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Title of lecture: The Conditions of Pygmies in Cameroon

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Keywords : Pygmies; Baka/Bantu communities; culture; iterative method; sustainable development

Summary

In 1983, nine members team headed by French Professor initiated a research study on Pygmies in southern Cameroon. The study was the first of its kind with the objectives to know the way of life of Pygmies, their relationship with neighbours and environment; and their engagement with sustainable and social development in Cameroon. Over the years, the research was divided into the four main activities: a) general census of Pygmies; carried during 1983-2007, b) basic training to Pygmies leaders; c) conscious attempts to realize Pygmies their vulnerable status; and d) socialization in relation to education, health and sanitation, and modes of agriculture. Though research on Pygmies had yielded significant success in bringing their situations into national and international limelight and also in improving their living conditions there is still a long way to go before Pygmies live a dignified and quality life.

Pygmies are basically considered hunter gatherers still living in forest who have different way of life than local Bantu people. Based on their language they are categorised into three main groups: Baka, Bakola/Bagyeli, and Medzan. Geographically Bakas are resided in east, Bakola/Bagyelis in central and south, and Medzan in central Cameroon. Beyond the way of life, even in terms of population, they are considered to be minorities as they together make 44,000 – Baka (39, 000), Bakola/Bagyelis (5000), and Medzan (1,000) – almost 0.44 per cent of the country's total population. Bantu people, who dwell in towns, did not considered Pygmies to be “civilized people”. It was only after 1983 when intellectuals, activists, and International NGOs started championing Pygmies.

The study on Pygmies began with a holistic approach covering all aspects of cultural, psychological, economic, and political. Analytical, systemic, and iterative tools were used to synthesize research findings. Despite the fact that Pygmies still suffer from poor education, poor health services, and is deprived of basic facilities there has been substantial improvements in their living conditions in last two decades.

Unfortunately, few significant organizations that had helped to uplift Pygmies situations ceased to continue

their activities as they lack resources – the major one was the missionary in the south province supporting Bakola group. As forests are rapidly being destroyed and devastated Pygmies are facing new challenges to deal with it and so are activists, NGOs, and government institutions.

There are no doubts that the rate of Pygmies going to schools, improvements in their health and sanitation, their interactions with towns and cities, access to French language, etc., have increased to a significant level. On such a backdrop, it is difficult from Pygmies to maintain pace with country's growth and sustain their developmental process. Academics are also were aware of a scenario that despites growing academic and public knowledge on Pygmies it is not yet set and challenges in days ahead are far more though for all, and more so to Pygmies.

Reporters: Toda, Bhaskar, Asegawa, Yoshimura, Yamane