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"Fisherfolks eat from the sea, why should we not eat from the forest?": farmer narratives of forest conversion in Ghana

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Abstract

Beyond global efforts dedicated to halting deforestation, in recent times, governments and companies are also implementing several voluntary initiatives to end agro-commodities driven deforestation. These initiatives are built on the assumptions that tropical forest loss endangers biodiversity, climate stability and forest livelihoods. While many of the assumptions hold in many ways, discussions around them tend to be dominated by governments, companies, and international organisations, neglecting the voices of subsistence farmers and forest-fringe communities (FFCs). Given that subsistence farmers contribute to about 33% of global deforestation, and that the meanings these farmers assign to their landscapes can affect conversation program outcomes, understanding FFCs perspectives about deforestation might provide new insights for effective zero-deforestation policies. Drawing on Narrative Policy Analysis, this paper traces the narratives that FFCs use to justify encroaching into protected forests to cultivate cocoa and food crops in southwestern Ghana, where restrictive deforestation policies have failed persistently. The article shows that FFCs are aware of the narratives, e.g., biodiversity, climate action, forest regulators use to legitimise forest conservation. However, they believe that their food security and quest for survival outweigh these 'western priorities'. Besides, "the forest is finished". The incongruity between farmers' needs and forest regulators' expectations complicates forest conservation attempts. Drawing on the political ecology literature, the paper argues that forest policy in the region needs to prioritise job creation and food security to have a chance at success, especially since most farmers in the region are prepared to put their lives at stake, converting forests for their daily survival.

Keywords: Deforestation and forest degradation, Agriculture, Governance, Social protection.

Introduction, scope, and main objectives

Global development discourse and praxis continue to emphasise the urgent need to protect forests and restore deforested landscapes. As the arguments advance, multiple actors argue that forest conservation is essential for securing biodiversity, ecosystem services, and mitigation of climate change (Krause and Tilker 2021). However, alternative arguments direct attention to how historical conservation efforts systematically exclude, marginalize and perpetuate poverty by diminishing forest-fringe communities' access to forest resources (Fletcher et al. 2021; Takacs 2020). While these debates continue to fester, forest conversion for subsistence agriculture is on the ascendency (FAO 2016), with little clarity on how best to approach the dichotomy between conserving forests and using forests to meet the concerns of forest-fringe communities (FFCs).

Multiple attempts to find a balance between forest conservation and improving livelihoods within forest communities indicate that collaborative resource governance provides a basis for finding win-win outcomes. Despite its promise to minimize trade-offs, collaborative governance is confronted by multiple contradictions, including deliberations about whose voice counts in such initiatives (Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2017; Delabre

et al. 2020). For example, multiple studies in Sub-Saharan Africa indicate that collaborative forest regimes in region tend to emphasize the interests and voices of developed countries and multinationals while neglecting the experiences and needs of FFCs (Kansanga et al. 2017; Fletcher et al. 2021). Meanwhile, several studies indicate that development programs that neglect communities' needs tend to encounter resistance and are more likely to fail than those that build on local communities' experiences and desires (Holmes 2007; Kumeh et al. 2021). Succinctly, understanding forest communities' experiences and expectations and placing them at the heart of forest policy and practice may produce better outcomes. Policy actors' expectations manifest in narratives, the stories they employ to communicate their ideas and feelings about policy interventions (Stone, 2012). Against this background, this study critically examines the experiences of forest communities in Southwestern Ghana, where multiple attempts by the Ghanaian government to rein in deforestation has proven futile (Brobbey et al. 2020; Kumeh et al. 2021).

The contributions of this paper are three folds. First, it provides a direct account of how FFCs perceive forest conversion, including the narratives and means they employ encroach into forest reserves. Second, it highlights gaps in the current framing of forest policy in Ghana, including how it is devoid of grassroots experiences and expectations. Thirds, it presents a vision on how forest actors can restructure forest governance at the landscape level by exploring food security corridors (FSCs) as a development practice to recognize and address the concerns of communities that are trapped within blocks of forest reserves.

Methodology/approach

Study area

The research was conducted in Ghana's Juabeso forest district, specifically in communities around the Krokosua Hill Forest Reserve (KHFR). The KHFR, about 482 km^2, was established in 1935. Ghana was a British colony, known as the Gold Coast, at the time. The KHFR falls within the Sefwi Wiawso Traditional Council, which the British colonial government urged to use bylaws to constitute the KHFR to, among others, reduce soil erosion, protect water sources, and create an ambient environment for cocoa production. When creating the forest reserve, the traditional leaders raised multiple concerns that the state was taking over most of their lands, which would imperil the future availability of farmlands in their area. However, such concerns did not significantly alter the total area of land proposed, and the eventual area constituted as the KHFR. Since 2004, about 30% of the KHFR has been designated as a Globally Significant Biodiversity Area (GSBA) and under strict protection, while the remaining is a production forest, where the state allocates permits to eligible companies for timber exploitation.

