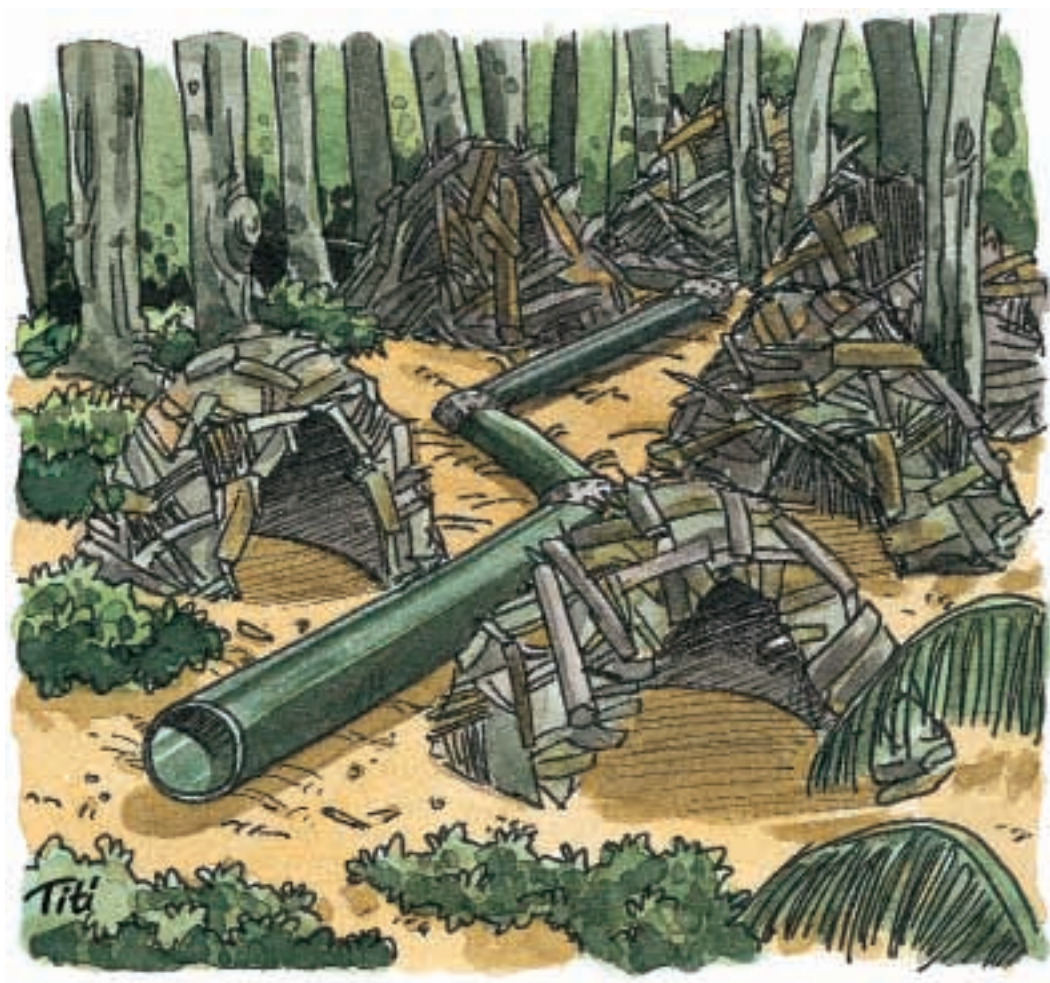


Doba-Kribi pipeline

How will the Pygmies fare?

On 6 June 2000, the board of directors of the World Bank pledged its support to the oil consortium that is to exploit Southern Chad's oil reserves. Exportation will take place via a 1070-km pipeline, the final section of which will cut through areas inhabited by Pygmy populations....

Eyoum Nganguè



From some 300 wells in Southern Chad's Doba oil fields, the pipeline will run diagonally for a distance of 890 km across Cameroon before emerging into the sea at Kribi in Southern Cameroon.

Construction is already under way, with exploitation scheduled to commence in 2004. Since Chad has no outlet to the sea, the oil pipeline was the obvious solution. NGOs have long been opposed to the project for environmental reasons.

But – with the World Bank, the European Investment Bank and the Chad and Cameroon governments behind the project – the Exxon, Chevron and Petronas consortium pressed on with this lucrative scheme, at an estimated cost of \$3,723.9 million. Opinion is divided as to the potential benefits that the people of Chad and Cameroon stand to reap from the project. More certain is the immense risk the Doba-Kribi pipeline poses to the Bagyéli Pygmies in and around Kribi.

Mobilisation of the NGOs

The Bagyéli, or Bakola Pygmies as they are also known, are one of the three main groups of Pygmies in Cameroon, alongside the Baka Pygmies in the East and the Bedjang tribes in the Nditam region. Having settled in Kribi a number of years ago, they live in small encampments along the main road linking Lolodorf, Bipindi and Kribi.

The oil pipeline will pass through 120 km of their land. Before the pipeline issue arose, the 5,000 or so Pygmies in these settlements were completely marginalised. Back in 1995 they set up CODEBABIK, a committee for the advancement of the Bagyéli people of Bipindi and Kribi. Jacques Ngoun, one of the committee leaders, is fully behind the initiative, maintaining that “until now, the Pygmies have always had their decisions made for them by people who view them as forest-dwelling ignoramus who are not entitled to have their say”.

