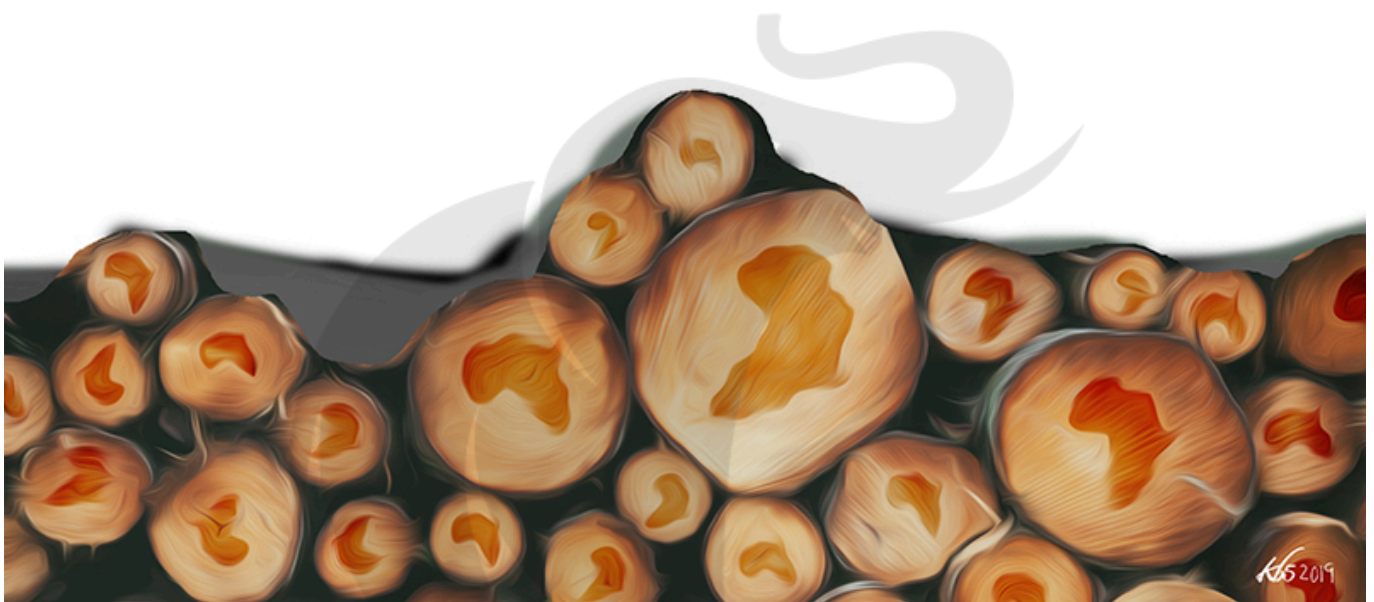




# How Corruption and Greed Are Destroying Africa's Forests

By Claudio Butticè



*"When elephants fight, it's the grass that suffers."*

As the trade war between the world's superpowers continues, the global South is the one getting the short end of the stick. The economy of most African countries depends on massive exportation of raw materials, usually controlled by large foreign companies. The exploitation of the local resources, such as wood, never seems to stop, even if massive deforestation in countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia is bound to have catastrophic economic and environmental consequences.

Who are the main (local and foreign) players behind the progressive loss of forested areas in East and South Africa? What are the causes and, more importantly, the effects of this apparently unstoppable exploitation of land on local economies and climate change? How much is corruption responsible for this devastation? Are there any virtuous players trying to staunch this wound, or is it just the usual Western hypocrisy that preys on the unavoidable dependence on "development aid"?

## **Land grabs and exploitation**

The Western world's hunger for African resources, including land, has only grown more intense due to the increased demand for carbon and biofuels. The whole continent becomes [more dependent on overseas trade day after day](#). Internal trade between African countries is extremely weak, and most

of these countries are large importers of pricey finished goods and services provided by other global partners. Most African countries are exporters of raw materials that generate profit margins that are quite small on their own and are made even smaller by the fact that most of the lands where these goods are produced rest in the hands of large transnational companies.

In many countries, such as Ethiopia, the laws that regulate land leases have been extremely generous to foreign investors. The land is leased for negligible rents, especially in remote and sparsely populated areas, and the approval process for investment proposals is superficial at best. In exchange for an alleged economic return that in many cases never follows, national governments exempted foreign companies from repatriated profits on taxes and taxes on imports of capital goods. All these land grabs are notoriously unjust to the original inhabitants of these lands - usually small farmers and pastoralists who, in some cases, have even forcefully been evicted with the help of the army.