Farming is the main livelihood for communities around the KHFR, with cocoa being the predominant crop. Migrants, mostly from other parts of Ghana, dominate cocoa production, with many securing their access to lands in the Juabeso district through sharecropping arrangements with customary institutions. There is little land available for food production in the region as areas outside the reserve are mainly used for cocoa production (Ajagun et al. 2021). Recognizing the lack of farmlands in the area, the forestry officials occasionally allocate degraded areas of the KHFR to forest-fringe communities for short-term food production; however, the process is characterized by multiple contradictions and conflicts (see Kumeh et al. 2021), leading to immense forest conversion to farmlands in the area (Brobbey et al. 2020).

Data collection and analysis

A qualitative approach involving six months of fieldwork was conducted in three admitted communities and nine others fringing the KHFR. Data was collected through interviews and focus groups discussions with farmers, forestry officials, cocoa buying companies and forest sector non-governmental organizations that work in the study landscape. The interviews examined how farmers access forest reserve lands for farming,

their motivation, challenges, and measure to overcome. The semi-structured interviews covered 426 farmers, while 67 farmers were engaged across 12 focus group discussions. Field visits were also conducted to observe some of the illegal farms from forest conversion in the KHFR to understand better the type of crops farmers plant in these areas and the means they use to protect such farms (Figure 1).

Data from the interviews were transcribed, and content analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 2020. This involved reading the interview transcripts and inductively identifying and categorizing the main issues that incited the respondents to encroach and farm in the KHFR. Several variants of the same issues were identified; thus, they were clustered using broader themes that best capture their essence. For example, quotes around inadequate food options in the areas, high cost of non-local food crops, limitations on growing preferred food crops were clustered under food insecurity. Similarly, all forms of competition over land resources, e.g., between chiefs and the state, migrants and natives, fringe communities at different sides of the KHFR, were clustered under land competition. These broader themes provide a good handle for presenting the results, which I turn to in the next section. Before that, it is worth mentioning that in presenting the results, I use multiple quotes to convey the voices and feelings of the respondents, providing information on their age class (years), sex (male, female), and residency status (migrant, native).

Source: Eric Mensah Kumeh

Fig. 1: An illegal farm in the KHFR, with the farmer cultivating cassava (manioc) and plantain).

Results

Three main themes on why forest-fringe communities encroach and convert the KHFR into farmlands are presented and elaborated: competition over access to farmlands, food insecurity, excessive forest exploitation, with inequitable benefits distribution.

Competition over farmlands

Creating the KHFR have left multiple farmers disgruntled. While none of the respondent's interviewed lived when the KHFR was created in 1930sthey recounted multiple stories passed unto them by their forefathers. One prevalent storyline holds that the British colonial government tricked their fathers into ceding their lands under the pretence of linking their villages to the national rail grid:

> Our forefathers were farming and trading palm wine here long before the whites arrived. Initially, they proposed constituting a forest reserve, but our people refused. Later, they came asking to construct railways in our backyard. Many of our people agreed, arguing that it would enable their children in the cities to visit. Our people even provided labour for marking the boundary lines. Afterwards, the Whites brought soldiers, ordering us not to trespass beyond the line because it is a forest reserve. (Focus Group Discussion, Chief and elders, Juansa, January 2020).

While there is little paperwork to support this assertion, a review of the historical material available indicates that the native chiefs had concerns that forming the KHFR would significantly reduce the future supply of farmlands in the area. Yet, there is no clarity on how this concern was addressed because the proposed area and the final area gazette are practically the same. The KHFR occupies nearly a third of the Juabeso district. And predicted by the chiefs in the 1930s, access to farmlands have become a contentious issue in the area. Several natives in the area perceived migrants (from other regions of Ghana) were encroaching into the forest reserve with the support of local chiefs to cultivate cocoa farmers and establish future claims to lands in the areas. Thus, the natives reported encroaching into the forest as a way to also lay claims to the land.

However, the race to establish claims is not limited to the migrant-native dichotomy. Instead, villages were also in competition over lands within the KHFR. Some villages held that their neighbours were doing business in the KHFR by cultivating food crops such as cocoyam and plantation on large scale.

