

# Community conservation in Cameroon: Approaches, challenges and insights through the lens of the national legal framework, practice and stakeholder perceptions

The future of conservation in the territories of life of the  
Baka indigenous forest people of Ngoyla and sacred forest groves



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## Acronyms and abbreviations

<b>COVILAB</b>	Village anti-poaching committee
<b>CoZIC</b>	Co-Managed hunting area
<b>IUCN</b>	International Union for Conservation of Nature
<b>MINATD</b>	Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation
<b>MINDCAF</b>	Ministry of State Property, Surveys and Land Tenure
<b>MINEPDED</b>	Ministry of Environment, Nature Protection and Sustainable Development
<b>ZICGC</b>	Community-managed hunting area
<b>MINFI</b>	Ministry of Finance
<b>MINFOF</b>	Ministry of Forests and Wildlife
<b>TCGC</b>	Community-managed hunting territory
<b>TCC</b>	Community hunting territory

## Glossary

**Protected area:** “A protected area is a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.” This definition is based on the proceedings of the IUCN Almeria Conference, 2007 (IUCN, 2012).

**Bantu:** A generic term for members of ethnic groups other than indigenous forest peoples. It is used by both local and indigenous communities. Officially, Bantu designates a group of ethnicities, including Pygmy peoples. They are distinct from semi-Bantu and Sudanese peoples (see <https://www.prc.cm/en/cameroon>). However, in local forest community tradition, the term Bantu usually refers to non-indigenous forest communities. These communities make up the dominant social group.

**Forest biodiversity:** The variability among living organisms in terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part. This includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems (Convention on Biological Diversity, Article 2).

**Tree felling:** The removal of large trees or shrubs. This is different from deforestation because only some of the woody vegetation is removed.

**Indigenous peoples:** The term indigenous peoples (peuples autochtones) in Cameroon refers to the Mbororos communities (indigenous peoples of the savannahs) and the Pygmy or indigenous forest peoples.

They are the descendants of the earliest inhabitants of their lands and have ways of life considerably different from those of mainstream society. Their cultures are threatened with extinction; their ways of life depend on the recognition of their land rights and their rights to other traditional natural resources.

Indigenous peoples face discrimination from dominant social groups. They also face political and social marginalisation, and subjugation through political and economic systems that are designed with the interests and activities of the national majority in mind. They often live in hard-to-reach areas and self-identify as indigenous peoples.

**Indigenous forest peoples:** Indigenous peoples who have historically lived exclusively in the forest and whose livelihoods depend exclusively on the forest. In Cameroon, three groups match this definition: the Baka, Bakola or Bagéyli, and Bedzan.

**Conservation of biodiversity:** The act of conserving biodiversity or the environment. It has two complementary facets: protecting nature from damage or destruction and preventing natural resources from being wasted.

**Customary land rights:** The recognised right of communities to own the lands, territories and resources that they have traditionally owned, used or occupied. This includes lands owned under customary law on which their physical or cultural survival depends, whether acquired or traditionally owned, used and occupied, and whether or not they hold the land title.

**Collective land tenure:** The system practised by most rural African communities to assert and organise their ownership, enjoyment and access to land, and to govern its use and transfer. Unlike top-down land tenure regimes, the rules of customary tenure are rooted in the practices of a given community and are upheld by the community itself, rather than by the state or national law (statutory land tenure).

Although the rules followed by a specific community are known as customary law, they rarely apply outside that community. Customary land tenure is as much a social system as a legal code. This goes some way to explaining its resilience, continuity and flexibility. This is crucial for customary landowners.

**Camp:** A village occupied by the indigenous forest peoples of Cameroon, whether or not it is legally recognised.

**Territory of life:** The homogeneous physical ecosystem where there is a long history of human occupation, use and cultural ties.

**Use rights:** The rights of local communities to take unprotected forest resources for personal use and self-consumption. In principle, under the law, forest resource use rights differ from commercial rights over forest resources, which require a commercial logging or collection permit specifying species and quotas.

**Customary law:** The set of customs, norms, uses and beliefs that are accepted as the mandatory rules of conduct in village and/or specific ethnic communities.

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## Introduction

The vital balance between the planet and human beings directly depends on the conservation of biological diversity, also called biodiversity.<sup>1</sup> The Convention on Biological Diversity, Article 2, defines biodiversity as:

The variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems. (United Nations, 1992)

When the scientific community recognised massive biodiversity loss as a crisis in the early 1980s, a new discipline was born: conservation biology.<sup>2</sup> At the 1992 Rio Conference, governments came together to agree international standards for an approach to conservation that is inclusive of human activity and that:

1. involves local and indigenous communities;
2. promotes indigenous knowledge and practices;
3. transfers conservation decision-making, resources and powers from central government to local and indigenous communities and decentralised authorities (municipalities, regions).

Since the 1980s, conservation efforts in developing countries have sought to reconcile the aims of conservation biology and social development. Many approaches have been tried. However, integrated conservation centred around protected areas remains the model favoured by national policies and strategies (Busquet, 2006; Clarke, 2019).

There are a variety of integrated conservation approaches, which all share the goal of reconciling conservation and development. Some advocate for local communities to participate as active stakeholders or for governments to transfer control over natural resources to communities and other actors (Brooks et al., 2013).

However, other approaches to conservation are emerging. Such approaches seek to preserve biodiversity by enabling the people who have for generations conserved biodiversity on their lands naturally through their practices to continue to do so. They focus on introducing measures and making resources available to this end. Research and experience have made it increasingly clear that community conservation more effectively protects biodiversity and improves socio-economic wellbeing in the long term (Dawson et al., 2021).

Since acceding to the Rio Conventions,<sup>3</sup> Cameroon has adopted a number of texts favourable to local and indigenous communities' participation in the sustainable management of natural resources and community conservation. They include: Act No. 96/12 of 5 August 1996 on the framework act on environmental management, Act No. 94/01 of 20 January on forest, wildlife and fisheries management, Act No. 2011/008 of 6 May 2011 on guidelines for land use planning and sustainable development, and their implementing decrees.

As part of this strategy, over recent years, the Government of Cameroon has also negotiated memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with the Baka communities affected by some protected areas, in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). These agreements aim to allow the Baka indigenous people to retain or regain access to their lands and resources in protected areas for their traditional activities and sustainable use (Clarke, 2019).

Cameroon's national conservation programmes, like those of other developing countries, still favour the creation of protected areas as the main method of biodiversity conservation, even though the creation of these areas leads to indigenous forest peoples being evicted from their lands and prevented from accessing their resources, with disastrous consequences (Clarke, 2019).

The rich biodiversity of Cameroon's forest ecosystems is world renowned. These ecosystems are also home to peoples who have lived there for centuries. In many cases, these peoples have been able to preserve islands of biodiversity around their communities through their use of the land, despite a range of challenges and pressures.

Against this backdrop, this study analyses how far the Cameroonian legal framework (and government policy) takes account of community conservation. It then examines stakeholder perceptions of community conservation initiatives. Finally, it identifies the main features of community conservation practice in Cameroon.

This study is part of the EU-funded Keta project, implemented by Forest Peoples Programme and its Cameroonian partner, Association Okani, based in south-east Cameroon. Keta means "dream" in the Baka language.

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1 Préservation de la biodiversité végétale : Un enjeu planétaire ! | Klorane Botanical Foundation

2 BIODIVERSITÉ, Conservation et gestion de la biodiversité - Encyclopædia Universalis

3 The Conventions on Biological Diversity, Climate Change, and Desertification, adopted following the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development.

## Theoretical foundations and key concepts

Conservation can be understood as combining sustainable activities with the protection of nature. Although not universally accepted, this approach to conservation includes protection through human intervention and aims to limit the use of natural resources (Depraz, 2013). Referring to American forester and politician Grifffort Penchot (1865-1946), Depraz asserts that conservation promotes the measured management of nature, conscious of natural equilibriums and respectful of cycles of environmental renewal, through the judicious use of resources. Conservation is akin to preservation, which is not protection strictly speaking; rather it involves land and natural resource management that is mindful of social and other issues.

