ADDRESSING ENCROACHMENT ON STATE FOREST LAND IN TUNISIA

BEDHIEF SAHBI, 2024

KEY MESSSAGES

Tunisia's state forest lands are under threat from encroachment by developers, farmers, and pastoralists, with approximately 500,000 hectares affected or at risk. The boundaries of these lands are unclear due to outdated maps and insufficient boundary markers. This encroachment poses a significant challenge for the government, balancing local livelihood dependencies with the need to protect forest resources in a fragile ecosystem.

To address this issue, the Direction Générale des Forêts (DGF) of Tunisia implemented a consultative approach guided by the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure and within the context of the national REDD+ preparedness activities. They initiated a pilot project in Siliana using the Open Tenure application developed by the FAO to collect field data, gaining deeper insights into encroachment issues to inform policy decisions.

Key recommendations include:

Involving multiple stakeholders, including local communities, in data collection and decision-making processes.

Utilizing modern technology like Open Tenure and GNSS systems for accurate data collection and boundary demarcation.

Adopting transparent, accountable, inclusive, and equitable approaches as per the Voluntary Guidelines to build trust and find acceptable solutions for local populations.

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Tunisia's state forest lands face significant encroachment due to increasing pressure from developers, farmers, and pastoralists. This encroachment is exacerbated by unclear boundaries resulting from outdated archival maps and insufficient boundary markers. Approximately 500,000 hectares of state forest land, representing about 50% of the country's total forest cover, are affected or at risk.

The government has struggled to address this issue due to the high dependence of local populations on these lands for their livelihoods. A heavy-handed approach to reclaiming state land could jeopardise these livelihoods, yet there is an urgent need to protect valuable forest resources within Tunisia's fragile Mediterranean ecosystem.

In response, Tunisia's General directorate of forestry (DGF) decided to take action, guided by the principles of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure and within the framework of the national REDD+[1] preparedness activities. Recognising the need for a multi-stakeholder approach, the DGF initiated a pilot project in the Siliana governorate, leveraging modern technology and inclusive data collection methods to understand better and address the encroachment issues.

Methodology

The DGF adopted a consultative approach, starting with a pilot project in Siliana due to its clear state forest titles and maps. They used Open Tenure, an open-source application developed by the FAO, to collect field data with mobile devices such as tablets. The survey design was tailored to the government's needs, allowing for the collection of spatial data and an inventory of various types of informal occupation on state forest land.

Data collected included the location and size of cleared or occupied areas, land use types, family size, motivation, and start date of occupation. The DGF also invested in a Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) to collect highly accurate waypoints for boundary marking, ensuring the accuracy needed to build trust with local stakeholders.

Expansion of olive plantations is the major threat to the forest. Tunisia is a top producer.

GNSS station used to identify boundaries positions.

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1 REDD+ (or REDD-plus) is a framework to encourage developing countries to reduce emissions and enhance removals of greenhouse gases through a variety of forest management options, and to provide technical and financial support for these efforts. The acronym refers to "reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries, and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries"

Findings

The pilot project in Siliana provided valuable insights into the nature and extent of encroachment on state forest land. Open Tenure and GNSS technology enabled the DGF to collect accurate and comprehensive data, mapping land claims, and create a detailed inventory of informal occupations. This data included information on the location, size, and type of land use, as well as the socio-economic background of the occupants.

The inclusive data collection process, involving various stakeholders such as the Agence Foncier Agricole (AFA), the Tribunal Immobilier, and local authorities, ensured transparency and accountability. The application of the Voluntary Guidelines emphasised good practices in working with communities, focusing on transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, and equity.

The pilot project developed a standard operating procedure (SOP) for collecting and analysing tenure data, providing a replicable model for other regions. The data collected helped inform policy decisions and provided a clearer understanding of the encroachment issue, contributing to more effective management and protection of state forest lands.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the pilot project, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Stakeholder Involvement: Ensure the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including local communities, in the data collection and decision-making processes. This approach builds trust and ensures that solutions are acceptable to those affected.

2. Use of Modern Technology: Continue to use technologies like Open Tenure and GNSS systems for accurate and efficient data collection and boundary demarcation. These tools enhance the reliability of data and support informed policy decisions.

3. Adopt Voluntary Guidelines: Implement the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure to ensure transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, and equity in addressing tenure issues. These principles help build trust and cooperation among stakeholders.

4. Capacity Building: Provide training and capacity-building programs for local authorities and communities on using modern technologies and the principles of responsible tenure governance. This will empower stakeholders and improve the overall effectiveness of land management efforts.

5. Policy Integration: Integrate the findings from the pilot project into national policies and strategies related to land tenure and forest management. This will ensure a coherent and coordinated approach to addressing encroachment and protecting forest resources.

6. Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation: Establish a system for monitoring and evaluating forest land tenure and encroachment issues. Regular assessments will help identify emerging challenges and enable timely interventions.

7. Expand Pilot Project: Consider expanding the pilot project to other regions with similar issues. The lessons learned from Siliana can be applied to other areas, enhancing the initiative's overall impact.

ACTION PLAN

To implement the above recommendations, the following strategies are proposed:

1. Resource Allocation: Allocate sufficient resources, including financial and human resources, to support the expanded use of Open Tenure and GNSS systems. Ensure that local authorities have access to the necessary tools and training.

2. Stakeholder Engagement: Organize regular stakeholder meetings and workshops to foster collaboration and ensure that all parties are informed and involved in the decision-making process. Establish clear communication channels to facilitate dialogue and feedback.

3. Training Programs: Develop and implement training programs for local authorities, community leaders, and other stakeholders on the use of modern technologies and responsible tenure governance principles. Provide ongoing support and technical assistance as needed.

4. Policy Development: Work with national and regional policymakers to integrate the findings and recommendations from the pilot project into relevant policies and strategies. Advocate for the adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure at the national level.

5. Monitoring and Evaluation: Establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to track progress and assess the effectiveness of implemented measures. Use the collected data to make informed adjustments and improvements to the approach.

By following this plan of action, Tunisia can effectively address the issue of forest land encroachment, ensuring the protection of valuable forest resources while respecting the livelihoods of local communities.
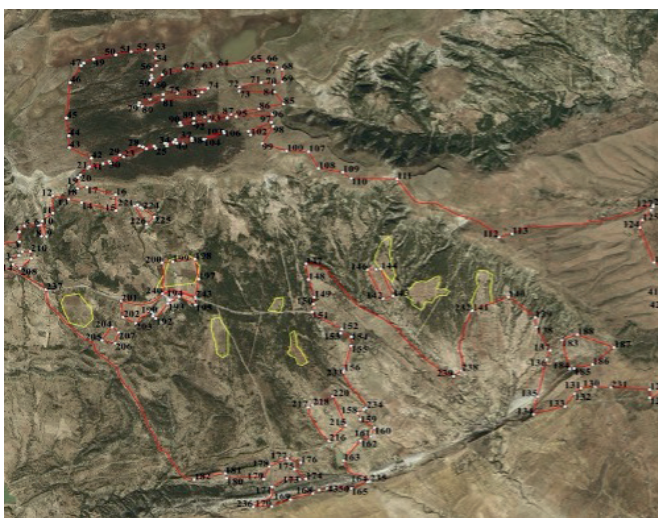
Later all claims are uploaded to a server for the project and can be viewed together (claims in yellow, forest domain in red).

Open Tenure (FAO) – tool used for recording tenure rights.

REFERENCES AND APPENDICES

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