

## Community Forestry in Cameroon – an overview of the community perspective



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# List of acronyms and abbreviations

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**ASDEBYM:** Association of the Baka of Yenga and Mambélé (from the French *Association des Baka de Yenga et Mambélé*)

**AEP:** Annual Exploitation Permit

**AVISOL:** Association of Villages in Solidarity (from the French *Association des villages solidaires*)

**CF:** Community Forest

**CIG:** Common Initiative Group

**CODEL:** Committee of Development of Lelen village

**CODEVIR:** Committee of Reunited Villages (from the French *Comité des villages réunis*)

**COMEAA:** Communities of Eden, Ando'o and Assadam

**EIA:** Environmental Impact Assessment

**EIG:** Economic Interest Group

**ESIA:** Environmental and Social Impact Assessment

**FAO:** Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

**FLEGT-VPA:** Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade – Volunteer Partnership Agreement

**MINEF:** Ministry of the Environment and Forestry

**MINEP:** Ministry of the Environment and Nature Protection

**MINFOF:** Ministry of Forests and Wildlife

**NGO:** Non-Governmental Organisation

**NPFD:** Non-Permanent Forest Domain

**NTFP:** Non-Timber Forest Product

**PFD:** Permanent Forest Domain

# 1. Introduction

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The concept of community forestry was first developed by the FAO in 1978 and defined as any situation which intimately involves local people in a forestry activity<sup>1</sup>. The initiative strives for social equity while seeking to ensure the durability of forest resources; it aims to empower communities to take the lead in sustainable economic activities in order to reduce poverty, improve living conditions and ensure sustainable local development<sup>2</sup>.

In Cameroon, the concept was first brought in as part of the country's new forest policy of 1992, whose two main objectives were "to protect the environment and preserve natural resources" and "to involve [local] peoples in the conservation and management of forest resources with an aim to improve their living standards"<sup>3</sup>. In order to put these ambitious plans into effect, Law No. 94/01 of 20 January 1994 to lay down forestry, wildlife and fisheries regulations (the Forest Code) was approved by the National Assembly and enacted by the President, as was the Decree of Implementation No. 95-531 of 23 August 1995, laying down the procedure for implementing the forest regime. This decree defined Community Forests (CFs) as a portion of Non-Permanent Forest Estate (NPFE), given by the State to a community on the latter's request, following the development of a Simple Management Plan (SMP). Once a management agreement is signed by the village community and the administration responsible for forests, the

SMP will dictate the management of said portion of NPFE. The community is responsible for managing the forest (whose area may not exceed 5,000 ha), with technical assistance from the forest administration. The rotation period in a CF is 25 years, the duration of the management agreement signed by the community and the forest administration.

Since community forestry was implemented in 1997 through pilot initiatives such as "Sustainable Development Support in the Lomié/Dja region" (SDDL) by the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), a number of CFs have been established. According to data from MINFOF,<sup>4</sup> 182 CFs were in operation or had an Annual Exploitation Permit<sup>5</sup> by 2016, covering a total area of 28,272.<sup>5</sup> ha of forest.

However, despite grand promises made initially and the popularity of CFs amongst local and indigenous forest communities, the impacts have been devastating: local development to promote peoples' welfare, the drive behind this initiative, has instead led to protracted conflicts within CF-owning communities. Illegal logging has led to corruption. CFs have thus become one of the obstacles in implementing the targets of the FLEGT Voluntary Partnership Agreement (FLEGT-VPA)<sup>6</sup> signed by the Republic of Cameroon and the European Union in October 2010, and in effect since December 2011 following ratifications and notifications from both parties.

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1 FAO, 1991 : « Foresterie communautaire : Un examen de dix ans d'activités ». FAO, Rome

2 FOMOU Ghislain, VANDENHAUTE Marc et FEUJIO De Souza: "Légalité et traçabilité des bois des forêts communautaires du Haut-Nyong (Cameroun) ». FAO, 54p.