In this study, we understand “community conservation” as the combination of practices that local populations have implemented to conserve forest biodiversity over several generations. These practices are underpinned by traditional or cultural rules. Community conservation activities may be implemented by local communities independently or in partnership with other actors (government, development agencies, researchers, etc.). We understand community conservation as a practice rooted in a social world in stable equilibrium, with this equilibrium the result of strong social consensus around a social value system (Delas, Milly, & Bruno, 2015).

This approach is consistent with arguments for community conservation as a model for biodiversity conservation (Sandbrook, 2015). It also supports the idea that indigenous forest peoples following the norms and customs of their communities and their traditional territories of life constitute a harmonious whole.

This contrasts with the prevailing conservation model under which governments aim to protect resources and preserve them for scientific study by creating restricted (or even prohibited) areas on land occupied or used by indigenous peoples. Yet conservation can indeed be a consequence of communities’ sustainable natural resource management.

### Objectives of the study

#### *Overarching objectives*

The overarching aim of this study is to analyse the existing legal framework in Cameroon and the traditional models of indigenous peoples and local communities that promote community conservation. The study is focused on the south-east of the country.

#### *Specific objectives*

Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Identify and analyse the legal instruments that support community conservation in Cameroon and their limits.
2. Identify and analyse the legal instruments that support community management of the territories of life of indigenous forest peoples and local communities in Cameroon and their limits.
3. Document the work and good practices of stakeholders in support of community conservation.
4. Map the traditional practices of the Baka people in Assoumindeleh, Se’eh, Mabam, Djadom, Ndimako and Makamakouma.
5. Analyse perceptions of the effects of Baka traditional practices on biodiversity conservation, forest management, living standards and ways of life in the Djoko community forest (in Asoumindeleh and Se’eh in particular).
6. Propose courses of action and legal reforms to support community conservation.

## Methodology

### *Study area*

This study covers the districts of Ngoyla and Mintom in the East and South regions of Cameroon respectively. Spanning an area of 4,382 km<sup>2</sup>, Ngoyla is a district of 6,000 inhabitants located in Haut-Nyong. It is subdivided into 29 villages where the population is mainly made up of Bantu tribes, primarily the Ndjem, Maka, Nzime and Bamoun. In the same area, indigenous forest people inhabit at least seven Baka camps.<sup>4</sup>

Mintom, which borders Ngoyla to the east, covers an area of 11,235 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>5</sup> It has an estimated population of over 11,000, mainly from Bantu tribes such as the Fang, Eton, Ewondo, Bamileke, Bamoun and Foulbe, with an indigenous Baka minority who live in 24 camps.<sup>6</sup>

These two areas have high natural resource potential, particularly forest resources. The landscape is characterised by alternating dense evergreen rainforest and semi-deciduous forest. The forests of Ngoyla and Mintom are home to dozens of species and a high diversity of wildlife. These resources are central to the livelihoods of local communities and indigenous people.

Since 2012, many projects have been announced or implemented in the study area. Their negative impacts could be irreversible for the Baka indigenous forest people, if adequate measures are not adopted and implemented soon. These projects include: the construction of transport and energy infrastructure, land clearing for roads, industrial mine exploration and exploitation, gold mining, industrial logging, and the creation of the Ngoyla Wildlife Reserve.

### *Approach*

Our approach combined documentary research, surveys, observation and analysis.

(1) Our documentary research provided additional context and information on community conservation and community forest management initiatives in Cameroon. It also allowed us to develop the theoretical foundations of the study. It allowed us to analyse the legal framework governing community forest conservation and how indigenous forest peoples' territories of life are managed in Cameroon. (2) By studying the relationships between perceptions and actions, we were able to describe the main features of conservation in the Djoko Community Forest and its surrounding area. We combined surveys and observation to describe community conservation as practised by the Baka indigenous people of south-east Cameroon (Ngoyla and Mintom). This approach also allowed us to analyse stakeholder perceptions of the conservation and management of community forests by the Baka and other stakeholders from a practical point of view.

Our findings allowed us to:

- propose avenues for legal reform to facilitate the community conservation of the Baka indigenous forest people's territories of life and sacred forest groves in Cameroon;
- propose short and medium-term measures to promote community conservation in Cameroon.

### *Data collection and analysis*

We selected survey respondents using stratified purposive sampling. We identified the study population using the snowball method. This method identifies additional survey respondents through existing stratified survey respondents. When using this technique, the study population is considered representative once the saturation point is reached. Saturation occurs when respondents give similar answers during the interviews, by stratum and question.

We conducted the surveys via guided interviews. We surveyed representatives of the bodies and institutions identified for each stratum. To this end, we visited these bodies and selected individuals to interview based on their organisational structure. When surveying local communities and indigenous people, we followed local customs when approaching the community and then interviewed individuals in each segment or stratum: men, women, young people, indigenous people and local communities.

We held stratum and segment-based focus groups to feedback and cross-check the data. We interviewed a total of 109 people and held eight focus groups. Descriptive statistics (mean, sum, frequency, percentage) were used to analyse the perception data. We used SPSS 17 and Microsoft Excel software to analyse the survey data.

### *Limitations of the study*

We designed this study around our analysis of the legal framework on the one hand and our meso-ecosystemic analysis of practices and perceptions on the other. The limited time and resources available prevented us from conducting a detailed comparative analysis of the nature and condition of the animal and plant populations in the Baka communities' territories of life and in adjoining protected areas with the same spatio-temporal characteristics.

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4 Ngoyla commune, Communal Development Plan, National Participatory Development Programme, May 2012, p. 17.

5 Mintom commune, Communal Development Plan, National Participatory Development Programme, October 2015, p. 27.

6 Mintom commune, Communal Development Plan, p. 39.

## Findings

### Part 1: Legal framework applicable to community conservation and community management of the territories of life of indigenous peoples and local communities in forest areas in Cameroon

Objective 2 of Cameroon's forestry policy, adopted in 1993, reads as follows: "Improve people's participation in the conservation and management of forest resources, to enable these resources to help raise their standard of living."<sup>7</sup> The government has sought to achieve this objective, including its conservation dimension, mainly through community forestry and community-managed hunting territories. There are, however, many gaps in the existing legal framework.

#### 1.1. Community forests and community-managed hunting territories as community conservation mechanisms within the meaning of the law<sup>8</sup>

Our analysis of the existing legislation identified provisions that could be seen as conducive to community conservation, whether in the form of community forestry or community-managed hunting territories.

##### 1.1.1. Community forests: A legally recognised community conservation model

Cameroon's legislation on forests and wildlife excludes communities, including indigenous forest peoples, from the governance of state forests. It designates community forests as mechanisms for conservation, among other purposes, and in so doing, enshrines community forests as instruments of community conservation.

###### 1.1.1.1. Conservation as a stated objective

According to Article 3(16) of the Decree implementing the rules on forest management, a community forest management agreement may pursue forest management, conservation or commercial exploitation in the interest of the community concerned as its objective. A simple management plan then specifies the activities to be carried out to this end.

The Manual of Procedures on the Designation and Rules governing the Management of Community Forests (Manuel des procédures d'attribution et des normes de gestion des forêts communautaires - Manual of Procedures) states that a forest may be managed for a single purpose.<sup>9</sup> The Manual of Procedures also provides guidance on the resources that can be protected by the communities, such as animal or plant species, water sources or aquifers, and soils.

###### 1.1.1.2. Conservation in community forests: An incidental objective?

The legal framework provides for the implementation of conservation initiatives in community forests. However, this is a secondary objective assigned to communities to compensate for the degradation of vegetation cover caused by the commercial exploitation of these forests, which is automatically given priority. This is, at least, one interpretation of paragraph 7.9 of the *Manual of Procedures*.

Under Article 32(2) of the Decree implementing the rules on forest management, community forest monitoring is the responsibility of the community, suggesting that the community is responsible for investigating and reporting infringements to the forest administration. This role is reiterated in the *Manual of Procedures* (paragraph 8.1). The community assigned to the forest therefore plays a key role, which reinforces the community's position as an agent of community conservation.

##### 1.1.2. Community-managed hunting territories as mechanisms for community conservation

Under Article 2(18) of the Decree implementing the rules on forest management, a "hunting territory" is an area where hunting activities are authorised and carried out in accordance with the regulations in force. A community-managed hunting territory is an area of state forest that the government has granted to village communities to carry out organised hunting activities.<sup>10</sup> There are three types of community-managed hunting territory: community hunting territories (TCC); community-managed hunting areas (ZICGC); and co-managed hunting areas (CoZIC).

