Democracy and Deforestation: Political and Environmental Change in Kenya’s Mau Forest Complex

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Abstract: During a period of political change, environmental conservation discourse was used to support calls for farmers to vacate forest-lands bordering water catchment areas in Kenya’s Rift Valley province. In 1993, an eviction order combined with other factors to precipitate ethnic clashes in the Enoosupokia area, displacing up to 30,000 people from the area and creating landless communities. We show how globally acceptable conservation discourse paradoxically facilitates unacceptable human rights abuses without guaranteeing sustainable resource use.

There are direct linkages between observed environmental changes in the Mau complex forests in Kenya, changing land use patterns in the region, and national and local politics. During the pre-colonial period, a delicate resource exploitation balance existed and was maintained by the different needs of foraging, agricultural and pastoral societies that inhabited the region. The foragers inhabited the forests, the pastoralists the plains and the agriculturalists the open highlands; complementary economic production provided avenues for commodity exchanges.

This ethno-economic balance, which maintained the forest environments intact, was later disrupted by converging political changes and top-down conservation discourse. Parts of the forest complex were designated protected zones and the foragers displaced through government issued eviction orders. However, due to corruption and ethnic politics, much of the land in protected areas was left open for encroachment by other politically favoured communities who turned the forest environments into agricultural fields. Food and fuel (charcoal) demands by growing urban populations as well as government policies that encourage agricultural expansion quickened the pace of forest destruction and the cultivation of land.

Changes in the political climate in Kenya, beginning in the late 1980s with movements for the reintroduction of multi-party democracy, contributed to rising tension over land and resource use and ownership. Environmental discourse calling for conservation and protection of sensitive areas coincided in some cases with inter-ethnic political tensions, and agriculturalists in several parts of the country were ordered to vacate forests and other areas seen to belong to pastoralists or foragers. One such eviction order in 1993 contributed to the flare-up of “ethnic clashes” and resulted in the displacement of up to 30 000 people, mainly farmers from both the declared area and surrounding locations. Another, in 2002, sought to evict foragers and pastoralists from the same area on the premise that a protected area should be devoid of all human presence, but was successfully resisted by the occupants.

The combination of State-run conservation initiatives, corruption, ethnic politics, and the ensuing conflicts have over time destroyed “communal responsibility” for land, created landless communities, exacerbated local resource competition and created insecurity of land tenure. These in turn have precipitated forest cover depletion, water catchment area destruction, and reduced land productivity.

Despite the use of environmental conservation as a justification for the eviction orders, neither the forests nor the people who depend on forest resources have benefited in the long term. We are led to ask whether the displacement of some humans from forests has been seized by people of other communities as an opportunity to acquire productive land and alleviate population pressure in their home districts, or whether the governments issuing eviction orders have used a globally acceptable conservation discourse to facilitate globally unacceptable human rights abuses in the form of forced migrations to obtain political objectives.