

A full-page photograph of a dense tropical forest. Sunlight filters through the thick canopy of green leaves, creating a dappled light effect. The forest floor is covered in various green plants and vines. The overall atmosphere is vibrant and natural.

Primeval forest conservation and renewable energies in Cameroon

25th February until 5th March 2017

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Impressions of the country

We arrived at the end of the dry season. From the early hours far into the morning, the sky was covered in dense cloud. On the Atlantic coast, we were unable to make out the horizon between the grey sky and the grey sea. It was oppressively hot in spite of this. Only in the old German colonial capital of Buea [bwee-aya] at an altitude of 870 m did a cool breeze surround us – finally a chance to catch our breath!

We drive through cities and villages teeming with life at every turn.



You can get everything you need from the roadside vendors. In the flow of traffic, countless mopeds dart between rundown cars and old lorries. Many people are well dressed, but they are repeatedly enveloped by thick red clouds of dust. The people move slowly but surely, not hurriedly or hectically. Life on and by the roads has a flowing rhythm to it.

A typical roadside scene. Everything you might need is offered on the roadside market.



The German cemetery in Buea. Farmer John Ndomba looks after the old graves.



German past in Sub-Saharan Africa. At 900m above sea level in pleasantly cool air overlooking the town of Buea stands the palatial former residence of the German governor of the colony of Cameroon. Today the governor of the Southwest Region of Cameroon resides here.



The former German schoolhouse in Buea. It is now a military base.



The Bismarck fountain in Buea. Today, as a German you are almost embarrassed by the friendliness the Cameroonian people show towards Germans. At every stop on our journey, people were eager to show us that they speak a few words of German.



Tee plantation 800 m above sea level near the former German colonial capital of Buea. The tea shrubs are knee-high. The fresh leaves are harvested by hand. It is one of the few plantations run by a local entrepreneur from Cameroon.



Mopeds are a status symbol. The driver is looking out of his front door. His parents are sitting under a mango tree in the shade.



Herds of cattle and car tailbacks cross paths in Douala, home to almost 2 million inhabitants



On the periphery of the towns and cities, kilometres of new houses are being built, always very close to the arterial roads

Forestry in Cameroon



On the national road from Yaoundé to Douala there is an uninterrupted stream of timber haulers en route with their precious cargo to the port on the Atlantic.

One of the main purposes of the visit was to assess the sustainability of the forestry industry. Since 2011, Cameroon has had an agreement with the EU ensuring free market access for its timber products in Europe. In exchange, the origin of each single tree trunk, all the way down to the tree stump, has to be traceable. Genetic origin tests in Germany repeatedly reveal anomalies between the declared information and actual origin, however.

The Forestry Ministry admits that not all the felling locations are covered by GPS systems yet. Teams of three men each patrol the forest and mark 1-3 tree trunks per hectare with a GPS signal. Then forestry tractors break their way through to these trees and drag them to collection points.



The Dzeng community forester points to the number carved into the stump of a felled tree. This should make it possible to trace the origin of each single trunk back to where it grew. The same number has to be carved into the tree trunk and later on the beams and planks.

The vast majority of the logging is done by international companies, which the central government grants **concessions** to for parts of the forest. We use the Dutch company Wijma [Vishma], which works 450,000 hectares near the national park of Campo Maan. There are also numerous communities who own parts of the forest. They also award concessions for forestry activities to international companies.

In the Dzeng [Tseng] community near Yaoundé I get to see an example of this.



At the nursery owned by the Wijma company. Here young saplings are grown to reforest cleared areas. The workers are clearly very committed to their job.



This map of a scale of 1 : 3150 covers a whole wall in the office of the timber concession-holder Wijma. Tree stumps are marked on it in orange showing each and every felled tree trunk with the number carved into it. A circular trail for transporting the timber out is marked as a black dotted line.

Search teams scour the forest on foot and decide which trees should be felled.

Heavy-duty vehicles then clear a grid of tractor trails used to drag the logs out to central storage places.

There, trucks pick up between

two to three logs with diameters of around one meter and transport their precious cargo to the port of Douala [Duala] on the Atlantic coast.

If local inspectors from the government do not demand any proof of origin for the information on the tree trunks, timber which has been felled beyond the level which is sustainable can continue on to Europe or China unchallenged.