###### 1.1.2.1. Community hunting territories

Under Article 2(19) of the Decree implementing the rules on wildlife management, a community hunting territory (TCC) is a hunting territory in a non-permanent state forest of up to 5,000 hectares, subject to a management agreement between a local community and the public administration responsible for wildlife. The community is free, under Article 27(2) of this decree, to assign objectives to the hunting territory requested. The community may also choose to pursue conservation, if there is space available and significant wildlife potential.<sup>11</sup>

7 Manual of Procedures on the Designation and Rules governing the Management of Community Forests, p. 1.

8 For the purposes of this study, the law is understood in the broad sense of the legislation in force and the Forestry Act refers to Act No. 94/01 of 20 January 1994 on forest, wildlife and fisheries management.

9 See 6.1.2 on the chapters of a simple management plan for a community forest.

10 Republic of Cameroon, Ministry for Forests and Wildlife (MINFOF). (2012). Establishment of community-managed hunting territories: lessons learned from the Sud-Est technical operation unit, p. 8.

11 MINFOF (2012), p. 10.

When setting up a community hunting territory, the parties must adopt a management agreement. The management agreement may address any specific commercial rights over forest resources. Such commercial rights may not be granted as part of use rights under the 1994 Forestry Act. Indeed, Decree No. 95/531/PM of 23 August 1995 implementing the rules on forest management specifies:

Article 26.

(1) In state forests, local populations retain their use rights, that is, the rights to carry out their traditional activities in these forests, such as the collection of secondary forest products, in particular raffia, palm, bamboo, rattan or food products and firewood.

(2) To meet their domestic needs, in particular for firewood and construction wood, the local populations may cut down the number of trees needed for this purpose. They will be required to justify their use during forest monitoring activities. Under no circumstances may they sell or trade the timber from these trees.

Similarly, Article 4(1) of Decree No. 95/466/PM of 20 July 1995 implementing the rules on wildlife management states that use rights concern:

The exploitation of forest, wildlife or fishery products by local communities for personal use. However, with the exception of wildlife reserves, sanctuaries and buffer zones where they may be granted, use rights do not apply to wildlife reserves, national parks, zoos or game ranches.

Article 24 of this decree further states:

(1) Traditional hunting is permitted throughout the territory, except on third-party property and in protected areas where it is subject to special regulations that take account of the development plan for the area.

(2) It is permitted to hunt rodents, small reptiles, birds and other class-C animals, for which the Minister for Wildlife will produce a list and set the quota.

(3) The products of traditional hunting must be used exclusively for food and may not be sold under any circumstances.

Community hunting territories offer better guarantees and greater legal certainty than are enjoyed by communities on the basis of use rights alone. Community hunting territories give communities greater control over the land they are assigned and its biological diversity, subject to legal prohibitions.

#### *1.1.2.2. Community-managed hunting areas (ZICGC)*

Like general hunting areas (ZIC), community-managed hunting areas (ZICGC) can be located in permanent state forests. Given the central role that permanent forests play in Cameroon's conservation landscape, it is noteworthy that communities are permitted to manage hunting areas here. However, community management is not provided for in the legislation, but is instead a question of good administrative practice.

ZICGCs are easily confused with ZICs because applicants must follow a similar process to create both types of area. Like for ZICs, the Minister for Wildlife must issue an order approving the creation of a community-managed hunting area, after consulting the Prime Minister.<sup>12</sup> However, unlike ZICs, a community-managed hunting area is entrusted to the community rather than to commercial hunting guides.

#### *1.1.2.3. Co-managed hunting areas (CoZIG)*

Although there is no specific legal basis for the creation of CoZIC, pursuant to Article 24 of the Forestry Act, ZICs not subject to a lease may be assigned to communities on their request for "the rational management of wildlife resources and the use of the financial income for local development". To acquire a co-managed hunting area, a beneficiary community must sign an agreement with the state, with provisions on equitable benefit sharing.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> MINFOF (2012), p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> MINFOF (2012), p. 9.

## 1.2 Weaknesses in the legal framework for community conservation

Weaknesses in the legal framework for community conservation relate both to its content and its form.

### 1.2.1. Weaknesses in the legal framework for community conservation: Content

#### 1.2.1.1. *The sidelining of traditional land tenure in the legal framework for community conservation in Cameroon*

Article 41 of the Decree implementing the rules on wildlife management requires hunting permit holders to respect or preserve the knowledge, techniques and practices of local communities and traditional ways of life that are conducive to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. Despite this requirement, Cameroon's rules on forest and wildlife management tend to accord lower priority to the protection of indigenous forest peoples' traditional tenure arrangements.

To illustrate, under Article 4 of Decree No. 95/466/PM of 20 July 1995 implementing the rules on wildlife management, the legislation grants a personal right to use resources for self-consumption. Yet the indigenous forest peoples' traditional tenure arrangements allow for trade, such as through bartering or commercial exchange for subsistence needs subject to traditional rules that seek to conserve forest resources. These indigenous tenure arrangements are part of a collective, community-based approach that is perfectly aligned with the sustainability requirements of sound forest governance.

#### 1.2.1.2. *The strong economic motivation behind community forests and community-managed hunting territories*

While the existing legal framework does recognise that community forests may be assigned conservation objectives, the legislation is primarily geared towards the creation of community forests for economic purposes, as a way to improve the living conditions of the beneficiary communities. It follows that seven of the nine<sup>14</sup> activities described in the Manual of Procedures relate to economic activities, with conservation only briefly mentioned.

In the same vein, in reference to the forestry policy, paragraph 1.3.1 of the Manual of Procedures lays the groundwork for agricultural, herding and other income-generating activities in community forests, with the income generated earmarked for community development.

Attempts to conserve forest biodiversity in community forests should be mindful of how community forests are conceptualised in the 1994 Forestry Act. The Act presents community forests primarily as a source of income for the community and as a tool for community development. Conservation, however, does not necessarily involve development in the sense of communities becoming "modern" societies.

Article 7 of Joint Order No. 0000076/MINATD/MINFI/MINFOF of 26 July 2012 establishing the arrangements for planning, using and monitoring income from the exploitation of forest and wildlife resources applies to communes and local village communities. It specifies that income generated from the exploitation of community forests belongs in its entirety to the community and must be managed by the community's association or legal entity in accordance with the simple management plan.

The range of potential objectives that community forests can be assigned under Cameroon's legislation opens a Pandora's box of options. This can lead to community forests being used in myriad ways that do nothing to either protect or sustainably manage the forest. Such activities include planting monocultures, intensive and illegal hunting and logging, fraud, and slash-and-burn agriculture.

Community hunting territories seem to be designated based primarily on public authorities' desire to turn them into a source of income for the population.<sup>15</sup> The emphasis is therefore placed on forest resource exploitation as a way to generate income in community hunting territories and community forests. This is just one example of how the rights associated with these two categories diverge from the prerogatives inherent in use rights. Under Article 8 of Act No. 94/01, holders of use rights may not profit from forest, wildlife or fishery products collected when exercising these rights.

#### 1.2.1.3. *The legal framework for conservation: Burdensome prohibitions for indigenous forest peoples*

Although communities' can in principle access state forests under Article 26 of the Forestry Act,<sup>16</sup> their enjoyment of use rights should be absolute in non-permanent state forests. Here indigenous forest peoples' have the greatest freedom to practice the ways of life that have conserved biodiversity for millennia.

However, many restrictions are imposed on such areas. For example, under Article 24(2) of the Decree implementing the rules on wildlife management, traditional hunting is authorised only for rodents, small reptiles, birds and class-C animals, for which the Minister for Wildlife provides a list and sets a quota. Similarly, if the government decides to protect a tree species pursuant to Article 43 of the Forestry Act, communities in general and indigenous forest peoples in particular are deprived of the right to use it for any purpose.

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14 Exercise of use rights; sale of timber; management; operating permits; personal felling licences; commercial harvesting of non-timber forest products; commercial exploitation of wildlife products; movement of products from community forests; conservation and forestry operations.

15 MINFOF (2012), p. 4.

16 Likewise, Article 9 of the Annex to Decision No. 0108/D/MINEF/CAB of 9 February 1998 applying the rules for forestry interventions in the Republic of Cameroon restricts communities' access to permanent forests, particularly, when they are of biophysical or social interest.

