
Cameroon: Restriction policies in national park have major impacts on women

Local communities generally perceive forest management as a public affair. And yet, in the household, the public domain and investment fall within the competence of men, since women are responsible for “private,” domestic business. Because of their deciding role in household food security, women are most affected by disruptions in the availability of and access to resources. Hence, latest forest policies fuelled by international and national environmental trends that restrict people's activities in parks, affect local communities and mainly women within them.

Bifa and Ebianomeyong in Cameroon are good illustrations of that. The two villages caught researchers' attention because the women there were unusually vocal in their opinions about a nearby national park called Campo-Ma'an. A CIFOR field work on the park's impact on the socioeconomic activities of communities adjoining the park, tells these women's story.

The Campo-Ma'an forest, located in the southwestern part of Cameroon, borders Equatorial Guinea and is endowed with an almost unique wealth of flora and fauna. Starting in 1932 as a game reserve, the area was later the target of a series of commercial projects –logging, industrial plantations- until 1999, when the Cameroonian government established 260,830 hectares of protected areas and forest. In 2000, with the financial support of the World Bank, this area was converted to a national park.

Bifa is a village of 306 inhabitants, jammed between the national park and an agro-industrial complex made up of vast rubber plantations, factories, and workers' camps with approximately 18,216 inhabitants. The local communities are Bulu, an ethnic group that settled in Bifa around 1860 and is part of the large Fang-Beti ethnic complex, formed by Fang, Fon, Mvae, Ntumu, Zaman, and Bulu ethnic groups. They have preferential and complex relationships with their neighbours of Nzingui.

As in neighboring villages, the people of Bifa have experienced external influences over the years, which have gradually modified their way of life. The creation in 1975 of HEVECAM's rubber plantation occupied part of the village land and caused great changes within the local communities, including exacerbation of inter- and intracommunity conflict for the remaining resources; destruction of large areas of forest and reduction in resources and incomes; influx of strangers into the area in search of jobs; increased poaching and illegal occupation of land by plantation labourers and their families.

The men and women of Bifa carry out traditional activities like agriculture, hunting, gathering and harvesting of non-timber forest products, fishing, small-scale poultry keeping, and breeding of small ruminants. Studying time allocation in Ntumu ethnic group in Campo-Ma'an region, researchers found that both men and women spend the same amount of time on livelihood activities (about 4.5 hours per day). The daily trekking for livelihood activities relates to both men and women takes about 2.5 hours per day.

Local populations gradually adapted their way of life to cope with the changes induced by external

factors over the years. In the process, women initially got the lion's share by positioning themselves as the salespeople of the family products. The men did most of the hunting, but trading was largely women's work, so the money went to them. Until recently, Bifa's women collected all the resources and redistributed them for purchases, sales, gifts, and various social exchanges.

The creation of the national park led to new disturbances, which have disrupted the very basis of village economic life and put in question the achievements of all the local communities, especially women. The women accuse ecoguards, who have been present in the area since the creation of the park in 2000, of failure to demarcate the park clearly and to spell out the rules and regulations governing hunting, in a bid to seize any game found with the women in the market or in the village. The women complain of being harassed by the ecoguards, who do not hesitate to "enter into kitchens to examine the contents of pots" or to "seize our game anywhere and anytime".

The ecoguards didn't manage to stop the hunting, but now people have to sneak into the forest and buy their meat directly from the hunters. Since the sale of game was the main source of income for Bifa's women, they have become increasingly poor, unable to work out adaptation strategies in time like the men. The women see their incomes dwindling while the problem of poaching still exists. This has had a negative impact on the equilibrium between men and women.

Ebianemeyong is a village of 103 inhabitants belonging to the Mvae ethnic group and to different clans. It is situated in an enclave on the southeast edge of the national park. The population of Ebianemeyong are traditional farmers, who make their living by practicing agriculture, hunting, collecting non-timber forest products, and fishing. Women are engaged principally in food-crop farming and increasingly in the cultivation of fruit trees. Activities typically undertaken by men are financially profitable to them. Women's activities, in contrast, are more focused on meeting the household's subsistence needs; only agriculture, and to a lesser extent gathering and harvesting of non-timber forest products, bring in cash income.

However, women say that the above-described economic activities do not really represent the current situation, but rather the situation before the closure of the Ebianemeyong-Campo route road, which was suspended at the request of the World Bank because it runs through the park and they want to keep out poachers. This has left the people of Ebianemeyong without access to Campo Ma'an. Actually, the poachers rarely used the road because they could easily get caught. The real losers have been female farmers who can no longer send their crops to the market or take their sick children to the doctor.

Apart from the reduction of living space, which is a common problem to all communities living adjacent to the national park, the women in Bifa and Ebianemeyong are experiencing more difficulties than the men in adapting to new circumstances. This is not an isolated case. The smallest disruption of the agricultural sector directly affects women's capacity to feed their families and deprives them of their main source of income. This vulnerability is linked to the competing demands on women's time, the circumscribed scale of women's activities, the concentration or uniqueness of their income sources, and the low market value of products derived from their activities. They are daily overloaded with work in production activities such as agriculture, hunting, fishing, harvesting, breeding, transportation, etc., as well as all the various household tasks such as fetching water, feeding the family, raising children, and managing the home. Thus, they hardly have the time to organize themselves to adopt reasoned and common strategies in the face of adversity.

As an Ebianemeyong woman, Septe declared, communities must not be "hostages of animals" in Campo Ma'an.

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