



GLOBAL  
GREENGRANTS  
FUND

## Cameroon's Troubled Timber Industry

Discussion with Samuel Nnah Ndobe and Chris Allan  
Taped Spring, 2007

**BACKGROUND** *Cameroon (Central Africa), like many countries in the Global South, is facing numerous development challenges. Greengrants International Financial Institutions (IFI) Advisor Samuel Nnah Ndobe, an Agricultural Engineer with the Center for the Environment and Development (CED) in Cameroon, is one of many civil society actors working to protect Cameroon's environment, natural resources, and indigenous peoples.*

*Cameroon's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, developed the country's economy by the means of agricultural exports—palm oil, coffee, cocoa, bananas, etc. Ahidjo's strategy was largely successful; Cameroon had strong economic growth between 1970 and 1985. In 1982, President Ahidjo constitutionally ceded the presidency to Paul Biya. Biya had a different vision for Cameroon's economy, where the extractive industries of oil and timber would comprise most of Cameroon's export earnings. Biya's irresponsible borrowing practices and dependency on the extractive industries, coupled with vast fluctuations in international commodity prices, led Cameroon to two economic meltdowns in the 1990s. In addition to economic devastation, dependency on the extractive industries created numerous social and environmental problems in Cameroon.*

*In the 1980s, European logging exploited nearly 60% of Cameroon's forests.<sup>1</sup> Cameroon's timber industry became more regulated in the 1990s, making it impossible for logging companies to receive such large land concessions. The logging companies employed a new strategy to beat regulation—bribery. According to Global Forest Watch-Cameroon, over 50% of logging in Cameroon is conducted in areas that are not designated for exploitation. The social impacts of this environmental destruction have robbed communities of economic livelihood, fueled land conflicts, and further marginalized indigenous communities.*



Chris Allan and Samuel Nnah Ndobe

*Samuel Nnah Ndobe is a CED advocate on public policy to properly enforce forestry laws, publish reports highlighting the corrupt management of the forests, and manage projects to protect the rights of indigenous communities. Earlier in 2007, Samuel sat down with Greengrants Director of Programs, Chris Allan, in Bali to discuss the timber industry's impacts on indigenous people in Cameroon.*

**CHRIS:** In Cameroon and the Congo, the focus of your work has been on indigenous people—the Pygmies. You're talking about an incredibly small percentage of the overall population, but it seems the forest people's issues really affect all communities around forest, not just the indigenous communities. Tell us about how both farmers and hunter gatherers have been affected by the timber industry.

**SAMUEL:** We know it affects people differently. It affects the Pygmies more severely than it will affect the farmers, but it affects all of them. We have a lot of projects with community

---

<sup>1</sup> M van Dorp. [Shaking the Tree: An Economic Geographical Analysis of the Foreign Impact on Forestry in Cameroon](#). (1995).

legal field workers where we work with some young lawyers ... we recruit them and put them in communities to help groups develop cases against logging companies. The companies have not paid community compensations for crops destroyed during their logging operations and these legal field workers also help the community to negotiate with logging companies the “cahier de charge” or social responsibility agreement, among other things. And talking about Pygmy rights—we have three main Pygmy groups in Cameroon: the Baka Pygmies, the Bagyeli or BaKola, and the Bedzan. All of them have lived in this forest for thousands of years. The Bedzan Pygmies stay within the transition area between the forest and the savannah. We help the Pygmies get access to citizenship documents, have their traditional rights to their ancestral lands (the forest) respected, and empower them to negotiate with government agencies and protected area managers.

**CHRIS:** Are these Pygmy groups all hunter gatherers?

**SAMUEL:** All of them are hunter gatherer groups ... they are fighting for survival because the forests have been destroyed to such an extent that it becomes impossible to feed their families. And if you see them farming, they are working for farmers, likely the Bantu.

**CHRIS:** As I understand the history, the farmers, who are from a different ethnic group than the Pygmies, hired Pygmies in a long term on-and-off relationship for simple barter items (e.g. knives). Under this arrangement, a Pygmy could decide when and for how long he would farm, and then return to the forest to continue to sustain himself and his family. Since the timber industry degrades forests, both by cutting down trees and eliminating plants and animals, there is less and less for the Pygmy to survive. Is that right?

**SAMUEL:** Basically ...

**CHRIS:** I don’t know if it’s true anymore, but traditionally when Pygmies were tired of that arrangement they could head back into the forest. But what happens now with deforestation?

**SAMUEL:** Is the forest capable of providing all what it used to provide? The richer parts of the forest have become protected areas with very heavy guards. In Cameroon, you have the European Union-funded Ecofac project. In the southeast we have people getting beaten up by game guards if you are caught inside the park. These guards are usually recruited by organizations like WWF. We must distinguish between which species of animals the indigenous people are hunting as opposed to what poachers are hunting. These are people who have been living on this bush meat (antelope) for their livelihood.