These restrictions represent missed opportunities for the legislation to promote community conservation. Indeed, the legislation seems to assume that local communities, including indigenous forest peoples, will use natural resources unsustainably. This is evidenced by Article 9 of the Annex to the Decision implementing the rules on forest interventions in Cameroon, which states that “the exercise of use rights in a particular site of biophysical or social interest, designated and categorised by the administration, may be limited in the categorisation instrument”.<sup>17</sup>

This disregard for traditional knowledge is also linked to an overly broad understanding of use rights. Article 44 of the Decree implementing the rules on forest management contains a list of activities, such as crop and animal farming, hunting and firewood collection, some of which are not practised in the indigenous forest peoples’ cultures.

### **1.2.2. Weaknesses in the legal framework for community conservation: Form**

#### *1.2.2.1. State-centred governance*

Under Article 7 of Decree No.95/678/PM of 18 December 1995 establishing an indicative framework for land use in the southern forest area, the management of permanent and non-permanent state forests is the responsibility of the Minister for Forests. This provision is symptomatic of the government’s monopolistic control over forest governance.

Other examples of the government’s monopoly over forest resources can be found in the 1994 Forestry Act. Under Article 11, the government appears to be the sole actor responsible for protecting forests and wildlife, as well as the owner of all genetic resources under Article 12. Moreover, Article 43 of the Act grants the government discretion to place any species under protection as it sees fit, including in areas under concession.

One consequence of this approach is that indigenous forest peoples’ traditional ways of life are rejected, despite them being conducive to conservation. Respect for traditional ways of life relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity is provided for by law. However, most of the forests allocated for conservation are controlled by the state with the support of its technical and financial partners, who almost systematically exclude communities from the use of these forests.<sup>18</sup>

#### *1.2.2.2. Disregard for the potential role of communities in community conservation and weaknesses of the model of participation advocated by the Forestry Act*

Under Article 3 of the Framework act on environmental management, communities should contribute to the implementation of the national environmental policy. However, indigenous forest peoples and other local communities are granted little room for manoeuvre to conserve resources by applying their traditional knowledge, which would help preserve biodiversity.

Article 62 of the Framework act provides that preserving the country’s natural heritage is in the national interest. Decree No. 95/466/PM of 20 July 1995 implementing the rules on wildlife management and the 1994 Forestry Act work to strengthen the central role of state-managed protected areas in wildlife conservation. They also undervalue the conservation potential of indigenous forest peoples and other communities, who tend to plan their hunting activities around the availability of forest and wildlife resources and consider the needs of future generations.

The role of communities, including indigenous forest peoples, is mainly focused on secondary monitoring activities. Government institutions are still responsible for verification and enforcement when communities identify infringements. However, sectoral institutions’ areas of competence often overlap and they often fail to consult one another or work together.<sup>19</sup> Their remits have even been known to conflict.<sup>20</sup>

Community members who report infractions are barely involved at all in verification or enforcement activities. One respondent noted during our interviews that: “the reports made by communities often come to nothing”.

Monitoring is not usually a feature of the social framework of community conservation, which is instead based on sustainable use and prohibitions. In the context of community conservation, it is therefore necessary to focus on building resilience, maintaining or restoring ecological functions, and raising awareness to support sound management.

When it comes to participation, the 1994 Forestry Act and its implementing decrees tend to reject the existence of pre-existing community uses that can be practised in harmony with the forest. In so doing, they undermine the inclusivity of their approach, for example, by banning certain communities from accessing their sacred sites or hunting.

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17 This provision is inconsistent with the idea that this biophysical or social interest can be preserved by and for the indigenous community.

18 See Article 41(3), Decree implementing the rules on wildlife management.

19 For example, there are no joint Ministry of Environment, Nature Protection and Sustainable Development (MINEPDED) and Ministry for Forests and Wildlife (MINFOP) patrols to monitor forest biodiversity.

20 MINEPDED and MINFOP are used as illustrative examples in this study in relation to complaints related to community forests.

Article 64 of Act No. 96/12 of 5 August 1996 on the framework act on environmental management states that:

1. The sustainable use of Cameroon's biological diversity will be achieved, primarily, through: an inventory of existing species, in particular those threatened with extinction; the adoption of plans for the management of species and the preservation of their habitats; and the introduction of a system for regulating access to genetic resources.
2. The conservation of biodiversity through the protection of wildlife and plant life, and the creation and management of nature reserves and national parks will be governed by the laws and regulations in force.
3. The government may designate any part of the national territory as an environmentally protected area. Such an area will be subject to an environmental management plan.

#### *1.2.2.3. Procedural barriers affecting indigenous forest peoples*

The assignment of both community forests and community-managed hunting territories is subject to lengthy and burdensome procedures whose requirements indigenous forest people struggle to fulfil. Among other barriers, communities that want to be assigned a community forest must select one of four types of legal structure: association, cooperative, common initiative group, or economic interest grouping. Not all communities have the required technical skills to set these up.

The areas to be assigned must be mapped and their resources inventoried. This means recruiting experts and, therefore, represents a significant financial investment. The volume of documentation that communities have to produce also comes at a significant cost. However, the Baka people, who maintain their traditional ways of life, have no financial resources and are unable to mobilise the funds and technology that the law requires, even collectively. A case in point: the Manual of Procedures requires seven copies of the simple management plan and the final management agreement to be produced.

Communities must also contend with long delays linked, among other things, to the back and forth between the departmental delegation and the Ministry for Forests. The Ministry of State Property, Surveys and Land Tenure (MINDCAF) has been called on to play a more prominent role, with a view to securing indigenous land rights in conservation areas. However, land registration procedures are also expensive and time consuming.

The size of the area communities can be assigned as a community forest is limited and may not exceed 5,000 ha under the Forestry Act. However, because indigenous communities are legally allowed to create multiple legal entities, they could potentially increase this area by a factor of four.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, this scenario is unlikely given the multiple procedural barriers that each entity would face. The trend is, moreover, towards allocating land for mining, forestry, industrial agriculture and protected areas, among other purposes. There are already overlaps in several areas of the country in the absence of a genuinely inclusive and joined-up approach.

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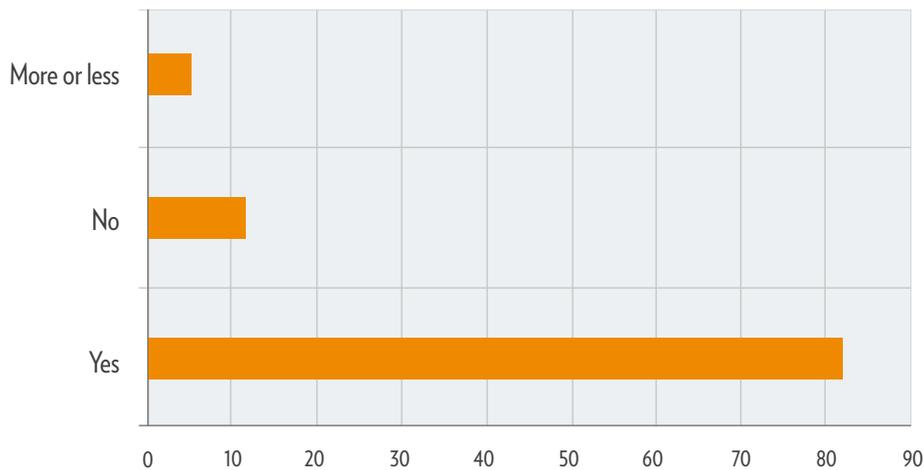
21 Within the meaning of Article 28(3) of the Decree implementing the rules on forest management, the legal structures that may be used for the creation and management of a community forest are: association, cooperative, common initiative group and economic Interest grouping.

## Part 2: Stakeholder perceptions of community forest conservation and management in Cameroon

### 2.1 Stakeholder perceptions of community conservation in Cameroon

Although national legislation continues to address community conservation to only a limited extent, our respondents did recognise the existence of community conservation initiatives in Cameroon (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Stakeholder perceptions of whether community conservation initiatives exist in Cameroon



**Source:** Survey data, February 2022.

Our analysis of the models described identified two types of community conservation in Cameroon: community led conservation and hybrid community conservation.