Locals turn the waste wood into charcoal at the Wijma timber mill. They work using their bare hands, surrounded by smoke. The charcoal ends up in European DIY stores as a cheap product.



At the Wijma timber mill. 90 % of the timber delivered to Europe has already been processed. China on the other hand buys most of the tree trunks whole and then processes them in its own country. Wijma is a foreign concession-holder, though. Its profits do not stay in Cameroon.



Chinese workers are building a new tarred road from Ebolowa into the national park of Campo Maan. Soon, feed-in roads will fork off to the right and left and push the cleared areas further into the forest. Between 1990 and today, the percentage of Cameroon covered by forest has dropped from 50 to just under 40 %. During the same period, the population has doubled from 12 to 24 million.

The reports on **corruption** have documented a positive trend in the last three years. In the private sector in particular, corruption has been able to be lowered somewhat, in the administration “it continues to prevail” (report by the German Development Ministry in January 2017).



The bookkeeper of the timber corporation Wijma shows the guest from Germany the registration lists for each felled log. The respective number has to match the number on the stump of the tree. The Thünen Institute of Forest Genetics in Germany repeatedly records anomalies between the numbers on the timber and the genetic origins of the wood, however. Illegal logging from cleared forest accounts for a significant proportion of this.

Between 1990 and 2010, the percentage of land covered by forest in the country fell from **51** to **42 %**. There is purported to be a government strategy to stabilise the area covered by forest at **30 %**. The State Secretary at the Ministry of Forestry told me this was not true, however. In his words, Cameroon wants to increase the percentage of land covered by forest. Whether this is true is questionable. When I mentioned at the Dzeng community assembly that Germany is increasing the proportion of its land covered by forest, this met with gasps of disbelief at any rate. What impressed government officials the most was the information that Germany investigates timber imports using a method that makes it possible to determine the geographical origin very precisely. No one wants to jeopardise the “voluntary partnership agreement” on privileged timber trading with Germany.



A smallholder plants an agroforestry area. Under the trees he will grow field fruits and vegetables. The shade increases the yield. He can use the timber from the trees after just 15 years.

Protecting the primeval forests

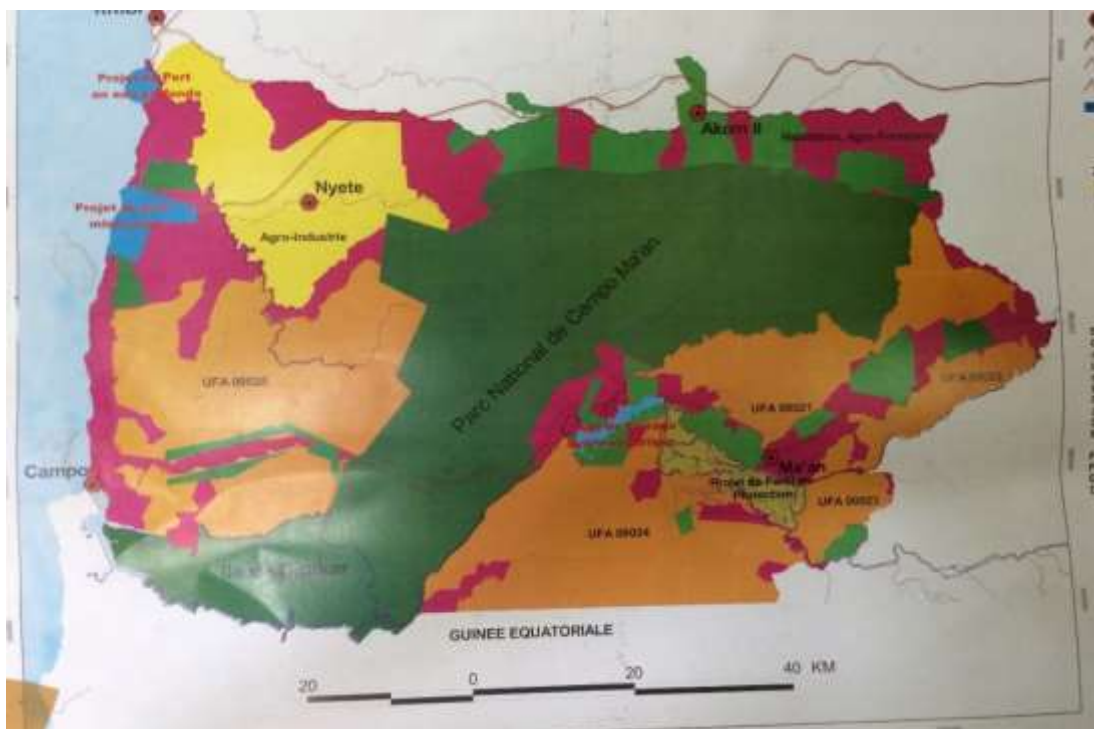
The forests of the Congo Basin cover an expanse of more than 1.8 million square kilometres. Germany covers 357,000 square kilometres. Cameroon's share of this is 7 %. In the national park of Campo Maan on the border to Equatorial Guinea in the south we encounter such a forest. The vegetation on both sides of the small sand track grows ever lush and taller. Two walls of leaves as tall as houses and light effects cocoon us. There is something protective about this in and of itself. Now I realise the difference between primeval forest and forest with mechanical logging. There are tall trees there too. But here the space between the ground and the highest crowns is just one big green filter. The different **storeys of the forest** from the knee-high shrub layer to the lower-growing shaded vegetation and new growth straining for the light all the way to