3 Cecilia JULVE, Cédric VERMEULEN: "Bilan de dix années de foresterie communautaire en périphérie de la Réserve de Faune du Dja au Cameroun ». Communication présentée à l'atelier « Concilier les priorités de conservation des aires protégées et de développement local : leçons apprises, expériences et perspectives en Afrique Centrale », Sao-Tomé, 29 septembre- 2 octobre 2008.

4 Cf. MINFOF : « Secteur forestier et faunique au Cameroun. 47pp. Edition 2017

5 En 2016, les statistiques du MINFOF indiquaient: **683** demandes d'attribution enregistrées depuis le début du processus en 1997 ; **193** FC sont en convention provisoire et **274** FC sont en convention définitive.

6 FOMOU Ghislain, VANDENHAUTE Marc et FEUJIO De Souza: "Légalité et traçabilité des bois des forêts communautaires du Haut-Nyong (Cameroun) ». FAO, 54p.



We must now ask the question: why hasn't it worked? Several studies have revealed a series of constraints and challenges in the process. Although these studies aim to present the entire picture, it should be noted that they only give a general overview and do not provide insight on how the process impacts local and indigenous communities. In the case of the latter, it has meant marginalisation, both from their natural neighbours the Bantus but also from the State, whose laws and institutions are often ineffective at guaranteeing the rights of indigenous peoples to access and manage the natural resources they depend on to survive.

After several years of experience, it has become clear that community forestry offers far more opportunities than previously thought, but that these have not yet been sufficiently explored. For example, community forestry can play a critical role in reforestation and conservation, as well as allow for the exploitation of resources other than timber; this could bring about tangible development within local and indigenous communities that are CF beneficiaries<sup>7</sup>.

The overall aim of this note is to gather perceptions held by local and indigenous communities currently managing, or setting up, community forests in Cameroon. The note aims to highlight issues regarding the process of establishing community forests and how much control communities have in the forests' management and governance. Recommendations, as proposed by said communities, are also presented. More specific aims include:

- To provide a situational analysis of the FC process (the creation phase, exploitation, investment, etc.) in order to identify the positive aspects and the constraints as seen by forest peoples;
- To compile a list of recommendations based on forest peoples' wishes, reflecting the role they would like CFs to play for them;
- To make their voices heard by policy-makers and other development partners in future advocacy work.

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<sup>7</sup> Leste NYEMGA WO-NDONG, sous la supervision de Christel Régis PRISO E.L. et Samuel NGUIFFO 2018: « Processus de révision d'un Plan Simple de Gestion. Guide simplifié à usage communautaire » CED et Fern, 36P. Ced





## 2. Methodology

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The methods employed were suited to the nature of the study.

A review of specialised documentation on community forestry was conducted at the outset, allowing for in-depth analysis of reports, legal documents and other sources. The review was carried out by employing typical methods of studying natural resources in relation with communities. A multidisciplinary approach was used. By examining anthropological, cultural and religious, socio-economic, and legal aspects (among others), the note takes account of the customary and traditional relationship that local and indigenous communities have with the forest.

To achieve this, focus group and individual interviews were conducted following a structured interview guide written in advance. Participants were able to discuss whatever topics took their interest, and their words were noted down, with nothing added that could alter the meaning or sentiment conveyed. The interviews were carried out systematically with participants divided into three social groups: men, women and children.

Data collection occurred in seven of Cameroon's subdivisions spread throughout four divisions, namely:

- Haut Nyong : Lomié et Ngoyla
- Dja et Lobo : Mintom et Djoum
- Boumba et Ngoko : Moloundou
- Océan : Bipindi et Lokoundjé

The communities chosen for interview within these areas were selected to represent three categories: communities with a long-standing CF (established 1997-2009), communities in the early stages of CF management (established 2010-2016), and communities currently establishing a CF.