#### 2.1.1. Community led conservation

The first type is community led conservation, which we identified in two social groups. Firstly, Grassfields peoples (e.g. the Bamileke ethnic group), whose activities in their sacred forests are primarily related to rituals and maintained by myths. Secondly, the indigenous Baka people, whose activities relate to traditional or cultural practices and the use of natural resources for self-consumption. A report from a study conducted by the MINFOF, shows that there are also sacred forests in other communities and in other regions of the country (Republic of Cameroon, 2010), implying a wider range of community led conservation models in the country.

When asked what people in their community do each day, more than 98% of indigenous Baka respondents from Ngoyla responded: *“I eat my morning meal, then I go into the forest to hunt”* for men, or *“I fish and collect non-timber forest products”* for women.

Community led conservation is community driven and community led. It is unique in that external actors are not involved in its governance and for the cultural and traditional nature of the rules applied, according to 99% of respondents. These rules are often connected to myths and totems.

Communities that employ this form of conservation are responsible for highly biodiverse forest ecosystems. Yet extreme climate events, including drought, have degraded and weakened their biodiversity.

### 2.1.2. Hybrid community conservation

The second type is hybrid community conservation. This type of community conservation is community driven and community led, but with government involvement. The governance of hybrid community conservation involves sectoral administrations or external partners (such as development organisations), or both.

Perceptions of hybrid community conservation initiatives in Cameroon vary by respondent category. For nearly 75% of the development workers and 50% of the forest administration officials surveyed, community-managed hunting territories (ZICGC), co-managed hunting areas (CoZIC) and community-managed hunting areas (TCC) are community conservation models.

They draw on five main arguments to assert that these management models are examples of community conservation:

1. communities are positioned as decision-making and monitoring bodies;
2. local and central government's role is limited to their sovereign duty to preserve public order;
3. development partners focus on facilitation and technical and financial assistance;
4. wildlife can be protected and natural resources sustainably managed in these areas;
5. participatory development projects are implemented using the income generated by the conservation area.

In 2012, 26 community-managed or co-managed hunting areas had been or were being created, according to figures from the Ministry for Forests and Wildlife (MINFOF). They are spread across the South, Centre and East regions. Many are not yet operational because the corresponding legal texts (MINFOF orders) have not yet been adopted (Republic of Cameroon, 2012). These respondents also noted that there are community conservation initiatives within their institutions.

Conversely, for 25% of the development workers and 50% of the forest administration officials surveyed, only sacred forests and forests where indigenous forest peoples have camps could be included under the umbrella of community conservation.

Only community members, private sector representatives and academics unanimously agreed that community conservation initiatives exist in Cameroon.

**Table 1:** Perceptions of the existence of community conservation initiatives by stakeholder category

Stakeholder category	Forest administration		Development partner and private sector		Community and academic	
	They exist.	They don't exist.	They exist.	They don't exist.	They exist.	They don't exist.
Total number of respondents	90		10		9	
Perception of the existence of community conservation initiatives	They exist.	They don't exist.	They exist.	They don't exist.	They exist.	They don't exist.
Number	67	23	5	5	9	0
Percentage (%)	75	25	50	50	100	0

**Source:** Survey data, February 2022.

Some representatives of development organisations asserted that community forests can promote community conservation. However, local communities, local government officials and the indigenous Baka people of Ngoyla consider that in practice community forests are one of the main causes of forest biodiversity loss in Ngoyla district.

More than 99% of the indigenous Baka people of Assoumindele surveyed believe that community forests risk the emergence of illegal logging. On this point, they referred to the poor track record of the Djoko community forest. This forest suffered uncontrolled felling by a logging company that had obtained a permit from the community after a provisional agreement had been signed.

Expressing the reluctance of the indigenous Baka people of Assoumindele, one respondent said: “We won’t always be with the operator when they’re in our community forest. Once they’re there, what’s to guarantee they won’t operate outside the area we’ve assigned them?”

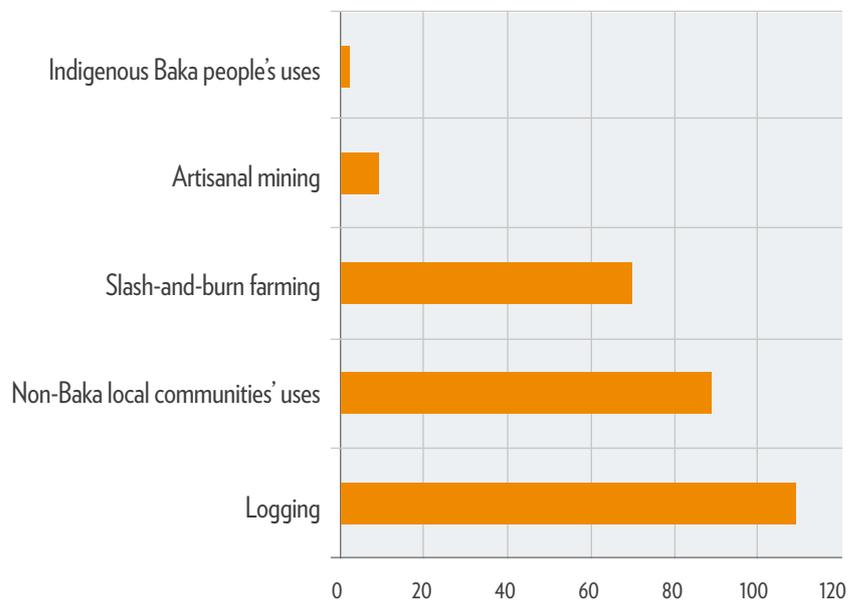
Similarly, referring to what happened in the Djoko community forest while it was under the provisional agreement signed in 2020, another Baka respondent stated:

The indigenous Baka spokesman for the community was looking out for himself. He didn’t think about the long-term effects of logging on us Baka. He did it for the money. We don’t want logging.

For the indigenous Baka people of Ngoyla, Cameroon’s community forest model is better suited to other local communities’ ways of life, not those of the indigenous peoples. The respondents also noted that, outside of sacred forests, only indigenous forest people are equipped to conserve the forests’ biodiversity. They have maintained their ways of life and relationship with nature for more than two centuries. Moreover, their use of the forests has little to no impact on tree felling or forest biodiversity loss.

Beyond income-generation and forest co-management, respondents also highlighted that communities play a subsidiary role in governance, through their participation in and monitoring of forest governance, as discussed in the previous section.

**Figure 2:** Causes of biodiversity destruction in Ngoyla district



**Source:** Survey data, February 2022.

According to more than 98% of respondents, the Baka people's activities do not destroy forest biodiversity. Logging is reported to be the main cause of forest biodiversity loss, followed by slash-and-burn agriculture and artisanal mining. These are the main ways local non-indigenous communities use the forests in Ngoyla.

The two types of community conservation we identified have certain features in common: they devolve responsibility for management to some extent and they seek to protect resources. They do however differ in some respects, mainly related to their (legal) basis, the type of land tenure, their operating structure and methods, and their uses (see Table 2 below).

**Table 2:** Comparison of community led conservation and hybrid community conservation

Aspect	Community led conservation	Hybrid community conservation
Basis	Cultural, traditional/customary and spontaneous	Participatory community assessment with community or external development organisations (non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, cooperatives, association, etc.) and the competent sectoral authorities.
Status of forested land	An area of state forest	Private state property or an area of state forest
Operating structure and methods	Mainly natural and unregistered boundaries Management organised around customs and norms No involvement of sectoral administrations in governance No logging Subsistence hunting by indigenous forest peoples No hunting in the sacred forests of Grassfields peoples No ecological monitoring	Boundaries documented in line with the institutional framework developed to facilitate implementation Management organised within the framework of agreements and a management plan approved by the competent administrative authority Involvement of sectoral administrations in governance Logging, in some cases Hunting in accordance with the legislation Ecological monitoring Specified conservation objective.
Main purpose	Cultural and ecological	Community development, protection and sustainable management.
Lead actor	Indigenous forest peoples (Baka, Bagyeli or Bakola, Medzan) organised around camps Local Grassfields communities (Nord-Ouest and Ouest regions) organised around traditional villages/ chiefdoms	Local communities organised into legal entities (associations, common initiative groups, economic interest groupings, cooperatives)
Intervention of public authorities and technical and financial partners	Little to none	Some

**Source:** Survey data, February 2022.

## 2.2 Community conservation and conservation in protected areas in Cameroon: Insights from the Ngoyla-Mintom forest block

The advantages and disadvantages of community conservation in comparison with conservation via protected areas generated the least debate in our research. Different categories of respondents were most likely to advocate their own model of forest conservation. However, only 10% of the conservation initiatives identified had adopted a community conservation model, while 90% were government-led.

