

- Ghana: Loggers and politicians, not small farmers, are to blame for deforestation

Even by conservative estimates, less than a quarter of Ghana's pre-colonial forest remains. Loggers and politicians caused most deforestation, though they like to shift the blame to farmers. But the fact is that throughout the Twentieth Century farmers have had little control over the trees on their land. British colonialists gave timber rights to chiefs, who promptly sold them to loggers, or ordered them cleared and replaced with cacao plantations. After independence, the government claimed ownership of all trees and land, and sold most of it off to loggers. Cocoa farmers followed the loggers, settling in the newly cleared areas. Because cacao trees grow better under shade, small farmers usually conserve forest cover. But decades of bad forest policies and a corrupt forest department meant that farmers received no compensation —only ruined fields— for the trees that logging companies cut from their land. Government officials —often receiving kick-backs from loggers— set extremely low royalties on logged trees, and failed to collect most anyway. Booming foreign demand in Asia combined with new timber mills financed by the World Bank plunged the timber sector into crisis.

Reforms in the 1990s came too little and too late. After substantial civil society and donor pressure, the government reluctantly implemented a few token reforms to involve communities in scattered projects. But farmers still have no say over forest policies, over whether their land is given off as a concession, nor over which trees companies cut from their backyards.

By blaming farmers, politicians and loggers evade responsibility. Similar scapegoating happens in Madagascar, Senegal and many other countries across Africa. Such stories about destructive slash-and-burn farmers are then picked up by naïve scholars and self-seeking international agro-input companies. Fertilizer companies say governments must get 'destructive' 'slash-and-burn' farmers to buy more fertilizer in order to raise productivity on existing land thereby stopping expansion. Biotechnology firms argue that new genetically engineered seeds will enable farmers to boost yields on current land. In the process, we are blinded to the real villains, and we lose opportunities for real changes in policy and government to foster conservation and rehabilitation.

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