
Cameroon: Will new support to forest sector enhance benefits for local populations?

The story of the rapid destruction of Cameroon's forests that has occurred since the 1980s, does not suffer from a lack of attention: many testimonies, analyses and recommendations have been written and many donor-led interventions to halt the deforestation have been simultaneously attempted. Between 1980 and 1995, it is estimated that close to 2 million hectares of forest were cut down in Cameroon. Industrial logging operations, often foreign companies whose raw logs left the port of Douala bound for European markets, were likely the primary source of this deforestation, acting in synergy with the concomitant encroachment of human settlements and agricultural clearing. The many programs and reforms pursued in the 1990s by the World Bank and the Cameroonian government (The Forestry Law of 1991, The Forestry Law of 1994, the New Forestry Policy of 1995 and the Law of 1996) to bring about sustainable and transparent management of Cameroon's incredibly rich forests were largely unsuccessful in achieving their objectives, and, by some accounts, even served to promote greater deforestation.

As the World Bank and other agencies now gear up to provide new support to the forest sector in Cameroon, a review of what has happened in the last decade to both the forests and the forest-dependent peoples of Cameroon, and the lessons learned, is warranted. Of particular importance is the need to highlight the role of forest-dependent peoples in decision-making in the Cameroon forest sector. As rightly noted in a World Bank report: "... a key determinant of poverty is inequality in the distribution of social decision power." And so, the questions must be asked: Has greater local participation in forest governance been achieved by the 1994 Community Forestry Law? Will the new Forest and Environment Sector Program (PSFE) promote equity and greater participation in forest governance by local people?

In 1991, the World Bank shifted their means of support to the forest sector, tying support to structural adjustment lending by the attachment of conditionalities to loans (rather than by providing direct loans to the sector, as they had previously done). These conditions were specific policy changes that the Bank insisted be made to the forest sector. While many of these policies appeared sound on paper, the translation to the implementation phase was fraught with difficulties. According to the World Bank's own Operations Evaluation Department, the World Bank failed to achieve the desired reforms because, among other reasons, the Bank did not craft a strategy that was feasible to implement, given the particular social, political and economic realities of Cameroon. It was further noted that because the Bank failed to engage in a genuine participatory approach when designing the policies by neglecting to seek out the views of local communities, that the resulting laws were not equitable.

In line with the devolution trend in forest management seen around the world in recent years, Cameroon, at the behest of the World Bank, enacted a Community Forestry Law in 1994. The World Bank's reasons for believing that Community Forestry would result in more sustainable forest management in Cameroon were not dissimilar to the rationale for promoting devolution in other cases:

(1) local people have more of a long-term interest in the natural resource than do outsiders, so local

management will be more sustainable than that controlled by regional or national bodies (which, in the case of Cameroon, most often results in control by foreign logging companies);

(2) local representative bodies are more accountable to local populations than are regional or national bodies, so there will be less opportunity for corruption to guide forest management decisions; and

(3) given the chronic underfunding of natural resource management agencies around the world (particularly in developing countries), local management is more administratively and financially feasible, and therefore, more likely to be effective in meeting agency goals.

However, since the enactment of the Community Forestry Law in 1994, these “advantages” of local management have not been realized. Many of the local management committees have been hijacked by village elites (socially powerful outside actors that may trace their lineage to the village but often reside elsewhere). These elites have seen the Community Forests as an opportunity for personal financial gain and very little of the financial benefits from logging these forests have trickled down to the local populations. There is, to date, no evidence that this type of Bank/government-driven Community Forestry have resulted in more sustainable management than centralized, “command and control” management by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MINEF).

It appears that the World Bank is now returning to the practice of direct loans to the forest sector: On June 16, 2005, a World Bank Forestry expert announced in Cameroon that the Bank will be assisting Cameroon to implement their forest management program by contributing \$30 million to the total project budget outlined by the Cameroonian government of \$115 million. The Canadian, German and British governments are also expected to contribute funds to the program. The new Forest & Environment Sector Program to be supported by the donors will consist of five target areas:

- 1) regulation and environment information management
- 2) production forests management
- 3) protected area and wildlife management
- 4) community forest resources management
- 5) institutional strengthening, training and research

Since the community forest resources management component, as outlined in World Bank documents, will include a “review of the legal & institutional framework,” as well as socioeconomic studies and support for the implementation of Community Forests, it is worth highlighting some of the key recommendations made by Cameroonian analysts. These recommended reforms to the laws and implementation practices could best be described as calls for true democratic decentralization to occur in Cameroon’s Community Forests.

- (1) Remove the administrative hurdles currently facing communities who wish to establish Community Forests by decentralizing the application process to MINEF’s Provincial offices.

Between April 1998 and November 2001, 136 applications for Community Forests were received by MINEF. By the year 2004, only 30 Simple Management Plans had been approved. The fact that communities must travel to the national capital, pay expensive fees, and hire a consultant to create the Simplified Management Plan in order to complete an application for a Community Forest is viewed by some as a cause of non-sustainable management. In some cases, communities end up having to borrow money from logging companies to finance these start-up costs and then are beholden to let these companies log their forests.

- (2) Remove the technical hurdles currently facing these communities by simplifying, even further, the

required components of the “Simplified Management Plan.”

The technical complexities posed to communities by the existing requirements of the Simple Management Plan exacerbates the conditions described above by making communities dependent on external actors not just for the sunk costs, but for all phases of implementation as well. In these scenarios, the external actors often have more ownership of the Community Forest projects than do the local populations, thus undermining democratic decision-making and the very concept of “local management.”

(3) Make the local forest management committees more downwardly accountable to local populations by requiring that traditional and moral authorities, such as chiefs and priests, be included in the management committees.

The management committees formed by MINEF, to date, have ignored the traditional authorities present in these villages. MINEF has instead, reportedly, facilitated inclusion of external village elites that are often not respected by, nor accountable to, the local populations. This has resulted in some instances of corrupt individuals hijacking the management committees and using the Community Forests for their own personal financial gain: specifically, undertaking rapid clear-cutting projects and then embezzling the profits.

(4) Facilitate the establishment of Community Forests by the Baka, Kola and Aka peoples (‘pygmies’) by considering their social and cultural realities and adjusting the application requirements accordingly.

Community Forests may currently only be established in the Non-Permanent Forest Domain of Cameroon, however, most “pygmy” groups reside in the Permanent Forest Domain. There is also uncertainty as to how the laws define “community,” “village,” and “chiefdoms,” and how the realities of “pygmy” lifestyles, including the traditional nomadic lifestyle and the current settlement near Bantu villages, fit in with these definitions. There are approximately 30,000 “pygmies” residing in Cameroon, yet they hold little decision-making power. The World Bank’s Environmental and Social Impact Assessment Summary rightly notes that “Without special steps, Baka, Kola and Aka will not be able to benefit from the PSFE that is national in scope and in principle and by intention open to everyone.”

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