At the time CODEBABIK was created, the pipeline's route was already public knowledge; it would pass through areas

inhabited by the Bakola populations. As Samuel Nguiffo, secretary-general of the CED (Centre for the Environment and Development), was quick to point out, "no one stopped to consider the fate of the Pygmies until a number of local, national and international organisations got involved and drew public attention to this extremely fragile population". In March 1997, NGO, World Bank, Consortium and COTCO (Cameroon Oil Transportation Company) representatives met in New York to assess for the first time the detrimental effects the pipeline would have on the life of the Pygmies. Following the meeting, COTCO, an organisation set up to oversee construction of the Cameroon section of the oil pipeline and to deal with any problems relating thereto, set up the "Plan pour les peuples autochtones vulnérables", a scheme in support of vulnerable autochthonous peoples.

Threats to the Bagyéli Pygmy way of life

The NGOs are keeping a close eye on the situation. Virginia Luling of Survival International, an NGO specialising in defending the interests of endangered populations, believes that "the pipeline poses a threat to the Pygmies because it will mean radical changes to their way of life. Most of them have no idea what they are up against". Samuel Nguiffo of the CED feels that "for populations for whom the earth has great mystical significance, cohabitation with a "huge pipe" will be extremely traumatic. This has to be taken into account".

Even at the construction stage, the oil pipeline poses a real threat. The arrival of machines will chase away the forest fauna, the staple diet of the Pygmies, who have always lived off the land, thereby doubling the disastrous effects of deforestation. The arrival of building site personnel will be an added strain on their habitat. To reduce the impact on the everyday lives of the Bagyéli, COTCO has forbidden them from "hunting, fishing and picking edible plants and fruit from the trees". Samuel Nguiffo and the Friends of the Earth association, however, are worried that this measure will go unheeded, as it will be impossible to keep an eye on every single building site employee.

In short, the threats to their ecosystem are many and varied and very real. Many fear the project may give rise to another "Ogoniland", similar to what happened in neighbouring Nigeria.

There has been no shortage of expert missions sent by COTCO and the World Bank to assess the situation facing the Bagyéli populations. However, the reports of NGO fact-finding missions on COTCO activities since the launch of the "Plan" all draw the same conclusion; the Pygmies are receiving little or no information on the oil pipeline, the impact it could have on their lives, or on the possible compensation they might be eligible for. The conclusion drawn by the Forest People Project mission's report in March 2001 is clear: the pipeline will serve to heighten discrimination against the Pygmies.

The integration problems that these populations are experiencing are by no means new, however. With little education, the Pygmies are exploited by the neighbouring Bantous villagers. Most of them work as day labourers on Bantous farms. The best they can expect to receive is a tiny

ration of yams, the farms' principal crop; at worst, they might be paid in arki, the local alcohol, at a risk of devastating effects.

Identity problem

Given the Bantous villagers' hold over them, the Pygmies are afraid to voice their opinions and find it practically impossible to defend their interests. COTCO representatives have already chased a number of them off the land where they live and grow their crops. Why do they not complain? One of their number was quick to provide the answer, explaining, "I'm afraid to go to the authorities because I don't have any ID". Over and above the general problem posed by their illegal existence in Cameroon, identity is a real issue for them when it comes to financial compensation. The Bantous, anticipating compensation, declared themselves owners of the Bagyéli's land and pocketed the sums due to the Pygmies. As at the end of November 2001, not a single Pygmy had been compensated.

Following our enquiry, Miles Shah, head of public relations for the Consortium in Houston, Texas, informed us that "when talks between the Pygmies and expert missions drew to a close, over twenty or so modifications had been made to the pipeline route; since the pipeline does not cross their land directly, the Pygmies will not receive individual compensation".

However, this same document, drawn up by COTCO in response to the questions raised by journalists and NGOs, states that the Pygmies are to receive up to \$600,000 in compensation from the Environmental Foundation. This information raises a smile from Samuel Nguiffo, who, calculator in hand, explains that this sum has not been allocated just to the Pygmies and will be spread out over 30 years, the theoretical duration of the project. Therefore, each Bakola is looking at \$4 a year! Not much when you consider the collective damage to their way of life and culture: their sacred sites are under threat and their traditional and legendary plant-based pharmacopoeia risks finding itself in competition with community health centres set up under the COTCO scheme. In the chapter on "Income-generating activities", tourism, aside from that generated by simple curiosity for these peoples, seems highly unlikely with the presence of the pipeline in Kribi even though it will be buried underground.

As Jacques Ngoun from CODEBABIK so succinctly puts it, "the Pygmies cannot remain cut off from the modern world... It is time for us to take charge of our own destinies". Will he achieve his dream? As things stand at the moment, the Consortium looks set to reap the lion's share of the benefits from exploitation of the Doba oil reserves, with Chad getting 12.5 percent of this lucrative deal and Cameroon securing itself substantial rights of passage. The Pygmies have been all but left out of the equation. ■