



Open letter to the relevant National Authorities, Development Partners of Guinea-Bissau and the International Community on a project threatening the Natural Park of the Lagoons of Cufada

The Cufada, Bionra and Bedasse lagoons, located in the Quínara region, constitute the largest freshwater reserve in Guinea-Bissau and cover ecosystems of wetlands and forests of exceptional value as heritage. The terrestrial part, which consists of dense forests, holds populations of chimpanzees, various species of ungulates and even elephants, of which some individuals have been sighted regularly. The wetlands are home to large concentrations of migratory birds and represent a privileged means for fishing and stock raising. However, the most important function of these lagoons is linked to the role they play in conserving resources in water. They act as a large sponge that fills during the rainy season and feeds the groundwater reserves and wells, local agriculture and the forests during the dry season.



These characteristics led to the classification of Cufada in 1990 as a Wetland of International Importance. It became the 1st Ramsar Site of Guinea-Bissau under the aegis of the Ramsar Convention. Subsequently, in the year 2000, a protected area was established in the area by the Guinean Government: the Natural Park of the Lagoons of Cufada (Decree-Law 12/2000, Official Gazette 49, dated 4/12/2000). In 2001, BirdLife International ranked the Cufada lagoons and surrounding forests as one of the most important bird areas on the African continent, and the IBA (Important Bird Areas) status was attributed to the Natural Park. The park covers a total area of 89,000 ha where some 5,000 people live in 33 villages. They depend mostly on the natural resources and ecosystem services that the Park offers them for free!



Through the creation of a network of Protected Areas, which includes Cufada and covers some 15% of the national territory, the Government of Guinea-Bissau shows its commitment to the conservation and wise management of natural resources. However, this network of protected areas is so far the only recorded progress for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Following the coup d'état in April 2012, the pressure on natural resources, forestry in particular, has increased at an alarming rate. Several reports have been made on the massive and selective logging that decimated “pau sangue” (*Pterocarpus ericaneus*), one of the species with the highest commercial value. The moratorium of 1 April 2015, approved by the Government after the elections in 2014, has stopped the haemorrhage but in recent months, new denunciations have been made of resumption of tree cutting.



Very recently, the development of new investments in the region of Quínara came to the attention of the public, as these will lead to the slaughter of trees inside the Cufada Park. A new 10MW thermal power plant is under construction in Buba, allegedly targeting the supply of energy to the towns of Buba and Fulacunda and villages neighbouring.



From the information gathered, this is a project signed in 2007 through a credit agreement between the Commercial Bank of India and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Guinea-Bissau. The project has been kept secret since its signature. It only came to the public with the beginning of the construction of the plant, and the consequent denunciations by activists and environmental organizations, among them Tiniguena, made in December 2016.

These complaints are based on: 1) Several unfortunate experiences with ambitious - and poorly planned - projects that led to the clearing of forest areas within this park without benefits for the populations or the State. 2) The violation of the laws in Guinea-Bissau, as well as international commitments. 3) The lack of integrated planning of the project and the lack of transparency in its execution. 4) The existence of viable alternatives that can better solve the energy problem affecting the populations. 5) The serious risks that this project represents to the environment and the livelihoods of local populations and to the resilience of Guinea Bissau to climate change.

1. Previous experience

Large parts of the Cufada forests were culled when the road to link the bauxite exploration area in the Boé region to the river flanking Buba was opened. A deep-water port was planned at the Rio Grande of Buba for the evacuation of that ore. The road was opened in 2006. Its path was corrected twice, resulting in a double slaughter of precious forest species, allegedly due to errors of calculation from the operators... 10 years later, neither the port was built, nor the exploitation of bauxite started! More than 50 hectares of forest were however sacrificed by the promoters within the park and a lot more abroad.

Ten years later this new project arises in Buba. Apart the local impacts, the construction of the power plant foresees the clearing of more forest areas to transport energy between the city of Buba and Fulacunda, 35 km away. The works are underway with no guarantee that the traumatic experience of the fictitious Boé Road to Buba, will not be repeated. Extensive forest areas were sacrificed, even if the announced port has never been built, and the rumoured bauxite has never been exploited. Today a wide lane is open in the heart of the forest by heavy machines.



It is unfortunately a common practice to launch ambitious and expensive projects, frequently in situations of doubtful institutional legality, justified by the promotion of development in favour of local populations and the country. The promoters take advantage of moments of crisis or political upheaval, in which the institutions of the Republic are weakened and sometimes lack legitimacy. Such situations have proliferated in Guinea-Bissau.

