

Ghanaian community protects sacred groves from mining

In 2010 it became clear that the mining company Azumah Resources Limited – without informing the communities – was granted permission by the Ghanaian government to prospect for gold in the Upper West Region. The prospecting activities of this company attracted a group of illegal miners who started mining in the community, using armed guards to ward off community members that got near the place. The mining activities posed serious threats to the land, soils, water quality, social security and above all, the sacred groves and sites of the community. In a reaction the Tingandem, or local spiritual leaders, from the Tanchara community came together and formulated a statement. It was the first time in history that a united group of Tingandem undertook such an action. This could largely be attributed to the activities of the local NGO, the Center for Indigenous Knowledge and Organizational Development (CIKOD) on endogenous development. CIKOD also introduced Bio-cultural community protocols as instruments to seek legal protection for traditional knowledge and natural resources.



Community members and NGO staff watch an illegal gold mine in northern Ghana

In recent years the Tanchara community has been the scene of numerous illegal gold-mining operations. These activities have not only scarred the land, but also polluted the river with toxic chemicals used for gold extraction, suspected to be

Bio-cultural Community Protocols (BCPs) link formal laws and customary laws

cyanide and mercury, affecting the community's drinking water. They also pose threats to the Tanchara community's sacred groves.

Protecting sacred groves

In this dryland savannah area, the sacred groves stand out as green clusters of indigenous trees and shrubs. These groves are known to be vital to the survival of the region's biodiversity. They are important to the community as they contain herbal medicinal plants and conserve soils and water supplies. However, the community's main motivation for saving the groves is that they are home to their ancestral spirits, and therefore play a key role in the community's spiritual life.

Traditional regulations for the protection of the sacred groves are enforced by the Tingandem, who are spiritual leaders as well as keepers of the land and advisor to the Chief and the Pognaa, the chief's female counterpart. When the international mining company Azumah Resources Ltd. was granted permission to start prospecting for its mining operations in the Tanchara area, the Tingandem became very worried. Their concern over their sacred groves and other natural

resources was widely shared in the community. In an interview, Sawbere Dakora Yirguru, one of the ten Tingandem from Tanchara the following concerns were expressed: *'We punish anyone who cuts trees in our sacred groves. Since I*

became a Tingandem, the groves have not diminished; they have grown thicker than in the past. They are used to protect the gods who protect all of us.' And Naa Yaa-yin Niber, regent of Tanchara states: *'Our main concern is a mining company that is about to enter our community. I called a community meeting, so everybody would know about this mining issue. These days nobody wants to look like a fool, so I gathered my people together and now we are united and ready to prevent future problems.'* The Tingandem formulated a statement protesting the activities of the illegal miners and asking government to safeguard their sacred groves and sites from both legal and illegal mining. All the tingandem appended their thump prints on this paper and requested CIKOD to send this to the appropriate authorities for their attention and action.

Strengthened Community organisation

Since 2003, CIKOD has been working with the Tanchara community, helping them to strengthen their self-reliance and ability to sustain their development 'from within'. To this end, CIKOD has developed and employed a series of tools known as Community Organisational Development tools:

- Community Institutions and Resources Mapping
- Community Visioning and Action planning
- Community Organisational Self-Assessment
- Community Institutional Strengthening
- Learning Sharing and Assessment

The Tanchara community members were trained to use these tools with the aim of strengthening their capacity to respond to issues of importance. Building on these tools, the community identified and strengthened seven capacity areas (see diagramme). These were inspired by a 13-step approach to strengthening endogenous development devised by CIKOD together with the other COMPAS partners in Africa. As part of the process for strengthening the endogenous development of the community, CIKOD introduced Bio-cultural Community Protocols to respond to the problems with the gold mining activities. CIKOD has become one of the COMPAS-Africa pioneers in the development of Bio-cultural Community Protocols (BCPs) and the Tanchara BCP is probably the first of such protocols in Ghana. The African Bio-cultural Community Protocol programme will develop BCPs in three African countries, and enable four other countries to benefit from peer to peer learning.

Tanchara BCP: example to others

A Bio-cultural Community Protocol is a document that embodies a statement in which the community affirms its traditional knowledge and practices related to their resources, in order to protect them within the framework of customary, national and international legislation. The BCP also sets

out community controls for how to negotiate any commercial agreement with outsiders.

With support from CIKOD, preparation of the protocol has been a tremendously empowering activity for the Tanchara community. Strengthened in their means for self-determination, the traditional leaders, especially the Tingandem, played a key role in developing the protocol and in discussions within the community. This process also helped the community become aware of their legal rights, such as the right to free and prior informed consent enshrined in the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity.

The Tanchara protocol, which is still under development, calls on the mining company Azumah Resources Ltd., the government and other stakeholders to save the community's sacred groves from the impacts of prospecting and mining for gold. After its completion, the protocol will be

signed by the Chief, the Pognaa and the ten Tingandem and any other trusted persons selected by the community. The completion of the BCP is a race against the clock, as Azumah Resources Ltd. is trying to bypass the regulations on free and prior informed consent by hiring a communications officer to interact with the chiefs and individual community members rather than the whole community.

The protocol will make it impossible for any individual to bypass the community and grant consent for prospecting and mining. And – as the mining potentially affects the sacred groves of all the communities within the mining concession – CIKOD is expanding the work on BCPs to other communities in the region.

Link with international agreements

The Bio-cultural Community Protocol is directly linked to international policies

related to biodiversity conservation. The government of Ghana signed the Nagoya protocol under the Convention on Biological Diversity in May 2011. This document states in article 9-1: *'In implementing their obligations under this Protocol, Parties shall in accordance with domestic law take into consideration indigenous and local communities' customary laws, community*

Interacting worldviews in protecting sacred groves

Spiritual

Destruction of the homes of the ancestors was stopped.

Material

The activities protected the land and biodiversity as the main source of livelihood and income.

Social

Social disruption was stopped by strengthened community organization.

protocols and procedures, as applicable, with respect to traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources'.

Community benefits

Through increased organization the communities were able to drive away the illegal miners, protecting their land, drinking water and sacred forests. In this way their children were no longer leaving school to be recruited as cheap labour in the illegal mining operations. Moreover, related to the legal mining, their issues were put forward to the relevant authorities. In the case of Tanchara, the community members have been able to bring their case to the regional and national governments. Hopefully this will be sufficient to stop or alter the gold mining activities in their region.



For more information:

byguri@yahoo.com, www.cikodgh.org and films by Peter Lowe on Ghana: <http://www.youtube.com/user/cikodvideo?feature=mhum>

Tanchara community self-assessment of capacities: 1 = dormant; 2 = sprouting; 3 = growing; 4 = well-developed; 5 = fully mature, ultimate vision of success.