Few stakeholders are aware of or actively support community led conservation. Many mistakenly equate it with activities to support local communities in protected areas, projects in forest areas, or even community participation in anti-poaching or monitoring activities.

Our analysis of stakeholder perceptions coupled with our observations allowed us to identify some advantages and disadvantages of conservation via protected areas in the Ngoyla-Mintom forest block (see Table 3 below).

**Table 3:** Advantages and disadvantages of conservation via protected areas

Conservation via protected areas	
Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conservation of biodiversity due to little-to-no tree felling</li> <li>• Implementation of development projects for the benefit of local communities</li> <li>• Monitoring and protection</li> <li>• Slower forest degradation in the Ngoyla-Mintom wildlife reserve</li> <li>• Anti-poaching activities</li> <li>• Maintenance of ecological functions</li> <li>• Community empowerment and participation in state forest management mechanisms, such as village anti-poaching committees (COVILAB)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involuntary and forced displacement</li> <li>• Restriction of communities' right to access and use the forest</li> <li>• Lack of flexibility</li> <li>• Conflicts with local residents and the creation of a climate of fear</li> <li>• Unlawful enforcement by eco-guards in the forest</li> <li>• Loss of income for local communities</li> <li>• Attempts to equate indigenous forest peoples with other non-indigenous local communities</li> <li>• Attacks and destruction of local communities' crops by primates</li> <li>• Landscape change and progressive loss of identity among Baka indigenous forest people</li> <li>• Increased exploitation of indigenous Baka forest people by other actors</li> </ul>

**Source:** Survey data, February 2022.

### **2.3. Perceptions of measures to improve the living conditions of the Baka people in Ngoyla district and associated challenges**

#### **2.3.1. Challenges related to land tenure, culture and development around the Ngoyla wildlife reserve**

Most Baka communities in the Ngoyla-Mintom forest block have their main camps on the customary lands of non-indigenous local community villages. This is because the government recognises these villages, but not the Baka camps that they absorb. Baka settlements are therefore called “camps” and not villages, because villages are the smallest recognised administrative division in the country.<sup>22</sup> As sub-village units, camps are often areas where incompatible customary land rights overlap.

This incompatibility is mainly a symptom of the different ways the Baka and the Bantu peoples relate to the land. Traditionally, the Baka see the land and the forest as a single entity, while non-Baka peoples and modern societies see them as distinct. The Baka see the forest as their home, a hospital, a market, a field and a place for sharing knowledge with future generations.

Both the Baka and the Bantu peoples argue over who has the older claim to the land where the camps are located. The Bantu leaders of the villages where the Baka are (re)settled assert their prior claim to the land, while the Baka claim they have been in the forest longer, including on land that has been converted for human use (housing, crops, etc.).

In practice, the Baka people are treated as foreigners in the villages where they are settled, even when they were settled there before other ethnic groups. In this context, when decisions have to be made at the local level about projects that affect customary land rights, the options advocated by the Bantu peoples tend to be prioritised. This situation is indicative of the general trend in Cameroon of equating indigenous forest peoples with non-indigenous forest peoples, in violation of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169).<sup>23</sup>

This trend is part of a wider pattern of insecure customary land rights in Cameroon. Not only does Cameroon’s legislation fail to secure customary land rights, but it also fails to legally recognise indigenous peoples pursuant to Convention No. 169. Consequently, the authorities do not properly account for indigenous forest peoples’ land tenure arrangements when creating protected areas.

In Ngoyla, this situation has two main consequences: (1) The Baka people of Ngoyla are unable to use forests classed as protected areas as they would have done traditionally. This is despite their presence and practices allowing for biodiversity conservation before the reserve was created. (2) The authorities disregard the requirement to seek the communities’ free, prior and informed consent before classifying the land.

Although the legislation does require the authorities to consult with anyone likely to be affected, the resulting conclusions and projects often reflect so-called modern rather than traditional approaches. This exacerbates the precarious position of the Baka people of Ngoyla, because Bantu traditions and culture dominate over those of the indigenous forest peoples.

Given that Bantu peoples’ activities tend to have a higher impact on biodiversity, development and conservation projects are steered towards protected area-based approaches. Such projects tend to treat these two different cultural groups as a single entity. They therefore implement activities that benefit Bantu peoples and meet their needs, more than those of the Baka people.

When initiatives directly targeted the Baka cultural group, they brought with them funding, new ideas and restrictions on hunting and access to sacred sites, often disrupting these people’s ways of life. The introduction of non-essential commodities to this environment and the new needs resulting from them have led to increased alcoholism, tobacco addiction and illegal trade.

The Baka indigenous forest people coexist with local Bantu communities, but have different ways of life. Despite government efforts for the benefit of these groups,<sup>24</sup> the national legal framework still fails to effectively safeguard indigenous forest peoples’ uses and territories. This weakness is reflected in the absence of integrated measures to secure the rights of indigenous forest peoples. These rights include collective land tenure and indigenous peoples’ right to maintain their culture and identity through their use of the forest.

Bantu people who live alongside the indigenous forest peoples, albeit with greater power, recognise that they use the forest differently from the indigenous Baka people. One respondent stated: *“the Bantu practice slash-and-burn agriculture here, which the Baka we live alongside don’t. The Baka’s activities don’t destroy the forest.”*

#### **2.3.2. Governance of the Ngoyla wildlife reserve**

Almost 93% of respondents believe that the living standards of the Baka people of Ngoyla can only be improved by measures to enable them to return to the forest. This is, however, unlikely when, from their point of view, they are denied access to the Ngoyla Wildlife Reserve. This reserve, established in 2014, covers the part of the forest where they could most effectively maintain their identity and culture, based on a semi-nomadic way of life. Development projects targeting rural communities typically offer ineffective short and medium-term solutions that do little to support the Baka people to flourish within the Ngoyla-Mintom forest block (see Figure 3).

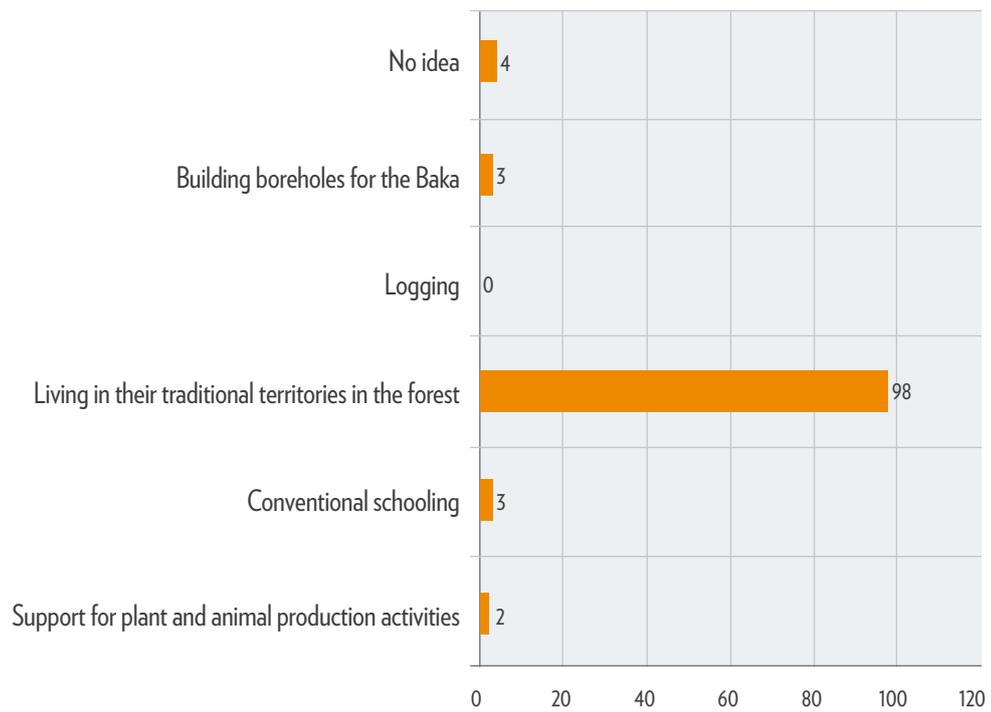
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22 Country, regions, departments, districts and villages

23 This text has not been ratified by Cameroon.

24 For example: the vote in favour of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007; the official celebration of the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples on 9 August since 2008; and Cameroon’s accession to human rights mechanisms that make observations and recommendations on indigenous issues (International Labour Organization, 2015).

