

An Assessment of Forest Resources Policy and Management in Ghana

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Abstract

Forest resources are of great importance to millions of people, especially those whose livelihoods largely depend on them. These resources play a key role in protecting the environment and are of tremendous importance to the sustainable development of every country. Forest resources policies and institutions are critical to achieving sustainable forest management. Recognizing the importance of forest resources and the need for appropriate measures to optimize their management and utilisation in Ghana, various past governments formulated policies for developing a national forest estate and a timber industry that guarantee a full range of sustainable benefits for the population. However, most of the forest policies have failed to address the fundamental challenges of forest management in the country. Through an exhaustive bibliographical investigation and interviews conducted on various forest development stakeholders and forestry experts, this paper uses sustainability analysis to critically evaluate forestry policies and management in Ghana. The key policy and management elements such as coherence, relevance, management efficiency, stakeholder participation, benefits sharing and sustainability are analyzed and the principal challenges of forest policies and management identified. The paper urges forestry institutions and the other relevant stakeholders to respond to emerging demands for research, extension and a capable and motivated professional workforce. It also recommends an effective placing of forest resources management in the core of Ghana's development agenda.

Key Words: Benefit-sharing, environment, forest policy, forest resources, sustainable forest management, sustainability assessment

1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed increased attention by the world community to the issue of conservation and a wise use of forest resources. These resources are of great importance to millions of people, especially those whose livelihoods directly depend on them. Forest resources play a key role in protecting the environment and are of tremendous importance to the sustainable development of every society. The geometric rate at which the once evergreen forests of Ghana are fast diminishing at the expense of forest communities' livelihoods and development is very alarming, especially with regard to meeting the needs of future generations. The degradation of these resources in Ghana will render the attainment of the objectives of the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy II (GPRS II) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) very difficult. The uncontrolled and unsustainable methods of harvesting natural resources harvesting being employed by forest resources exploiters, investors, government agencies, individual community members and forest rubbers urgently need to be checked.

2. Research Problem and Objectives of the Paper

Although, forests play a vital role in the economy of Ghana and a great number of people continue to depend on forest resources for subsistence and to satisfy their socio-cultural needs, one of the biggest environmental challenges facing the country today is the need to reconcile the conflicting demands of the various stakeholders for these resources (Boon and Ahenkan, 2007). Forests in Ghana have suffered a serious decline because of over-exploitation to meet the growing socio-economic needs of the population (EPA, 2004). The continuous depletion of these resources is likely to lead to their eminent extinction in the long-term. This will have enormous consequences on the forests themselves and the livelihood of the population (Boon and Ahenkan, 2008).

Since 1948, forest resource policies in Ghana have provided for the creation of permanent forest estates, protection of water supplies, the provision of favourable conditions for cultivation of agricultural crops, and the promotion of public education and research (Ghana Forestry Commission, 1994). In spite of these policies and interventions, the destruction of the natural forests continues at an alarming rate of 2% per annum. The factors responsible for this state of affairs include the over-exploitation of timber species, improper forest management systems, poor farming practices, population pressure, the complex nature of Ghana's land tenure system, lack of community involvement, an unequal benefits-sharing system, weak institutions, inefficiency of the timber industry, flouting of laid down regulations and lack of political will and commitment (Tropenbos International-Ghana, 2007). A major concern over conservation of forest resources in Ghana is the huge gap between the intentions of national policies and the realities on the ground and the highly skewed power structure which favours the government and the industry on the one hand, but marginalizes the local communities on the other. This paper analyses forest policies and management in Ghana. The key forest policies, the current state of the forests, and the effectiveness and efficiency of management of forest resources are critically analysed. The participation of local people in the management of forest resources and the extent to which these communities benefit from forest resources are also examined.

3. Forest Policies in Ghana

The history of forest policies and resources management in Ghana dates back to 1906 when legislation was enacted to control the felling of commercial tree species and the creation of the Forestry Department in 1908. The demarcation and reservation of the forest estate was largely completed by 1939 and a forest policy was adopted in 1948 (Ghana Forestry Commission, 1994). Since then, a consistent policy of selection, demarcation, reservation, protection of water supplies, maintenance of favourable conditions for cultivation of agricultural crops and the promotion of research and public education have been vigorously pursued. However, most of the early forest policies mainly emphasised a sustained supply of timber for the wood industry and promoted over-exploitation and an eventual demise of unreserved forests. As a consequence, by the end of 1978, the Government placed about 3,267,250 ha of forests under permanent forest estate.