The largest African and global development institutions, such as the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and the World Bank, always sold this process as a much-needed transformation to help the growth of less developed countries. The idea of shifting toward large-scale commercial exploitation of lands and resources has been presented as the perfect recipe to overcome the stagnation of African economies; a transformation that would bring progress, modernity, and riches to all the impoverished lands and populations of the global South. Now the whole continent has been integrated into the global trade system with a relationship of complete unilateral dependence, chained to the volatile prices of commodities, enslaved by continuous "development aid", and bent under the weight of totally asymmetrical agreements.

### **The effects of foreign liberalism**

The free market didn't help low-income to countries flourish; the only economic effect was purely cosmetic in nature. The shift towards large-scale commercial exploitation of lands came with promises of better employment opportunities, improvement of existing infrastructure, new opportunities for development, knowledge transfer, and professional specialisation. We saw this happen elsewhere as well, such as in Central America - all these promises eventually turned out to be empty, and only resulted in more poverty, hunger, and unfair exploitation.

In a continent where the vast majority of the population depends on agriculture for a living, uncontrolled liberalisation is nothing but a recipe for disaster. Even the most developed nations of the West know the limits of free markets very well and keep sustaining their own farmers with generous subsidies.

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For example, Ethiopia's annual GDP growth rate [kept increasing by nearly 9% between 2004 and 2014](#), but very few Ethiopians enjoyed the benefits of this growth. Nearly 80% of the population is still composed of farmers and pastoralists whose livelihoods are even more precarious than before after their land was impoverished - their income still incredibly low, at \$0.14 per day in some areas. The rural population has been marginalised even further, and local labour is often hired only on a seasonal basis, leaving very little opportunities for the professional and economic growth of all these vulnerable households. Knowledge is kept in the hands of the Western professionals, and their

investments on ameliorating the infrastructure are too minuscule to represent a valid trade-off.

This non-inclusive model largely depends on the constant flow of capital, which necessarily come from foreign investors, creating an unbreakable cycle of dependency. Technology-based land exploitation has caused the environment to be degraded, and has substituted traditional sustainable and labour-intensive agriculture with intensive use of fossil fuels, pesticides, and widespread deforestation. The loss of biodiversity of large-scale monocultures and the destruction of large forested areas weakened the ecosystems against unexpected weather changes and other natural disasters.

## **Deforestation and greed**

The constant demand for crop and grazing land, as well as wood for fuel and construction, have a tremendous impact on soil conservation and weather management. Deforestation, in particular, is one of those problems that, if left unchecked, may cause a planetary disaster.

Africa's tropical rainforests include the Guinean forests of West Africa and the Congo Basin, which comprise the second-largest forest cover in the world. However, [according to Professor Abraham Baffoe](#), Africa regional director at Proforest, this immense "world's set of lungs" is rapidly disappearing. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ethiopia's forest coverage reached almost 40%. Year after year, almost 200,000 hectares of forest were lost; by 1987 it was reduced to just 5.5%, and in 2003 it had gone down to a mere 0.2%. According to Innovation for Poverty Action (IPA), between 2000 and 2010, [Uganda lost forests at a rate of 2.6% every year](#). Over the last century, West Africa has lost almost 90% of forest coverage.

Losing forests has devastating effects on the indigenous population, the local ecosystem, and the global environment as well. Forests are critical to lowering carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, to stabilising the weather, and preventing soil erosion. Among the highest causes of carbon emissions from human activity, deforestation is the second after burning fossil fuels, accounting for approximately 20% of world greenhouse gas emissions.

Soil erosion alone may cause the drying of lakes, such as in the case of the three lakes in the Rift Valley that recently dried up. As the soil is massively washed into the lake, the water is pushed up to a larger surface and rapidly evaporates. Without water, droughts ensue, causing famine, starvation, and poverty.

An estimated 100 million African people rely on forests for support and finding freshwater, food, shelter, and clothing. Forests support biodiversity as well, and many plants and animals only exist in these regions. Without forests, many animal species, such as chimpanzees, are endangered since they can't survive without their habitat, and entire towns are at risk of rainforest flooding.

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But the ecological devastation caused by the alleged modernisation of agriculture is not the sole reason behind the massive deforestation occurring in Africa. African forests store 171 gigatons of carbon, and there is a wide range of different interests swarming around them. Everybody wants to put their hands on this gigantic loot, no matter the consequences for the local populations or climate change.