**Figure 3:** Suggested activities to improve the living standards and flourishing of the Baka people of the Ngoyla-Mintom forest block



**Source:** Survey data, February 2022.

Farming, education and borehole construction, although mentioned, are only minor concerns for the Baka people of Ngoyla. Activities related to infrastructure development (schools, roads, health centres, modern houses, electrification, etc.) are barely mentioned among the activities respondents considered key to the development of the Baka people of Ngoyla.

The Baka camp in Ndimako is a case in point. Although their camp is only 50 metres from a modern primary school, Baka children from the Ndimako camp do not attend the school for many reasons: the cost;<sup>25</sup> the language used to teach; parents' lack of interest in taking their children; and bullying of Baka children by non-Baka or Bantu children. To more effectively meet the educational needs of these Baka children, a civil society organisation is running a project to offer classes in a hut in their camp (see Photo 1).



**Photo 1:** Teachers and children from the Baka community in Ndimako.

**Source:** Survey data, February 2022.

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25 While education is officially free, there are costs associated with teaching materials and contributions to the Parent and Teacher Association.

Similarly, in Mabam, modern houses were built for Baka people as part of a development project. However, the Baka owners rent out these houses to non-members of their communities, while they live in traditional houses just a few metres away (see Photo 2).

**Photo 2:** Traditional house inhabited by a Baka family on the left and modern house on the right belonging to the same family, but rented to a non-Baka family.



**Source:** Survey data, February 2022.

These traditional houses are used mainly by more ‘modern’ indigenous forest peoples. However, many of the indigenous people surveyed during our research still live in traditional huts called “moungoulu”. These huts are used exclusively by indigenous forest people. This was the case in Ndimako, Mbalam, Djadam, Se’eh and Makamakouma (see photo 3 below).



**Photo 3:** Traditional Baka houses

Ten key proposals were made during the focus groups to improve the management of the Ngoyla wildlife reserve:

1. Allow the indigenous Baka people to set up camps in the Reserve if they want to settle there.
2. Involve representatives of all Baka camps in the Ngoyla-Mintom area in revising the memorandum of understanding on the management of the Reserve.
3. Allow the Baka to collect non-timber forest products and medicines in the Reserve.
4. Allow the Baka to hunt animals used in traditional rituals regardless of their classification (A, B or C).
5. Allow the Baka people to hunt animals for self-consumption regardless of their classification (A, B or C).
6. Allow the Baka to move within the Reserve without an eco-guard escort.
7. Set up a system to record the animals hunted by the Baka people within the Reserve.
8. Raise awareness among the Baka about the key species protected by the Reserve.
9. Recruit Baka people who apply for jobs in the Reserve and provide information on the job specification and the associated risks.
10. Provide medical care and cover Baka people's urgent needs based on assessments made during the awareness-raising campaigns.

According to Ngoyla Wildlife Reserve officials and many development actors, conflicts over land rights are rooted in how land is divided up and categorised. For them, the solution to the problems caused by protected areas in Cameroon lies not in creating a new category of protected area (i.e. Community protected areas), but in rethinking how existing protected areas are managed.

Harnessing the lessons learned, the parties could use stakeholder consultations and memoranda of understanding to drive a paradigm shift in how existing community forests and protected areas are managed. This would involve transferring the management of these forests to indigenous forest peoples and local communities practising community led conservation, whose survival and culture depend on the forest.

In this vein, one respondent argued that:

*The idea isn't to incorporate community protected areas into the law, but to tackle how protected areas are managed to focus more on communities whose ways of life preserve forest biodiversity. There is an untapped source of non-timber forest products in*

*some protected areas that could be useful to local communities and indigenous forest peoples. We could also work to restore protected areas, existing community forests and sacred forests degraded by communities. There are places of worship in the forests that are inseparable from the identity of certain people.*

One Baka respondent noted that:

*The forest is the shop, the field, the market, the hospital and where we transfer knowledge to the descendants of the indigenous Baka forest people, and all these uses are in forests that we can no longer access.*

Another issue that came up many times in our research was the question of who owns the land or forests that might be subject to any new classification processes. Respondents also questioned how inhabitants' traditions will be affected and what effect any new restrictions added to existing customary and traditional restrictions will have.

One possible avenue for legal reform is included in the latest draft version of the Forestry Act (although currently under review), which includes the provision for "community protected areas" as a new land classification. Article 43 of the draft bill states: "(1) For the purposes of this Act, a community protected area is an area in local and/or indigenous community territory, which is voluntarily allocated to forest and managed by its representative institutions, in application of local customs and a simple management plan drawn up by the community concerned through these institutions and approved by the forest administration, to ensure the long-term conservation of nature, ecosystem services and the cultural values tied to the area. (2) The local and/or indigenous communities who own the protected area will implement the simple management plan under the supervision of the forest and wildlife administration. (3) The arrangements according to which forest and wildlife administration will support the sustainability of these areas must be laid down by regulation. (4) Community protected areas will be deemed public property."<sup>26</sup>

Although, potentially providing interesting opportunities for securing indigenous peoples' collective tenure (depending on the final text and accompanying legislation), based on our findings, we would urge stakeholders to rethink how they interpret the concept of conservation. Community conservation models come in many different forms, depending on the customs and practices of the people who implement them. They might involve nature conservation with or without use rights, agro-forestry or other activities.

Community protected areas are one possible solution among many, but could be incompatible or ineffective in some contexts. The same can be said of conservation-oriented community forests. It would therefore be beneficial for the ongoing legal reforms to recognise and protect community conservation as an overarching concept.

## Part 3: Community led conservation initiatives in Cameroon: Features, challenges and insights

### 3.1 Case study: The forests of the indigenous Baka people of the Ngoyla-Mintom forest block

Most of the study population noted that the practices of the Baka of Ngoyla conserve the biodiversity on which they depend. Conservation goes hand in hand with their traditional ways of life, which have for centuries allowed them to live in harmony with their environment. We identified the following practices:

**Traditional and subsistence hunting.** Baka people follow customary rules when hunting and use tools made from plant-based materials.<sup>27</sup> The many restrictions they observe help to limit the pressure on wildlife resources. For example, among the Baka, pregnant women and their partners are not permitted to eat the meat of certain animals, such as pangolins, turtles and vipers. Similarly, during the rainy season, most animals are pregnant and it is forbidden to slaughter a pregnant animal. Only animals that are often overpopulated may be hunted in the rainy season according to Baka custom.

Large mammals are not traditionally hunted by the Baka. However, territorial conflicts between the Baka and large mammals can provoke reprisals and lead to the death of a community member or a large mammal. On rare occasions, large mammals are sacrificed as part of traditional rituals. How often these rituals occur and which animals are sacrificed is regulated by the community to maintain the population of the species selected. The Baka hunt for subsistence, i.e. for self-consumption and bartering.

**Collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs).** Non-timber forest products are collected for self-consumption. They include: honey, wild yams, moabi seeds and wild peanuts.

**Subsistence farming.** The type of crop farming practised does not involve burning, the use of chemical fertilisers or pesticides, or ploughing. The (more than 78) fields belonging to the Baka people interviewed are garden plots, corroborating the ILO findings (International Labour Organisation, 2015). We noted some tree felling where small shrubs had been removed from growing plots.

**Micro-zoning.** The forest areas where the Baka live are divided into zones, including many sacred areas where hunting is prohibited. This is the case for the Jengi sacred area or the area where newborns are circumcised.

**Protecting plant life.** Trees that produce non-timber forest products and medicinal plants are protected, such as Moabi.

**Use of traditional hunting methods.** The traditional traps used by the Baka are not designed to kill animals immediately, because the Baka only eat fresh meat. These traps catch game in such a way that they can usually escape by struggling if the trap is not visited by the hunter within two days.