2. Violation of laws

The construction of the plant has already begun and the clearing of the woods for the placement of the pylons is about to begin. Again, no environmental and socio-economic impact studies required by Law have been made so far.

There is a clear violation of a number of laws in force at national level (Framework Law on Protected Areas, Environmental Assessment Law, Environmental Law, Environmental Law, Land Law) and sectorial legislation (Decree-law of creation of the Park of Cufada).

There is also a lack of respect for important international conventions and commitments assumed by Guinea-Bissau, notably the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the Bonn Convention on Migratory Species.

3. Lack of planning and transparency

There is an urgent need to put an end to the obscure timber business, which has been developing in Guinea-Bissau in recent years. It takes various forms, ambiguous projects promoting the corruption of politicians and military leaders, entrepreneurs and local populations. In situations of crises, they allow the depletion of our forests to enrich themselves quickly and illegitimately.

Everything indicates that this project to construct a thermal power station in Buba, is another white elephant, hiding unconfessed interests of state and private agents, once again around the "business" of wood. The economic sustainability of this investment promoted by a private company is highly questionable. Its profitability is highly questionable only through the "sale" of electric energy, especially in a region of great poverty where very few can pay their energy bill. Where will the profits come from?

The perceived promiscuity between operators in the timber sector with the energy supplying company gives grounds for suspicion. Is it a disguised strategy of the State to finance the supply of energy and wood to the private sector? But who will refund the credits granted by the Indian bank?

4. There are alternatives!

It is true that rural areas and people urgently need energy to improve their living and working conditions. Fortunately it is possible nowadays to provide clean energy taking advantage of the technological progresses in the field of solar energy. The installation of small decentralized solar power units, of lower cost and easy to manage with the participation of the populations is possible. The experience of Bambadinca, where a station powered by solar panels has been providing light to the entire city is a good example. The Sun is the cleanest energy available to countries such as Guinea-Bissau!



5. Risks to the environment and local people's livelihoods

Thermal power plants are highly pollutant, contaminating air, land and water with their waste, they represent high investment and operating cost, and they require regular maintenance and astronomical fuel costs.

Forests are a precious commodity, which take decades or even centuries to regenerate! They protect us from climate change, protect soil fertility and feed the underground sheets. Wetlands and forests join together in the Natural Park of the lagoons of Cufada, to ensure that all the inhabitants have access to essential goods and services without which no living being can survive: WATER!



It is critical to allow the Natural Park of the lagoons of Cufada to continue to perform its vital functions, and provide us with valuable resources and services. THIS PROJECT TO BUILD A THERMO-ELECTRICAL POWER STATION IN THE PARK MUST BE STOPPED IMMEDIATELY AND THE POWER PLANT MUST BE DISASSEMBLED and eventually relocated in another locality and converted to other forms of cleaner energy supply and with less risks in terms of the environment and human health!

In this regard, the signatory organizations of this open letter **urge the competent national authorities to:**

- 1^o) **Comply with and ensure respect for national and international laws** and conventions approved and ratified by the Guinean State.
- 2) **Ensure that no extensive tree harvesting will be done within the Cufada Natural Park** within the scope of this power plant project or any other public or private initiative.
- 3) **Relocate the plant and its branches to another area outside the park boundaries**, to be defined after carrying out previous environmental and socio-economic impact studies.

4) **Invest seriously in clean and sustainable energy**, encourage the use of solar energy favouring the creation of decentralized and low-cost parks for the supply of renewable energy to populations, progressively banning thermal plants that are highly pollutant and have high investment, operation and maintenance costs.

5) **Respect and enforce the moratorium approved and in force, in order to stop the massive cut of trees and the criminal activities** that have been proliferating around the wood business. It is a true environmental and economic crime committed against the Guinean nation as a whole!

The signatories also **call upon Guinea-Bissau's conservation and sustainable development partners to use all their influence to ensure respect for the laws** aiming at the good governance of natural resources in Guinea-Bissau, as well as the conventions and agreements signed by the Guinea-Bissau State to promote the conservation of shared resources which are common goods of humanity.

Bissau, January 25, 2017

The Signatory Organizations:

For Tiniguena - This Land is Ours!

For the Guinean League of Human Rights

Miguel de Barros

Augusto Mário da Silva

Executive Director

President