> “Several people are farming on a large-scale in the forest reserve, and nothing happens to them. There are even more northerners than we, the natives. I will not live in my birthland, sit ideal and go hungry. So, I am also cultivating my fair share.” (38, Female, Native, January 2020).

Multiple village leaders facilitate cocoa farming within the KHFR to establish claims to such areas, leading to multiple conflicts with the state. However, the lack of proper documentation and administrative barriers with the state apparatus, the susceptibility of some officials to bribes, and interferences by politicians addressing challenges with admitted farm extension in the study area.

Food insecurity

Fallow lands and farmlands are difficult to find outside the KHFR, with cocoa farms covering most lands and running into the boundaries the reserve (Ajagun et al. 2021; Kumeh et al. 2021). While forestry officials occasionally allocate degraded portions of the KHFR to its fringe communities to plant trees alongside crops for a short duration, known as taungya, the respondents indicated multiple lapses in taungya administration, including exploitation from forestry officials, poor and inconsistent allocation of the degraded areas. For example, several communities have not had taungya allocation in over five years, leaving them with no option but to encroach into the KHFR.

> “The forest reserve belongs to the government. Ideally, we should not be farming it. However, there are no lands for food production. Without encroaching to farm there we the people in this town would be hopeless. (42, Female, Migrant, December 2019).

> “If forestry officials destroy my illegal farm, some of the crops will regenerate. So long as I have no way to eat, I will encroach no matter the consequences. After all, fisherfolks eat from the sea; why shouldn’t we eat from the forest? If I farm the KHFR and you destroy it, I will encroach in another direction: if you have no time, you don’t shoot a duiker.” (40-45, Male, Native, December 2019).

Some forestry officials acknowledge the role farming in the KHFR plays in securing food within its fringe communities, which complicates any attempt to halt the communities from encroaching.

> "Honestly, many of the communities will starve if they don't encroach into the forest. So often we arrest encroachers, beat them, cut their crops, jail them, but they still encroach upon their release. Quite simply, it's the only option available to them. So, sometimes, as humans, we also look the other way, especially if the farm is small because you know if you cut that farm, you're basically telling the farmer to go home and starve" – (forestry official, January 2020).

Inequitable and excessive forest exploitation

The KHFR is heavily depleted, and this was visible during our field visits to multiple "illegal farms" in the reserve. While farmers within the communities acknowledged their role in driving deforestation in the KHFR, they also emphasised the state's role in exacerbating the challenge. Many respondents were disgruntled that their communities have nothing to show from decades of logging within the KHFR by the state. In several instances, timber contractors and illegal chainsaw operators had fallen timber and left them in the forest to rot. Communities expressed concerns that besides lack of access to revenue from forest exploitation, the activities of timber operators have diminished their access to non-timber forest products, including snail and mushrooms significantly.

> "Previously, after school, the kids go and collect snails for food. For over five years, I have never collected 5 snails on a single day. I am not educated, but I know that previously, forestry officials fell trees at about 6-year intervals. However, this has changed, with contractors felling trees continuously, using skidders to the biodiversity.' (38, Male, Native, January 2020).

Due to the perceived lack of benefits from the forest, many of the respondents pointed out that they have no obligation to protect the forest. Alternatively, they were dismayed as to why forestry officials continue to take bribes and facilitate illegal chainsaw operators and timber contractors' access to timber resources in the KHFR while impeding FFCs access to the space.

Discussion

The results direct attention to three central issues relevant for improving forest governance in the KHFR area: power asymmetries and ensuing procedural injustices, inequities in forest benefit access and agriculture-forest land-use conflicts. First, the results indicate multiple contradictions in creating the KHFR. Evidently, concerns about future farmlands were not adequately addressed when forming the reserve. Admitted farms as an option to overcome future farmland access appear to be a knee-jerk response to the challenge. Instead of solving the challenge, it has succeeded in worsening it because of multiple difficulties in confining forest communities to a fixed land unit. Besides, the evidence that communities were inveigled into relinquishing control over their lands constitutes a procedural injustice that demands further investigation and redress. Thus, discrepancies in constituting forest reserves add up to the untoward colonial legacies that post-colonial Ghana must resolve.

Forest encroachment does not happen only in the KHFR. Instead, the practice is pervasive, and policies since the 1960s to address the challenge, including taungya farming have largely failed (Kumeh et al. 2021). Due to this policy failure at the national level, multiple forest reserves are but reserves only on paper. The results indicate the poor access to forest benefits within forest communities partly motivates them to encroach into forests to derive their own benefit. Meanwhile, recent studies suggests that many of the institutions earmarked for improving forest-fringe communities' access to forest benefits, do not work properly. For example, the social responsibility agreement instituted to ensure communities receive 5% of timber stumpage were not complied due to, among other, elite capture of the benefit by local chiefs (Kumeh and Abu 2019).