In addition, quite a number of policies and attempted remedies were initiated by government and its agencies such as Forest Commission Act of 1960; forest improvement fund Act of 1960; Concessions Act of 1962; Forest ordinance for the protection of forests including reserves of 1972; Trees and timber (chain saw operation) regulation of 1983; Administration of land (amendment) degree of 1984; Forest products inspection Bureau Law of 1985; Forest protection (amendment) Law of 1986; Control and prevention of bushfires Law of 1990 and Trees and timber (chain saw operation) regulation of 1991 as guides for forests resources management in the country Forest (Ghana Forestry Commission 1994). These policies and related laws were contained in various official documents and vested in specific Ministries and state agencies for implementation. The agency responsible for forest resources management in Ghana is the Forestry Commission which was established under Act 405 - Ghana Forestry Commission Act, 1980 - to

coordinate the activities of the forestry sector institutions, namely: the Forestry Department, Department of Game and Wildlife, Forest Products Research Institute and Ghana Timber Marketing Board. Section 6 of the Act mandated the Commission to regulate and manage the utilization of all forestry and wildlife resources of Ghana and also coordinate the policies in relation to forest resources (Forest and Wildlife Policy, 1994).

4. State of Ghana's Forests

As was indicated in section 3, Ghana was richly endowed with forest resources which were vital for her development and future prosperity. Originally, Ghana's forests covered about 36 percent (84,000 km²) of the total land area of the country (EU, 2006; Rice and Counsell, 1993). Records do indicate the existence of relatively undisturbed forests, which harboured abundant biodiversity (Alpert 1993), which protected fragile soils (FAO, 1999; FAO, 2007; UNEP, 2002), and regulated the supply of scarce water resources (Glantz & Katz 1985,). However, deforestation and global climate change impacts are significantly causing a rapid loss of biodiversity in the country. The degradation of forests and the loss of biodiversity in Ghana have increased sharply in recent decades (Dixon et al., 1996). Ghana's total forest zone is currently estimated at 81,342 km² and accounts for about 40% of the total land area, out of which about 17,845 km² are known to be under reservation. The reserved forest is made up of 11,590 km² of production forests; 4,323 km² of protection forests; and about 1,980 km² of game production reserves (Siaw, 2001; Ghana Forestry Commission, 1995). Ghana, like many tropical countries, continues to lose its remaining closed forests at an alarming rate. The area of closed forest has reduced to less than 25% of its original value and now exists in fragmented patches estimated to be about 20 to 524 km². Between 1990 and 2005, Ghana has lost about 1.9 million hectares of forest or 26 percent of her forests cover (mongobay.com); the annual deforestation rate is 2.0%. The Government took steps to address the deforestation issue by introducing the Ghana National Plantation Project to plant 20,000 ha per annum (Domson et al., 2007; Ghana Forestry Commission, 2005; IUCN, 2006). Most of the forests have lost their pristine interior habitats that are critical for the protection of vulnerable species (FAO 2001; Forest Services Division of Ghana, 1995).

In 1992, it was estimated that only about 1.5 million ha of "intact closed forest" were remaining in Ghana. It is estimated that about 20,000 hectares per annum of the reserved area are lost to agriculture or through bush fires and other human activities (Tabi Agyarko, 2001; IUCN, 1992). The forests are now characterised by excessive harvesting of logs, a reduction in standing volumes of species, dwindling resource base, species depletion and loss of biodiversity. About 14% of the total permanent forest reserves in Ghana are without adequate forest cover. The worst affected areas are the moist semi-deciduous North-west and South-east subtype of forest zones (Tabi Agyarko, 2001). The factors causing the depletion of the forests include excessive legal and illegal logging, unsustainable farming methods, annual bushfires, surface mining and infrastructural development. Underlying these deforestation driving forces are forest policy failures, unrealistic forest fee regimes, external prices of timber, weak institutional structures, and population pressures (FAO, 2001).

5. Materials and Methods

A comprehensive bibliographical investigation was undertaken and interviews conducted on policy-makers and managers, researchers, forestry experts and other relevant stakeholders to collect information and data on forest policies and management in Ghana. Sustainability analysis was used to critically evaluate the sustainability of forest policies and management in the country.

The 1994 forest and wildlife policy is an overarching forestry policy document of the Government of Ghana. The implementation of the policy, which began in 1995, targets conservation and sustainable development of the country's forest and wildlife resources, maintenance of environmental quality and a perpetual flow of optimum benefits to all segments of society (Forestry Commission of Ghana, 2006).

This paper evaluates the policy in terms of its coherence, relevance, the efficiency of the implementation process, stakeholder participation, equity in benefits-sharing, and sustainability of the policy in general. The policy is subjected to a rigorous SWOT analysis. To provide the paper a concrete character, the analysis of the policy, its implementation and management are situated in the forest zones in the Bebiani–Bekwai and Sefwi Wiawso Districts in the Western Region of Ghana.