### 3. Legal, regulatory, political and institutional framework of community forestry in Cameroon

#### 3.1. Legal and regulatory framework: advances made in the community forest process in Cameroon

The Forest Code of 1994 promoted the involvement of new stakeholders in the management of forest and wildlife resources. This was seen with co-management systems between the State and local riverside peoples in protected areas, with forest tax retrocession for communes and communities, and the creation and management of communal and community forests.

Article 37 (3) of the Forest Code states that any forest product acquired through the exploitation of community forests is wholly owned by the village community in question. The community is to be provided with free technical assistance from the forest administration (art. 37 (1)). It should nonetheless be noted that the State solely transfers the management of the forest, not the land itself, to the community. The 1995 Decree of Implementation<sup>8</sup>

specifies that forests eligible to enter into a community forest management agreement are those situated adjacent or near to one or multiple communities who conduct their activities in the forest in question (art 27 (2)), and that when allocating any potential community forest, priority will be given to the nearest neighbouring community (art 27 (3)). Monitoring a community forest will therefore primarily be the responsibility of the community in question (art 32 (2)). When referring to exploitation, the legislator did not take into account artisanal aspects or the low financial capacity of communities compared to wealthier logging stakeholders. Article 54 of the Forest Code states that logging is to be conducted on behalf of the community concerned, under State management, by the sale of standing volume, by individual authorisation or by permit, in accordance with the management plan approved by forestry services.



<sup>8</sup> Décret n° 95/531/PM du 23 août 1995 fixant les modalités d'application du régime des forêts

More recent regulatory provisions for community forestry<sup>9</sup> include:

- Circular letter No0677/LC/MINEF/DF/CFC of 23 February 2001 placing a cap on industrial logging in community forests;
- Ministerial order No0518/MINEF/CAB of 21 December 2001 giving priority to neighbouring village communities for attribution of any forest that may be developed into a community forest. This order supplements the Forest Code of 1994 by introducing pre-emptive rights giving communities priority to establish community forests over the sale of standing volume in the same area;
- Ministerial decision No1985/D/MINEF/SG/CFC of 26 June 2002 setting out practical modalities for controlled/selective felling within the framework of the establishment of Simple Management Plans (SMP) for Community Forests;
- Manual of Procedures for the Acquisition and Norms for Management of Community Forests written up in 1998 and revised in February 2009 introducing the following measures:
  - The provision of early stage information and awareness-raising;
  - Efforts to represent all social components in the process with the aim of limiting conflict;
  - More specific detail on the management entity (organisation, different members' management roles, etc.);
  - Reduced file processing time;
  - The introduction of a tentative management agreement (two years) allowing to communities to carry out logging in the forest and self-finance the drawing up of an SMP;
  - The mechanised clearance of forest access trails (4m without right-of-way) and service trails (3m without right-of-way);
  - Allowing the use of agricultural machinery to transport products.

### 3.2. Political and institutional framework: tools to aid the community forest process

An analysis of the political and institutional aspects of community forestry in Cameroon involved observing tools for planning and regulating the process. Indeed, the policy and legislative framework behind the process has been essential to its existence. The updated procedures manual in 2009 introduced new elements to facilitate certain activities on the ground. Also of note, is the flexibility that MINEP has demonstrated regarding the development and evaluation of summary Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), given the high cost (which is far beyond village communities' financial capacities) and the low environmental impact of artisanal exploitation in community forests.



<sup>9</sup> Pascal Cuny : Etat des lieux de la foresterie communautaire et communale au Cameroun ». Tropenbos International, 2011



## 4. Major challenges faced in the community forest process

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Although the 1994 Forest Code has been seen as an innovative step towards decentralised forestry, conducive to the involvement of local stakeholders, it should be noted that it has not always been an easy law to apply in practice. While it is a significant achievement, constraints remain due to the consistently complex and cumbersome nature of the regulations in place.

### 4.1. No control for local and indigenous communities in the process

In all the communities consulted in the study, it was apparent that the forest is perceived as a fundamental part of villagers' lives, in which they find all the necessary elements for traditional medicine. The forest is their birthplace and primary source of livelihood.