The coastal primeval forest in Cameroon consists of five storeys from the ground all the way up to the crowns of the highest primeval forest giants. Raindrops hardly even make it to the ground. It is a 70m-tall green lung for the Earth.



the canopy crowns of the primeval forest giants 60 to 70 m tall are preserved and intact. We guess how far we can see at eye level. 20 m at most. Compared to the rain forest in the Amazon and on Borneo, this area in the lower storeys seems more lush and vibrant.

Suddenly our guide stops and points to a fresh pile of dung which looks like horse manure. It was a **gorilla**, which must still be close by. Elsewhere we encounter freshly trodden undergrowth. **Forest elephants** have passed through here, grazing as they cleared their way. We fall silent. Now all you can hear is melodic birdsong, the rustling of leaves and wind from the highest crowns. When a little rain falls, hardly a single drop reaches us below. In spite of the humid heat, **no mosquitos** bother us. Their predators are clearly so numerous that a low-level balance is created.



Map showing the use of the southwest of Cameroon. On the left, the Atlantic; at the bottom, Equatorial Guinea. The national park is under pressure from all sides

Dark green	Campo Maan National Park
Ochre-coloured	Forestry area available for use
Red	Agroforestry areas for smallholder farming under trees
Yellow	Agroindustry; <i>inter alia</i> Hevecam rubber plantation
Blue	New deep-water port



The local guide already told us from the start that no one need worry about malaria here. With no people carrying malaria there are also no infected malaria flies.

I have a small piece of soil dug up; the topsoil with the layer of roots is barely 10 cm deep, then you already hit a barren, coarse mineral soil.

The topsoil on the floor of the tropical rainforest is only around 10 cm deep. Underneath lies coarse, infertile sand. Almost all the biomass circulates above the ground in the leaves and in the stalks of the plants. That is what makes the tropical rainforests so sensitive. If they are cleared or burnt down, the rain carries away the ash and topsoil and the sun bleaches the bare ground.

Almost all the **biomass circulates** in the plants above the ground. This makes the tropical rainforests so sensitive. There are no reserves in the soil. A cleared piece of forest can no longer regenerate itself for a long time.

The primeval forests are endangered by illegal logging of valuable tree trunks, by improper use as firewood and by poaching. Several international organisations help by providing knowledge and funds. The German development bank KfW funds the development of typical regional products and nature tourism facilities to create new earning opportunities. With the long-time Member of the German Bundestag and forester Dr **Christian Ruck**, it has an expert in Cameroon with a proven track record of visible successes. The bonus system he developed to reward the attainment of certain targets evidently fits in very well with the country's character.



The village community of Bakalingi at the foot of Mount Cameroon. The mayor is pictured at the centre. The women grow and breed banana trees which they sell in the local vicinity at 30 cents a piece. The bananas from Bakalingi are known far and wide for being especially tasty. The German development bank KfW financed the nursery in exchange for acceptance of the national park on Mount Cameroon.



The view over an oil palm plantation up towards Mount Cameroon. This is one of the Earth's most rain-abundant regions. At the front of the picture on the right is volcanic stone from the last time Mount Cameroon erupted in 1999. The quickly decomposing lava is the reason for the lush fertility.

