
Cameroon: A zoning plan that splits apart forests and people

Cameroon has undergone a major re-organisation of its forestry sector over the last two decades. A process of policy reform was implemented, sponsored by the World Bank, and this resulted in the new Forest Law of 1994, which included changes to forest taxes and regulations relating to the allocation of concessions, including the requirement for management plans, and new provisions for community forestry. Implementation of the forest law was based on a national zonation plan, referred to as the plan de zonage, which was supposed to be a preliminary plan, but in practice, it was often taken to be the definitive plan, and one that was not open for discussion.

Under the law, a fundamental distinction is drawn between the permanent (PFE) and non-permanent forest estates (NPFE). The PFE is designated to remain forested in the long-term and includes State forest, Production forest (for timber extraction), Protected areas and forest reserves, and Council forest. The NPFE includes Communal forest (mostly managed according to local “traditional” rules), Community forests (leased to community organisations), and Privately owned forests. Within the PFE, shifting cultivation is forbidden, and the use of forest resources is restricted. The NPFE is land that may be converted to nonforest uses, and so it is in this category that all agricultural activities must take place. Within this category, communities can apply for community forests of up to 5,000 ha, under 25 year leases, to be reviewed every 5 years. Communities can exploit these forests for timber extraction or other purposes, on the basis of a management plan. Hunting territories, of up to 5000ha., can also be established within the NPFE.

Timber extraction is possible either through forest concessions, Unités Forestières d’Aménagement (UFA), or sales of standing volume, ventes de coupe. UFAs are available within production forest for a period of 15 years, up to a maximum size of 200,000 ha. Ventes de coupe, which can be granted both in the PFE and NPFE, are reserved for nationals, and either cannot exceed 2,500 ha or a given volume of standing timber.

In 1993, a plan de zonage was drawn up for southern Cameroon, undertaken by the Department of Forests, with the assistance of the Canadian consultancy firm, TecSult Inc. In the resulting plan, the vast majority of the land area was defined as State forest. The total area within the plan was 14 million ha, of which about 9 million ha were designated as PFE, two thirds of which was production forest. Strips of Communal forest were established along main roads, and also in buffer zones around villages.

The plan de zonage was conceived of as a preliminary zoning plan, to be converted into a definitive zoning system through the official reservation of the permanent forests (see WRM Bulletin N° 93). This, in theory, should entail a process of consultation with local communities to determine the boundary between the permanent and nonpermanent forest estate. But the outcome of the plan de zonage clearly reflects the priorities of the government and the funders of this process, which were primarily revenue from timber production, and to a certain extent, forest conservation. In contrast, the priorities of local people, and forest-dependent communities, were given little attention. This is apparent from the final designation of zones, in which nearly 65% of the total area being zoned was assigned to the PFE, and the majority of this area designated as production forest. Furthermore, the

best areas of forest were more often than not included within this zone. Thus, local people were excluded from owning or managing for economic purposes nearly two thirds of the land area, leaving a severely limited area of forest for cultivation or community forests. Even within these areas, community interests were still in competition with industry, since ventes de coupe are available within the NPFE.

The areas designated as NPFE were identified on the basis of satellite imagery and aerial photos. Such a method does not allow for the identification of areas under agroforestry systems, old fallows, nor those areas used for resource extraction. Consequently, many areas used by local populations for hunting, fishing, and harvesting forest resources were included within the PFE, as were old fallows and agroforestry systems, including cocoa plantations. Some resource extraction is allowed within the PFE, provided it is for subsistence purposes, but all such activities are banned from the various categories of protected area. Cultivation, including agroforestry, is completely prohibited. Therefore, many rural populations found their activities severely restricted under this zonation.

The plan also took little account of the dynamic nature of land use, for example, disregarding patterns of shifting cultivation and the shifting nature of settlements. Furthermore, although buffer zones were allocated around villages for future agricultural needs, these were insufficient. Very little consideration was given to other needs, such as resource extraction, hunting or agroforestry. Such activities can take place within community forests, but these areas have to be defined with the NPFE, and so compete with agricultural needs as well as ventes de coupe. The buffer zones were not large enough to meet these various needs. Indeed, the restriction of community forests to the NPFE is indicative of the marginalisation of local people's systems of forest exploitation, the system clearly favouring the traditional models of large-scale timber production. The underlying assumption is that forest use will decline, and there will be a shift to more intensive, settled agriculture.

Particularly disadvantaged were the Pygmy peoples, the Baka, Bakola and Bagyéli, as no allowance was made for their particular way of life. Those living within the forest have found that their territories have been included in the PFE, within which they are unable to apply for community forests. Even should they be able to apply for this, the maximum size of 5,000 ha. for community forests is not sufficient to allow for a hunting and gathering lifestyle. Even those groups who are officially "settled" in villages continue to make extensive use of forest resources, but this was not recognised.

The division that has been made between the PFE and NPFE has created a division between the administration and local populations, encouraging the development of competing land use strategies. For example, the process of determining the boundary between the PFE and NPFE promoted the clearance of forest areas by local populations, as they sought to lay claim to these areas and so push back the proposed boundary of the PFE. Furthermore, the fact that there are differences in legislation between the two zones, with tighter regulations existing for the PFE, has encouraged exploitation of the forest within the NPFE.

Thus, the plan de zonage created the perfect conditions for conflict over forest resources and, indeed, conflicts between communities and logging companies, local and national authorities, and between communities, have become endemic and widespread within Cameroon's forests.

A more integrated approach to forest management is needed, in which each of the various zones is seen as part of a larger whole and managed as part of this wider landscape. Without such a shift, within the NPFE community forests could come to be "scattered like islands in a sea of unregulated forest resource use". Similarly, conservation zones and agricultural areas could become islands in an expanse of production forest.

A more integrated approach would encourage a sense of the common ownership of resources, and avoid a situation in which stakeholders retreat to their respective areas of management within the NPFE or PFE.

Adapted from: "Divided Forests: Towards Fairer Zoning of Forest Lands", The Rainforest Foundation, <http://rainforestfoundationuk.org/files/Divided%20Forests.pdf>