**Ernest Adjina, a member of the ASDEBYM CF from Mbateka village in the Moloundou subdivision,** says with regret:

"Communities used to be able to move freely through the forest with no restriction. But now the forest has been divided up and things have changed." Having a community forest has allowed these communities to secure some of their land.

According to **the president of the Baka legal body "Bouma Bo Kpode" for CF of Nomedjoh village in Lomié subdivision:**

*"CFs have requirements that do not correspond with our way of life. This has made things complicated for us". He goes on to say: "We have no control in the CF process. All procedures for gaining a management agreement, the Simple Management Plan and so on, are unfamiliar to us and out of our hands. We are not even aware of our role in the association. It's all been done by NGOs."*

CF implementation requires the creation of a formal organisation representing all components of the community that can act in its name. Under current Cameroonian law, the four types of legal bodies are associations, cooperatives, Common Initiative Groups (CIGs) and Economic Interest Groups (EIGs). However, these bodies are poorly adapted to the social and administrative context of the area, often leading to weak ownership of CFs by local peoples. Another issue is the "infiltration" of CFs by external or internal elites, who control the benefits of CF management, sometimes for their sole profit. Some social groups face marginalisation, including indigenous forest peoples, women, and non-indigenous peoples, all of whom tend to be disadvantaged in the forest community process. Their needs are rarely considered in CF management, and they are seldom subject to fair or equitable benefits. This can lead to conflict between different social groups.







## 4.2. Communities rarely initiating the process

Of the communities consulted in the study, only the communities of Eden, Ado'o and Assadam, which form the COMEAA CIG in Lomié subdivision, say they financed the creation of their CF. In most other cases the idea of establishing a community forest has come from initiatives external to the community. The process is often instigated by external elites and support NGOs. This regularly results in intra-community conflict over CF management.

Furthermore, factors such as communities' low financial capabilities, a lack of awareness regarding the process and limited road access have led to the involvement of external stakeholders who may have good intentions, but whose interests are not always aligned with communities'. Such communities often end up excluded from the process, which is controlled by their collaborator, and some are left with no documents to confirm CF status (such as a legalisation certificate from the legal body, tentative management agreement or SMP). This has been seen in the Ngoyla area, where one collaborator (a logging company) has a monopoly and is not allowing communities to negotiate fair and equitable contracts. **H.M. Evariste Ngouele, Chief of Lelen village and president of the CODEL CF in Ngoyla subdivision** says: "We keep getting misled, but we have no choice in the matter; we're obliged to go along with it".



## 4.3. A long, complex and expensive process

Establishing a community forest costs time, money and energy. Feedback gathered during community consultations has revealed that creating a CF – from the first stages of the process to the point at which forest resources can be exploited – takes at least five years, despite support from various projects. Expenses incurred during this period can exceed 8 million CFA francs (Julve et al., 2007). One reason behind the long wait and considerable expenses is the Simple Management Plan. Modelled on management plans for large forest concessions, it requires the involvement of specialised structures (such as consultants or NGOs) at prohibitive costs (Vermeulen et al., 2006). Renewing the annual operations certificate is no less expensive. The legislator did not adequately consider the significant differences between the two types of forest title (those intended for artisanal exploitation and those intended for industrial logging) and between the two types of stakeholder (deprived village communities and private operators), whose technical and financial capabilities are in no way comparable.

The **former president of AVISOL's joint CF and current president of the Comité Paysan-Forêts de Lomié 1**, says of the CF allocation process: "It's like giving someone a goat but keeping hold of the rope, as we say here. It's not right! The only reason all these CF documents need to be renewed is so that MINFOF can make money; there is no pricing scale for document renewal. They'll charge however much they think they can get out of you." **Mr Alain Mimbob, manager of the COMEAA (Committee for Eden, Ado'o and Assadam) Badjoe Consortium's CIG**, adds: "What we are seeing is the State trying to regain control of the forest. We are spending a lot of money and energy that we may never get back. The process involves a number of costs, many of which exceed our capacity as villagers. At this point there is no difference made between communities and large logging companies. How can it be that a CF created in an impoverished area always requires such a large sum of money?"

Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) conducted at various stages of the process are estimated (Julve et al., 2007) to carry an overall cost of 10 million CFA francs (including



5 million CFA francs for administrative file processing fees). This situation has led to an increase in illegal logging, with communities unable to afford legal CFs (Julve et al., 2007). The long-winded task of completing the process has served to dent communities' enthusiasm and trust. Regrettably, the 2009 reform to the Procedures Manual has thus far been unsuccessful in resolving this issue.

#### 4.4. Difficulties with governance and revenue management

CF-owning communities face significant problems with governance and little transparency in the community forest accounting process. The latter is attributable to a training gap in revenue management, often coupled with a complete lack of communication between the managing body and the community. The withholding of information has been used to assert power. These issues have brought about numerous conflicts within communities, sometimes disrupting exploitation activities. In the eyes of **Mr Motto Séraphin, former Forest Operations Manager (FOM) of CODVIR's joint CF in Lomié subdivision**: "We lost our community when the money came along, because it turned us all into capitalists." Furthermore, the management roles assigned to populations are not within their capabilities. Communities have stated that planning the actions of the Simple Management Plan is often at odds with the wishes of the community.

#### 4.5. What about women and indigenous peoples?

As in other countries of the Congo Basin, the women of Cameroon's forests play a significant role in forest management, be it through traditional agroforestry practices or gathering fuel wood and Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) for food, livestock feed, medicine or to generate income. The situation on the ground shows that women are as actively engaged as men in management, forest use and forest resource activities, with differing activities according to gender. Nevertheless, despite holding a well-defined role, women remain in a position where they are seen as a workforce rather than key players in forest resource management<sup>10</sup>. Women have become increasingly involved in the collection and processing of NTFPs, aided by the establishment of specific groups within legal bodies. They are also visible in the office, generally in treasurer roles. While the conditions imposed by supporting structures on the creation of CFs have been behind this set-up, it must be noted that, in practice, women's roles are negligible because easily influenced.



<sup>10</sup> Eulalie GUILLAUME, 2018 : « La foresterie communautaire : Opportunité ou chimère pour les femmes du Bassin du Congo ». Fern, 28P.

## 5. Suggested improvements

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In order to improve the community forestry process, communities have listed the following recommendations:

We, the communities, wish for the following:

- Support in terms of technical facilities, equipment, etc. to enable better management of our CFs;
- Capacity building (technical, organisational and financial): when the CF functions as it should, young people are no longer out of work and our villages see a rise in employment.;
- That NGOs, the administration (both local and central), the private sector etc. really help communities to develop. This means becoming aware of the realities that communities live in and adjusting their actions accordingly;
- For the State to reduce procedural delays and develop flexible and community-appropriate funding schemes;
- Most communities are not able to harness the potential of their forests because others have operated on our behalf (drawing up inventories, conducting socio-economic surveys, submitting files etc.). We would like our collaborators not to act in our place, but to allow us to work at our own pace and in accordance with local realities;
- For the State to expand the creation of CFs to spaces where usage rights on land recognised as traditional to communities overlap with timber and agricultural concessions, mining areas etc.
- Although the partnership agreement signed between a community (by its representative legal body) and an economic operator is a matter for the private domain, we wish for the State to provide a third party monitoring mechanism, as communities do not always have a strong understanding of negotiation techniques, and are constantly misled as a consequence;
- For document renewal not to be systematically enforced after the expiry periods currently in place (e.g. five years for SMP, one year for waybill, AEP, etc.). Exploitation in CFs cannot be effective while communities are being doubly punished: they do have sufficient time to exploit the forest or gain any benefits from it and are then forced to find funds to cover renewal costs before any changes can be made in the forest.
- For MINFOF to become a signatory of the Management Agreement, allowing the Prefect's administrative barriers to be sidestepped.
- To further consider ways of providing more effective free technical assistance, which remains very difficult to implement on the ground.





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