The frequent conflicts that ravage the continent take their toll on forests as well. For example, after the South Sudan crisis in December 2013, nearly one million refugees, mostly women and children, [have sought shelter in nearby Ethiopia and Uganda](#). Once there, they started chopping wood to build their encampments and to fuel their stoves. This had a significant impact on local forests, according to experts.

### **The impact of corruption on deforestation**

Corruption has a tremendous impact on global deforestation. With 13 million hectares lost each year, the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) has identified the illegal timber trade as one of the principal causes of forest loss. The estimated value of illegal forest activities accounts for more than 10% of the value of worldwide trade in wood products. And corruption in the forest sector may increase the cost of forestry activities by about 20%.

Most countries in Central and Western Africa that are particularly rich in forests and other resources score particularly low on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), a global index of public sector corruption [established by Transparency International](#). Without a transparent and democratic administration whose framework is built on solid ethical principles, the land rights of local communities and marginalised groups are constantly violated. In sub-Saharan Africa, one citizen in two had to pay a bribe to obtain a land service, such as registering land for his household.

The forest sector is especially vulnerable to grand and petty corruption activities because of the non-standardised but high-priced timber products and low visibility. Government officials often collude with powerful European, American, or Asian companies since they offer forest as a highly valuable commodity in exchange for power and money.

Many indigenous populations have no access to information and justice, cannot claim their rights, and have no chance but to bend the knee when land grabbing laws are enforced by corrupt governments. Foreign companies know how easy it is to violate national regulations and often do so with total impunity knowing that punishment would probably be very light. Funds generated from the profit of the forests are usually embezzled or siphoned out of the continent to be laundered through complex schemes of multi-layered shell offshore businesses. Money that could be invested in social services, jobs, and better infrastructure ends up being devoured by greedy officials, money-hungry corporations, and shady smugglers.

### **Reforestation and other plans to restore Africa's forests**

Luckily, not all is as bad as it seems. Ethiopia has just started a restoration process that includes a reforestation programme that should replace 22 million hectares of forests and degraded lands by 2030. Even better, in 2018, [the government finally revised the National Forest Law](#) to provide better recognition to the rights of local communities and acknowledge their importance in managing lands and crops. The new law also includes much more severe penalties for those who endanger forest ecosystems or who extend farming into natural forests.

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In Uganda, Project Kibale focuses on restoring the Kibale forest and has managed to restore 6,700 hectares of forest so far. On lands owned by subsistence farmers, the Community Reforestation project coordinates hundreds of small community-based tree planting, education, and training

initiatives. Similar projects are in operation in Kenya as well, such as Carbon Footprint, B'n'Tree, WeForest, and [the Green Initiative Challenge](#).

Although certainly commendable, many of these reforestation efforts simply seem to be a Band-Aid on a gaping wound. The core problems - corruption, grossly uneven distribution of power among players, and poorly-designed regulations - are not addressed at all. The handful of trees that get planted only help these parasites to get more wood to harvest in due time.

It can also be argued that many of these brave steps toward sustainability are nothing but green rhetoric spin for Western audiences. Wilmar's hypocrisy, for example, [was exposed back in 2015](#). The multinational of palm oil had abused human rights in Indonesia for years, expropriated lands with no qualms, polluted the environment, and destroyed crops and forest in large areas. After being named by *Newsweek* as "the world's least environmentally-friendly company" in December 2013, the palm oil giant adopted a "no deforestation, no peat, and no exploitation policy" and became a champion of environmentalism. However, this was just window-dressing that was rapidly unmasked in subsequent years by NGOs in Uganda, Nigeria, and Liberia. The icing on the cake? In previous years, Wilmar was financed by none other than the United Nations International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

## **Conclusion**

When the rules are made by those who dominate the markets, globalisation becomes a source of profound inequalities. The blatant asymmetry in bargaining power between the global superpowers and the global South has all but abolished the few safety nets that national laws could provide. All the regions that are rich in resources and commodities are quickly transformed into no man's lands where the indigenous populations become unwanted guests to be displaced. Entire ecosystems are ravaged and exploited, no matter the consequences. And when newer, fairer rules are established by a more ethical administration, they are rapidly dismantled by leveraging corruption and bribes.

The word "development" has been mentioned so many times that it is now empty and meaningless. Nonetheless, the only way to shift toward a more sustainable economic system is to focus on the *real* development of African countries. Reforestation is just palliative therapy that is trying to heal some of the wounds of an already terminally ill patient. Africa can flourish only through a more radical approach that allows Africans to grow, develop, and fully exploit the immense value of their enormous resources instead of leaving them in the hands of foreigners and global corporations.

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