councils; and communities, private sector and the civil society) synergise to pool resources, build capacity as well as value-added regimes and institute plans to implement decisions about forest conservation and rehabilitation at multiple spatial and temporal scales. To the extent that the different tiers of government must work in tandem to achieve the common goal of entrenching inclusive and participatory governance, concerted efforts must be geared towards full-scale devolution and decentralisation of power/authority to lower levels and non-governmental actors.

Box 3: Decentralisation and devolution in a democratic system

The structure of the federation is hinged on constitutional provision; it defines power separation as well as means for resolving conflicts. A significant point is that if power is assigned to the various levels of government through a constitution, then the balance of power cannot be altered willingly by any of the levels of government. Such changes would require a constitutional amendment. With decentralisation, decision-making bottlenecks are avoided, particularly those that are routine in nature, allowing the central government to concentrate on those functions that require a central approach such as policy formulation and implementation. Programs and projects also are more likely to be sustainable if local interests feel that they have participated in their design and that such design reflects priorities of local constituencies (Contreras-Hermosilla, et al. 2008).

Conclusion

To entrench inclusive governance, the disparate forestry policies and laws at national and state levels must be harmonised and streamlined. The current dismal state and increasing threats of further environmental and rainforest degradation notwithstanding, a constitutional review process will swing the pendulum in favour of driving result-oriented forest rehabilitation programme, particularly from the grassroots. To this end, the following reforms and actions by the different parties – government and non-governmental actors are recommended.

Policy Recommendations

In restructuring the forestry sector, efforts should be made towards building inclusive forestry services in all the federating units of government. The forestry service at all levels should be replaced with constitutionally backed forestry commissions. Government must act to decentralise all responsibilities for which it lacks particular expertise

or competitive advantage. The Land Use Act of 1978 must be reviewed or out rightly repealed. There is the need for inter-ministerial, inter-departmental and inter-agency synergies between the federating organs of government and non-governmental-actors (communities, private sector and civil society). Good governance must be entrenched at all levels. States and Local Government Councils should develop adaptive mechanisms to institutionalise grass-roots driven participatory and inclusive forest governance.

Reforms in policies, legislations, land-use and attractive incentive systems must critically address the real impact of logging and milling practices, poor farming tools/practices, and lack of participation in tree planting/private forestry.

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