

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Ominous trends



All forecasts agree that the outlook for the country is grim. The people are facing a wide range of threats, including desert encroachment, the loss of forests, increasing poverty and under-employment. No one is taking action to improve the situation. The country has no policy for sustainable development. Government bodies do not coordinate their policies and it is not hard to see that the worst is still to come.

Action Group for Peace and Education for Change (GAPAFOT)

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The economy of the Central African Republic depends primarily on the agriculture sector, which employs around 68% of the active population and in 2005-06 generated 54% of the gross domestic product (GDP).¹ The country has about 15 million hectares of arable land, but less than two million hectares – 3.2% of the surface area – are actually cultivated.² Its 16 million hectares of grassland are also underexploited; it has 2.9 million head of cattle while the potential is five million.³ Some agricultural production is exported (cotton, coffee and tobacco) but most of the sector is used for subsistence farming.

The traditional cultivation methods commonly applied use burning techniques, which contributes to soil erosion and deforestation.⁴ The most widespread system is semi-itinerant poly-cultivation, a method that involves rotating cotton, mandioc and cereals in the savannah; coffee and mandioc in the forests; and cereals in the Sahel region. In spite of favourable agro-ecological conditions, agricultural yields are extremely low.

Energy from firewood

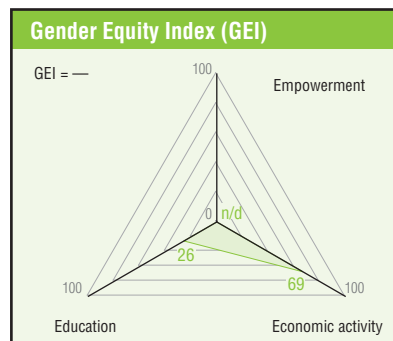
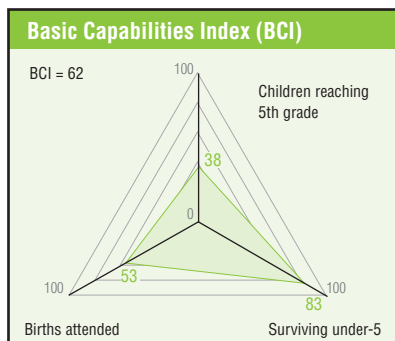
An analysis of the urbanization process and the situation in large cities reveals several serious problems with current exploitation of the country's environmental and human resources. Reliance on wood for nearly 90% of cooking fuel is causing deforestation. Urbanization and the concentration of the population in and around the cities has brought environmental problems such as anarchic housing construction on what was agricultural land, the concentration of pollutants, soil degradation, alteration of the hydro-geological system, expansion of the savannah and pre-desertification

1 World Bank, *Agriculture*, <datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/NV.AGR.TOTL.ZS>.

2 ITeM *World Guide, Central African Republic: Indicators*, <www.guiadelmundo.org/uy/cd/countries/caf/Indicators.html>.

3 J.J. Ndewana, *General Panorama of the CAR*, <www.mijarc.org/uploads/media/MIJARCNoticias2-06.pdf>.

4 Mongbay.com, *Central African Republic*, <rainforests.mongbay.com/20car.htm>.



conditions. Wood is the main fuel for heating in 91.7% of households in the capital, Bangui, where it is used in nearly all poor homes (96%); the rich use a combination of firewood (84.5%), coal (10.5%) and gas (2.5%). Between 750 and 1400 tonnes of firewood are consumed every day in Bangui alone, which comes to 280,000 to 500,000 tonnes per year.

Environmental problems

The country's most pressing environmental problems are water pollution, desertification and the loss of biodiversity. Droughts are now frequent in the north, northeast and eastern regions, which in the past were known for their agricultural production. It is increasingly evident that underground water reserves are being exhausted, causing a se-

TABLE 1

Links between energy consumption and poverty

Socio-economic category

Energy for cooking	Very poor	Poor	Middle	Rich	Very rich	Total
Wood	96.4	94.0	93.0	90.8	84.5	91.7
Coal	2.7	4.1	4.5	5.9	10.5	5.5
Oil	0.5	1.4	1.7	2.2	1.3	1.4
Gas	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.5	2.5	0.7
Electricity	0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.8	0.2
Others	0.3	0.3	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Socio-economic category

Energy for lighting	Very poor	Poor	Middle	Rich	Very rich	Total
Oil	97	89.9	76.2	53.3	14.7	65.5
Gas	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3
Electricity	2.0	9.3	23.0	45.9	84.5	33.7
Wood	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.3
Others	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source : RCA-MÉPCI 2005b

vere reduction in productivity in these areas.⁵ To make matters worse, the Central African Republic ranks alongside Zaire and Nigeria as countries with the most severely eroded soil in Africa.⁶ The ravaging of the jungles and forests by farmers and others cutting wood for fuel leads directly to desertification and deforestation. The country has now lost around 29,600 hectares of tropical forest.