Rubber – an example of the international plantation industry

To the north of the national park of Campo Maan we drive for kilometres past areas where the forest has been cleared. As well as the red sand from the tracks, billows of smoke also envelop us. These aren't just the micro-clearings of smallholders, which extend around 50m to each side of the path; this is deforestation as far as the eye can see. Did the Chinese build the **new deep-water port to the south** of the bathing resort of Kribi to transport timber from the primeval forest out of the country perhaps? What we are seeing would suggest this.

Near Nyete we arrive at a high wire fence with a guarded gate. It is the entrance to the rubber plantation run by the company **Hevecam**. The owners, we hear, are from Singapore. The administrators and managers we meet are Dutch and British, though. Hevecam has secured 42,000 hectares for 99 years here. This is equivalent more or less to the size



On the rubber plantation. Between the 7th and 15th year of the trees' life, the latex flow is the best. Afterwards they are cut down again.

of the metropolitan region of Hamburg. The rubber saplings are arranged in rows a few metres apart. One metre from the ground, small containers are fastened around each trunk. The latex runs out of v-shaped cuts in the bark into the collection containers. Collecting the latex fluid is only economically worthwhile between the 7th and 25th year of the trees' life. After this, the area is cleared and replanted.

From further away, the rubber trees look like plane trees because of their patched bark. But they are far less firm. The majority of the trees are bent in the direction of the wind. Overall they don't look that healthy.

The WWF (!) invites us to lunch on the plantation. Hevecam's British administrator boasts of the social benefits the company offers its 4200 workers - free schooling for the labourers' children and medical care. There are 17 villages inside the plantation.

The annual lease the company pays to Cameroon is apparently around EUR 230,000.

The pygmy village



Welcome committee in the pygmy village on the edge of the Hevecam rubber plantation. 42 people live here, caught in limbo between their traditional way of life and the so-called civilised world.

When I here that there is a pygmy village on the Hevecam grounds I want to see it. The visit turns out to be an ambivalent experience. We drive just under an hour towards a wooded chain of mountains at the foot of which Hevecam's concession ends. There we encounter a dozen low huts, covered in leaves but also scraps of plastic sheets. The inhabitants have already gathered on the veranda of the assembly hall. They welcome us with cheerful song. Young boys perform artistic feats. In total there are 42 people living in the village. The men



The pygmies explain their hunting methods to the hunter from Germany. Dogs track down the game. The hunter has to creep up silently enough to kill the game with a spear. The meat is divided up between all the inhabitants of the village.

reach up to 1.60 m in height, the women around 10 cm less. All of them look haggard. The round bellies of some of the children are signs of malnutrition and parasites. As I am shown around the village, I ask the chief how they feed themselves. The men kill animals in the nearby forest with spears; the women gather fruits and tubers. When at the end of the visit I ask the chief what he would wish for, he answers not so many people walking around the forest disturbing their hunting. These people are caught in a kind of **transitional limbo** between their traditional way of life and the “civilised” life of the other tribes.

On the one hand I didn't see any of the inhabitants with a mobile phone, on the other hand they also use what others throw away - old plastic bowls, sheets with holes in them, torn blankets.



The huts of the pygmy families. A mixture of traditional building materials and disposable items from the “civilised world”. The banana trees in the background produce delicious fruit.

Hevecam sees the indigenous village as a prestige project. The administrator points out that they live on the corporation's land and could also benefit from schooling and medical care if they wanted. What a perversion of the facts! It is the pygmies' land. They are the original inhabitants here.



The communal cooking area in the pygmy village.

Church action



The church of the bishop in Ebolowa. The institution of the church plays an important role in development.

Church, school, wells, clinic and vocational training are the hallmarks of church action "deep in the country".



Bishop Dr Philippe Mbarga is a pastor and motor of development all in one. He studied in Germany for eight years. In his opinion, the church needs to be a rock for people in the face of the problems of this world.

On our journey from the capital of Yaoundé to the national park of Campo Maan, we stop in the small town of Ebolowa to visit the new bishop Dr Philippe Mbarga. The grounds of the bishop's seat spanning several hectares are teeming with activity. A new school is under construction as is an agricultural centre where people can learn agriculture as a trade.

This is absolutely new here. Up until now, you

learnt how to farm from your parents. Up until into the 1950s it was the same in Germany, too.