6. Discussion of Results

Several issues that are crucial for a sustainable management of forest resources in Ghana have not received adequate attention in the 1994 forest and wildlife policy; major social, environmental and economic issues were not given enough attention. For example, the principal challenges bedeviling forest resources management in Ghana such as the very complex land tenure system, the conversion of forests to farmlands, a skewed benefit-sharing mechanism, weak institutional and governance structures, and ineffective involvement of relevant stakeholders were not properly addressed. Lack of political will and commitment, weaknesses in the implementation and enforcement of laws and standard practices, and lack of transparency significantly encouraged unsustainable harvesting of forest resources and illegal logging. Moreover, many of the activities outlined in the Forest and Wildlife Policy of 1994 are unachievable because they are too ambiguous and beyond the capacity of one single organisation to manage effectively. The defined policy directions, particularly in the area of sharing responsibilities and rights, allocation of concessions, disbursement of benefits and the general management of the forest resources are major weaknesses of the policy.

The existing inequity in the sharing of benefits generated from forest resources is a particularly worrisome problematic. The Forestry Commission benefits more than the other stakeholders such as the Stool Lands and the real land owners. The mechanism used in sharing benefits does not cater for the actual land owners at all. The allocation of 25% for Stool Lands; 55% for District Assembly and 20% for Traditional Council simply ignores individual landowners and their families. It is even possible that Stool Lands Administrators alone or the Forestry Commission staff on their own grant concessions to resources exploiters without the knowledge of the other key stakeholders. This tendency is contributing to the existing lack of transparency, corruption, illegal logging, black marketeering of forest resources and the inefficient manner in which concessions and the forests are managed. The large-scale concessionaires and the timber companies are mainly concerned about markets and private profits and therefore tend to flout existing rules and regulations on concession and forest resources management. The current over-focus on timber is to the detriment of other possible forest benefits that support the livelihoods of local communities. So far, very little is being done to actively involve local communities in a judicious management of these resources.

7. Recommendations and Conclusion

Forest community members should be actively engaged in co-managing forest resources under a regime of very clear responsibility for protecting them from excessive exploitation. Improper and inadequate compensation paid landowners for taking away their lands for purposes of establishing forest estates, mining and revenue generation activities are key drivers for the increasing incidence of chainsaw operations and illegal extraction of forest resources. Adaption of community-based forest resources management in Ghana will go a long way to improve the conservation and management of these resources in the country. Sustainable management of forest resources can be achieved if the following measures are effectively implemented:

- Adequate access provided local residents to forest resources.
- Equitable sharing of benefits accruing from the conservation and management of forest resources in local communities.
- Active local participation in designing conservation and resource management plans.

- Emphasizing the importance of innovation: making new, achievable solutions, rather than hanging onto existing policy alternatives that are irrelevant / unsatisfactory to many stakeholders.
- Commitment to voluntary compliance rather than obligatory enforcement.
- Flexibility in the march towards achieving conservation goals, rather than hanging onto command-and-control approaches.
- View sustainability as the bottom line of the conservation of forest resources: economic, ecological, and social/cultural sustainability of patterns of resource use.
- Use locally and specific standards and guidelines rather than general and the “one model fits all” guidelines.

Periodic direct physical forest assessment programmes should be conducted by the government and development stakeholders to facilitate the setting up a national system for updating information on forest cover, types, ownership, status and stocking. Research into fast growing trees should be carried out, and communities and individual land owners encouraged and provided incentives to plant them. Multi-resource management plans should be developed and eco-tourism and non-wood forest products such as fishery, beekeeping, grass-cutter rearing, production of mushroom and nails, and wildlife management should constitute integral components of forest communities’ livelihood improvement programmes and sustainable human development. The Forest and Wildlife Policy of 1994 needs to be reformed and adequate incentives provided for encouraging stakeholders to practise sustainable forest management systems. For instance, loggers should be made to ensure sustainability of forests by growing trees in harvested concessions. Also, a mandatory and equitable sharing of benefits with the local communities and the individual landowners should be introduced. Farmers and landowners should be paid adequate compensation whenever their farms are damaged through logging and mining activities. These incentives will help to attract farmers to cooperate in monitoring logging operations and thus eliminate the over-exploitation of forest resources in Ghana. Further more, to ensure transparency, the government should develop and adhere to clear criteria and procedures for the allocation of concessions. It is also important to designate an independent body to monitor the activities of concessionaires, timber companies and the other forest stakeholders. The depletion of forest resources has very long-term impacts on local communities, especially on women and children. An active involvement of women in the management of these resources will help to guarantee their sustainability for future generations.

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