Biodiversity has become another critical problem. The elephant population, for example, has long been under threat. In the middle of the 1990s it was estimated that over the previous 30 years 90% of the country's elephants had been exterminated, with 85% of the massacre after 1985. Hunting of elephants is now banned but illegal poachers are still killing them, along with black and white rhinos.

Urbanization and poverty

The myth that moving to a city brings higher income and greater security became widespread in the Central African Republic only recently. The predicted annual urbanization rate for the period 2010-15 is 2.5% and the new city dwellers are overwhelmingly poor.⁷ Analysts attribute this population shift to a variety of factors, including high birth rates, a drastic drift off the land, and an influx of refugees caused by armed conflicts and instability not only in the Central African Republic itself but in neighbouring countries (Congo, Sudan and Chad). Living conditions are far from good. For example, in some districts of Bangui inhabitants have electricity only four days a week. Access to potable water is extremely limited.⁸

According to the 2003 General Population and Housing Census, 2.6 million people, 62.7% of the population, live below the poverty line. The overall poverty rate is 60% in cities and 72% in rural areas.⁹

Since Bangui's population growth is due to migration from rural areas, the structure of the urban landscape and the use of space are key questions in the future development of the city. Reliance on poorly remunerated, precarious methods of earning a living, such as collecting firewood aggravates urban poverty.

5 "Central African Republic – Environment", in *Nations Encyclopaedia*. Available from: <www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Africa/Central-African-Republic-ENVIRONMENT.html>.

6 FAO, *Land and environmental degradation and desertification in Africa*, <www.fao.org/docrep/X5318E/x5318e02.htm>.

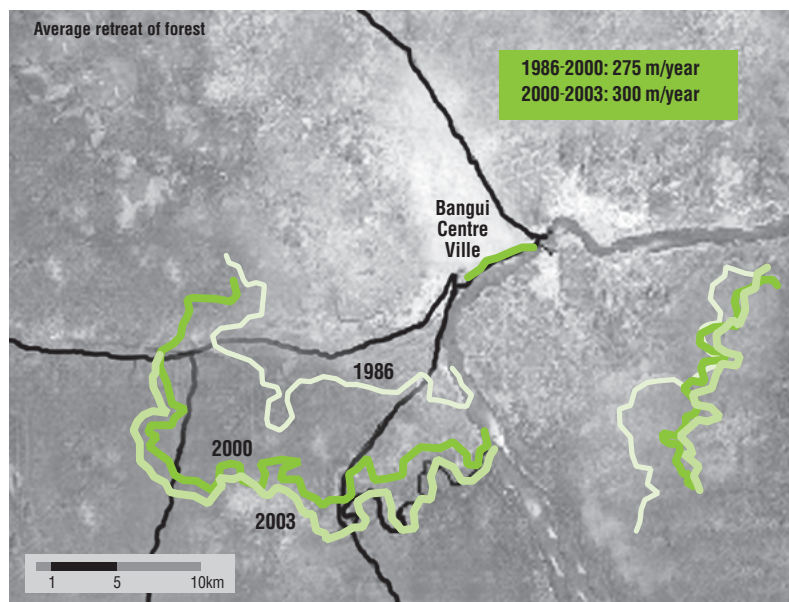
7 <en.worldstat.info/Africa/List_of_countries_by_Rate_of_urbanization>; *Indexmundi, Central African Republic Urbanization*, <www.indexmundi.com/central_african_republic/urbanization.html>.

8 Social Watch, "Central African Republic. The Reduction of Poverty: a very distant objective," in *People First, Social Watch Report 2009*, (Montevideo: 2009), p. 146.

9 Social Watch, "Many obstacles and slow progress," in *After the Fall, Social Watch Report 2010*, (Montevideo: 2010), p.154.

FIGURE 1

Influence of the growth of the city of Bangui in the last 20 years on the forest to the southwest of the city and in the border region with DRC



Source: Drigo 2007

Although the unemployment rate is calculated at only 2%, 64% of new labour opportunities are in activities that are very poorly paid, such as extensive small agriculture and the informal sector; only 10% of jobs are in the formal sector.¹⁰ Urban poverty is particularly severe among people working in agriculture and fishing.

The worst is still to come

The State is offering no solutions to these problems and appears to have no will to take action. It does not engage in any long term planning, has no development policy and has taken no measures to tackle the most urgent problems. Individual ministries, including Agriculture and Environment, intervene without any kind of coordination.

If current trends continue the forests will continue to shrink, even more land will become savannah and soil erosion will increase, gradually depriving people who cultivate crops or cut wood of their main source of income and increasing the risk of flooding. Conflicts over whether urban and semi-urban plots of land should be used for building or for agricultural production will become acute.

In the long term we can expect the prices of firewood and agricultural products to increase, and poverty in cities and their periphery to intensify. Even more worrying, climate models predict that average temperatures will rise and droughts will become more frequent. This will lead to a marked increase in desertification, which will exacerbate the other catastrophes gradually degrading the country. ■

10 Ibid.