Bishop Philippe is a hands-on man. He was educated in Germany for eight years. With his winning smile and powerful figure, he exudes something of the healing powers of traditional chiefs. He is also a pastor and proclaimer of the faith, though, Philippe emphasises. But trust is built by dealing with the worries and concerns of this world.

The evening of the same day holds something completely different in store for us.

The local MP of the ruling party **Jean Zam** has invited us to his home for an evening reception.

Here, by torchlight, everyone who is anyone

in Ebolowa arrives. The



Above the Ebolowa cathedral are the new school (centre) and an agricultural training centre (upper right; on the left, the bishop's lodgings)

commanders of the police and military, public prosecutors, judges, a senator, the province governor and other officials.

There are even traditional chiefs in leopard skins. We are served snake as a delicacy. Unfortunately because of the large number of guests, the conversation I had hoped to have with fellow MP Zam does not materialise. He is said to be the MP who champions the preservation of primeval forests and biodiversity the most at the Cameroonian parliament.

Development through renewable energy sources

In consultation with Development Minister Dr Gerd Müller, this trip is a small test run for the planned **Energy Partnership with Africa**. This was also what Member of the Bundestag Marco Bülow was especially interested in, but who fell so ill two days before the start of the trip that he had to cancel. Dr Iven Schad, the development advisor at the German embassy had organised a meeting with the Minister of Water and Energy, **Basile Atangana-Kouna** right on the Monday of the week of the visit. He listened to the German proposal of focusing the propagation of renewable energies more on Cameroonians somewhat bored first of all, but then with increasing interest:

1. Germany would provide large-scale support for the **vocational training** of young Africans in managing renewable energy sources.
2. After successfully completing their training, the graduates would receive **start-up help to found a business**. The end-user business resulting from the development of solar and biogas plants would be in the hands of Cameroonians.
3. If so desired, personal **partnerships** with German municipal utilities, energy cooperatives or companies could be found for the young African entrepreneurs. This would lead to a broad network of personal support and mutual learning between Africa and Germany.



Meeting with Cameroon's Energy Minister, Basile ATANGANA-KOUNA. Germany's offer to support the vocational training of young Africans in the field of electrical engineering so that they can take the development of renewables into their own hands in his country is something he would like to implement immediately if he could. He has slight difficulties with the idea that these energy experts would then be self-employed entrepreneurs rather than employees at large corporations. For the young entrepreneurs, Josef Göppel explained, partnerships with energy cooperatives and municipal utilities in Germany would be built to provide support, though.

The meeting lasted 1½ hours because the minister had detailed follow-up questions on the German *Energiewende*, the transition to a new energy era, and the use of renewables in the rural areas of Germany.

As was to be expected, the Energy Minister loved the idea of support for vocational training. He also particularly liked the fact that the end-user business would be carried out by Cameroonians. He said initially though that the trained experts would end up being hired by international investors as usual. But I emphasised the opportunity to also build up a layer of homegrown medium-sized businesses by harnessing decentralised energies.

At the end of the meeting, ATANGANA KOUNA requested that Minister Müller turn this proposal into an operable project as swiftly as possible. He and his heads of departments repeatedly emphasised the quality of German products and working methods. They were very interested in working with Germany, they told us.

There wasn't a single stop on our journey where a Cameroonian did not speak a few **words of German**. The pride in ties or contacts to Germany is unmistakable. Germany's treatment of their ancestors during the colonial period was not better, just shorter than others'. It was already over in 1916. The trauma of colonisation means we have an ethical obligation to engage in a fair and constructive partnership in the present day.

The willingness to engage in such a partnership based on a new self-confidence is tangible everywhere in Africa. Perhaps the pre-colonial traditions of the different peoples of the continent are the basis for this. On the other hand, many people are adopting the latest breakthroughs in telecommunications, such as payment systems using mobile phones, as if it were second nature here. In Europe, by contrast, in many cases we are still stuck in the old structures of the industrial age.



In the community of Mengueme to the southeast of the capital of Yaoundé on the Nyong river, attractive holiday homes and a lodge have been built with the support of the European Union. This base for tourism is now very well received by foreign guests and wealthy Cameroonians.

Entrance sign of the new holiday village in the community of Mengueme on the Nyong river



Kribi beach. In the morning, fishermen sail out onto the Atlantic in one-tree boats. At the beginning of March, the seawater here was as warm as in a bathtub. If you are looking for a holiday far from the madding crowd in simple accommodation, then look no further.