**CHRIS:** So when it comes to this issue of protected areas, the conservationists are happy to create a protected area, yet its protection can be death for the people who actually used to live there.

**SAMUEL:** It’s really a death sentence and a shame because these people have been living in the forest, they rely on the game they get from the forest and the wild yams, wild foods—everything is natural. We had a policy right from the colonial period—the policy of requiring people to come out of the forest to live along the roads and take up farming.



Baka Pygmy Children

**CHRIS:** Is that because in the western mind, living as a farmer is seen as better than living in the forest as a hunter gatherer?

**SAMUEL:** Yes, in the western mentality ...

**CHRIS:** Given the vast cultural differences between the Pygmies, the farming communities, and even the urban population, what do your friends and family say when you tell them you’re working with Pygmy communities?

**SAMUEL:** Oh, [laughing] that is a very interesting question. The very first time when I was to work with the Pygmies, I was going there for research for six months. When I told my mother, she found it very difficult to accept ... the perception we have about them, they are very mystical. So it was my first contact with Pygmies and I saw how they were discriminated against, by the dominant farmers and even by government, despite their good knowledge, despite their long-term existence in this area. I was really touched because, myself, I come from a part of Cameroon that had been discriminated against—Southern Cameroon, English-speaking Cameroon.

**CHRIS:** What was your mother's feeling when you first mentioned it? Was she afraid? What did she think was going to happen to you?

**SAMUEL:** That I would not come back. I'm going to die. I'm going to ...

**CHRIS:** Because they're dangerous?

**SAMUEL:** Yeah. Dangerous, mystical, and supernatural. Which of course they are not. The Pygmies are very nice people.

**CHRIS:** Tell us about the Forest Stewardship Council certification?

**SAMUEL:** The Forest Stewardship Council certification process permits a certificate to a logging company to allow this company to sell their final products. This certificate shows that you are currently logging in an ecologically sustainable manner and you are respecting the social rights of workers and the community that lives in and around your logging concession. In order to have this certificate you must meet certain criteria. You have to show proof of good management; have a good inventory; show how you are going to extract logs within the different parts of the land concession; and then you have to show how you are going to ensure that the existing community gains something from logging which you are carrying out of this area.



Logging Concession

**CHRIS:** And the certification is done by an independent monitoring body.

**SAMUEL:** Exactly.

**CHRIS:** And why was the first council that certified the logging companies in Cameroon suspended as a monitoring body?

**SAMUEL:** It had been said that they didn't strictly follow all the criteria. This company that received certification didn't meet all the criteria, so organizations like ours did some research to prove that the company did not meet up with the criteria to have this certificate.

**CHRIS:** So the research exposed that the certification really didn't mean what it was supposed to mean.

**SAMUEL:** Exactly.

**CHRIS:** Tell us about the research you did on the forest concessions in illegal logging and the report that you produced.

**SAMUEL:** We did research in 2003-2004 on three of the Dutch companies that were involved in illegal logging activities. What these companies did, among other things, they logged completely out of the concession area that was given to them and they didn't compensate the communities whose crops were destroyed during logging operation. Our research figured this out and we published reports, which had GPS points that showed this was out of the land

concession they were supposed to exploit. We first published this report in Europe, and then in Cameroon. We expected our government to be very happy with such a report.

**CHRIS:** Because you're in support of national laws and in support of the Forestry Department.

**SAMUEL:** Exactly. First of all, they have exploited logs that they didn't pay for. When you exploit out of the concession area, you're not properly paying because the government is supposed to get tax revenue.

**CHRIS:** The Government Finance Ministry should have been very happy with you ...

**SAMUEL:** But unfortunately the Forestry Department went back to the field to do counter-research that contradicted our reports. But then an independent forest observer was also sent and confirmed the initial report we made.

**CHRIS:** Confirmed your findings?

**SAMUEL:** Yeah, we had a lot of conflict with these companies because they were very angry with us and one of the companies came back to us for negotiation. One thing that was very important to me in that negotiation process was that local communities got as much as 30,000 euros of compensation.



Samuel Nnah Ndobe

**CHRIS:** Which they should have been paid in the first place as compensation for damages to their crops and forest during illegal logging ...

**SAMUEL:** Yes.

**CHRIS:** And I'm sure your funders in Europe were very happy about this report.

**SAMUEL:** Unfortunately, one of our funders perhaps had a misinterpretation of our report, and we suffered greatly because we lost that supporter.

**CHRIS:** So advocacy can be a risky activity for an African organization.

**SAMUEL:** At times very, very risky.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION** we recommend *The Forest People*, Colin M. Turnbull's best-selling, classic work that describes the author's experiences while living with the BaMbuti (a different but related group of Pygmies).