Read together with the multiple cases of bribery and corruption demonstrated in our results; it appears that both state and customary institutions have a long way to go in making forest work for people in nature in the region.

Another critical issue the results brings up is a mismatch between forest policy and practice in Ghana. Ghana's prevailing forest policy emphasizes timber and non-timber uses of the nation's forest resources. Pursuant to the latter, the state has signed an emission reduction agreement with the World Bank to tackle deforestation with the Juabeso area being a target landscape. With the growing onset of climate change impacts, emission reduction is important, but should forest-fringe communities remain food insecure and encounter multiple confrontations with forest officials to save the world while industrialized economies continue to emit greenhouse gases disproportionately? While there is little space to properly tackle this question in this paper, the question itself indicates some of the fractures in the global environmental politics that reproduces inequality by disempowering forest communities to serve the needs of powerful nationals and multinationals (see. McAfee, 1999; Delabre et al. 2020; Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2017; Takacs, 2020; and Massarella et al. 2020).

For now, one way to tackle the food insecurity and inequities in forest benefit sharing is to introduce food security corridors (FSCs) within FFCs in the study area. Conceptually, FSCs involves using a decentralised governance structure to negotiate and allocate permanent areas to communities trapped in blocks of forest reserves to enable them to meet their food and livelihood needs[1]. Among others, the modalities for FSCs need to build solidarity within FFCs, enable them to meet their food needs, and achieve income, e.g., from the sale of food surpluses from the FSCs. However, FSCs need not be limited to geographical spaces. Alternatively, it can be extended into a social protection scheme, whereby the state allocates portions of revenue from timber exploitation and emission reduction payments, to compensate FFC for their lost lands. Such compensation could occur in the form of targeted food subsidies to improve forest-fringe communities' access to food, enabling the communities to 'eat from the forest' and thereby improving food security. Alternatively, such subsidies could be used to promote green livelihood options and create jobs within the area.

Conclusions/ wider implications of findings

The study demonstrates how attempts to implement forest conservation meet multiple contradictions within forest-fringe communities, leading to conflicts between forest and agricultural land use and struggles of over lands in rural Ghana. Concurrently, it reveals multiple gaps between forest policy and praxis, complicating forest law enforcement and compliance at the grassroots. Three main conclusions can be deduced from the findings. First, forest conservation conflicts are driven by historical and neo-colonial processes that cannot be resolved with simple knee-jerk solutions. Instead, within post-colonial contexts, forest actors need to pay attention to the specific issues that matter to the people experiencing injustices from forest conservations. This does not mean romanticizing forest-fringe communities' interests and desires. Instead, it implies going beyond tokenistic participation to appreciate the genuine concerns of FFCs and finding practical solutions to victims of injustices from forest enclosures. Within the context of this study, food insecurity is a paramount challenge, and well-negotiated food security corridors may unlock new ways of achieving forest-fringe communities needs and conservation goals; thus, development organizations and governments need to invest in further developing and piloting FSCs.

Second, the broader challenge of poor resource governance and how local elites, especially local chiefs, complicate attempts at effective resource management remains largely unresolved in post-colonial Ghana. Chieftaincy is an enduring and authoritative institution (Boamah, 2014; Ubink, 2007), but one riddled with poor transparency and a lack of accountability (Kumeh et al. 2021). And while the institution thrives on the

[1] For a comprehensive exploration of Food Security Corridors, see: Kumeh et al. 2021b.

notion of grassroots representation, the evidence presented suggests otherwise. Alternatively, multiple chiefs are out for their personal interests, not their communities' needs. Thus, findings creative ways to improve transparency in the role of chiefs remains critical and needs to be pursued urgently for forest governance to work effectively.

Finally, while using a case study limits the external application of the findings, it has nonetheless been sufficient to demonstrate that forest resources are on the decline due to the actions or inactions of FFCs and the ineffectiveness of state institutions that are tasked to manage these resources. Thus, the broader question of whether forests are best managed by state institutions or through devolved management structures that empower FFCs remains largely unanswered. This paper has suggested FSCs as an option that forest stakeholders can explore concerning the latter. Now is the time to act and invest in refining and piloting FSCs to empower local communities, improve their access to food, create green jobs and livelihood opportunities.

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