**Regenerative fishing.** The Baka people fish by hand in rivers for self-consumption at certain times of the year.

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<sup>27</sup> Decree No. 95/466/PM of 20 July 1995 implementing the rules on wildlife management, Article 2(20): Traditional hunting: hunting using tools made from plant-based materials.



**Photo 4:** Baka women fishing.

**Source:** Survey data February, 2022.

Government interventions have forced the Baka people to live alongside other local communities. This has produced a socially and culturally heterogeneous population, which according to some has damaged the Baka people's conservation model. Forcing these groups to live together and compete for access to forest resources has many consequences:

1. Baka people are exploited as labourers in plantations belonging to other communities that practise slash-and-burn and plant monocultures.
2. Baka people participate in hunting that does not comply with their traditions and in illegal logging due to the high external demand for natural resources that are usually sustainably managed by the Baka. Baka people have been employed by other communities as hunters and as guides to locate popular species such as Moabi. These activities cause considerable biodiversity loss. Moreover, Baka people are rarely compensated fairly for their work.
3. Some highly culturally assimilated Baka people are involved in poaching.
4. More modern hunting tools have been introduced that kill animals immediately.
5. Large swathes of the Baka's territories of life have been acquired by others. This has led to the conversion of forests, to deforestation, and to the Baka being excluded from the land or prohibited from using it, as in the case of protected areas.

Prohibitions underpin the Baka's traditional system of land and natural resource management. These rules are respected in wholly Baka camps like the camp in Se'eh. This system of land and natural resource governance is built around collective property, which is not recognised by the existing legislation on land tenure. Because this tenure system is not recognised in law, the rights that flow from it are not secure.

In particular, this lack of recognition undermines the obligation to obtain free, prior and informed consent. This consent should be obtained from the communities that hold these collective customary land rights, if there are plans to transfer rights over their land or make investments in that might negatively impact their rights.

This state of affairs affects Baka people in many ways. They have been evicted from their original territories and relocated to new territories where they are severely discriminated against. These evictions lead to food insecurity and the disappearance of indigenous camps from the forests due to population decline. They also cause the Baka to lose their cultural identity because local knowledge is not passed on. In particular, knowledge of how to treat or prevent certain diseases is lost, as is how to invoke the deities that govern all the communities' activities.

### 3.2 The forests and sacred areas of Grassfields peoples (Ouest and Nord-Ouest regions)

The forests and sacred areas of Grassfields peoples tend to cover relatively small areas of between one hundred to hundreds of thousands of square metres (Republic of Cameroon, 2010). Some are divided into several sites within a single village. They have high plant biodiversity linked to the migration of animals including birds and bees, which bring in new seeds as they move around.

The conservation of these forests is based on their status as sacred places (Republic of Cameroon, 2010). In addition to preservation, 98% of respondents highlighted protection as an integral part of the forest management model here. The relevant communities' ownership of these areas is recognised by 81% of respondents, who also noted that they are sacred places where hunting and logging is prohibited by customary rules.

The local communities in the villages or the local area affected do not contest these rules. Instead, they have made it their shared legacy to protect these places. According to customary practices, local communities visit these places for rituals, sacrifices, initiation ceremonies, secret meetings and burials. The respondents presented eight features shared by Grassfields peoples' community conservation areas:

- in most cases, they have natural boundaries that are not georeferenced;
- natural resources are not exploited within their boundaries;
- they have religious and (traditional) cultural uses;
- population data are not collected or monitored;
- these areas are inalienable, i.e. they must not be taken from their communities;
- farming is not well developed in these areas;
- collective customary land tenure arrangements pass the land from generation to generation, but are not recognised by law;
- use is regulated by customs and norms;
- the sectoral administrations and external (non-community) actors are not involved in the governance of these places;
- ecotourism has developed in some areas.

These areas are threatened by land pressure and population growth, which lead to community conservation areas or their surrounding areas being transferred or acquired by private or public actors. The forests are then converted for other uses or used for hunting, tree felling or undergrowth collection.

Threats related to land pressure and population growth are compounded by the effects of climate change, which are increasingly detrimental to forest cover in these places. Water shortages, changes in vegetation cover and falling wildlife populations can be observed in these areas.

The respondents stressed that this conservation model is tied to the sacred status of these places and that the communities authorised to access them urgently need training on ecological monitoring. They also noted the need for legal reforms to properly safeguard these areas.

Commitment to the conservation of these places is a socio-cultural reality for the local communities living in and around the villages there. On this topic, one respondent noted that:

*It is a place for secret meetings used by the whole village. For example, the village chief goes there for his "La'akam" (initiation ceremony). He'll usually go in one way and come out another at the end of this ceremony.*

The sacred forest conservation model is based on prohibitions and is similar to that of the Ewe people of Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria. The Ewe people are guided by their religion and its supreme god, Mawuga Sogbo-Lisa (a male and female deity), to conserve nature through forests and sacred sites, taboos and totems (Global Forest Coalition, 2018). Based on these practices and beliefs, these places are governed by customs tied to their sacred status, without the interference of people outside the community.

There are other sacred forests in Cameroon in the Adamaoua, Extrême Nord, Littoral, Nord and Sud-Ouest regions. However, Act No. 94/01 on forests, wildlife and fisheries, the 1996 Framework act on the environment and other subsequent legislation fail to explicitly address sacred forests. There is little interest in sacred forests, so few financial resources have been mobilised for ecological research and monitoring in these areas (Republic of Cameroon, 2010).

## Part 4: Potential legal reforms and measures to support community conservation and community management of the territories of life of indigenous forest peoples in Cameroon

### 4.1. Legal avenues

In 2011 the Government of Cameroon began the process of reforming its 1974 land tenure system and 1994 Forest Law, which fail to secure customary and collective tenure rights. Below we present some key considerations for these reforms, from the perspective of community conservation.

#### 4.1.1. Legal recognition of both individual and collective customary land tenure

Community conservation models are rooted in customs that have the land at their heart. Whether Cameroon's sacred forest groves or the territories of life of indigenous forest peoples, these areas are threatened with conversion to other land uses, despite them being inalienable under customary rules.

Customary land rights can be individual or collective. If collective land tenure is recognised, conservation efforts in territories of life and sacred forests will have to guarantee that:

- free, prior and informed consent is obtained from communities, if there are plans to transfer rights or make investments likely to affect their rights;
- no community is involuntarily displaced;
- the inalienable and collective nature of the lands is recognised.

More than principles, it is values that govern indigenous forest peoples' community conservation and sacred forests. Moreover, protecting these lands in law will also help to safeguard cultures at risk of extinction.

#### 4.1.2. Express recognition in the Forestry Act of community conservation of permanent or non-permanent state forests to align it with the Framework law act no. 96/12 of 05/08/1996 on environmental management.

Our study indicates that the ways of life of the indigenous Baka people do not lead to biodiversity loss. Yet the law seems to view these people as destroyers of the forest. Cameroonian law should therefore recognise the role that indigenous peoples and their traditional ways of life can play in conservation and acknowledge them as agents of conservation in their own right.

Community conservation could then be practised on forest land regardless of whether it is part of a permanent or non-permanent state forest. Community conservation areas could be mapped and documented to help identify sustainable management approaches aligned with community conservation models, such as protection

through collective ownership. Mapping these areas could allow different stakeholders whose rights are not competing to carry out activities.

Legal recognition of community conservation could lay the groundwork for community conservation in existing protected areas. The 1996 framework law on environmental protection states that "it is the duty of the public authorities and of each citizen to ensure the safeguarding of natural heritage". This article could be taken up by the upcoming forestry law in the spirit of shifting power back to those who have been able to conserve biodiversity in a traditional way everywhere in the country to continue to do so under a legal framework. This would include, for example, the legal recognition of the rights of communities with uses compatible with conservation to carry out activities or live in existing national parks.

Recognising community conservation could also encourage the delineation, documentation and classification of forests and the digitisation of the data on forest land subject to community conservation by indigenous forest peoples or other communities, in accordance with their cultures, customs and good practices.

#### 4.1.3. Legal recognition of indigenous forest peoples' traditional chiefdoms

Recognising indigenous forest peoples' traditional chiefdoms in law is an important step in recognising the rights of indigenous peoples in Cameroon. Under existing legislation, traditional chiefs are supplementary to the Government of Cameroon and its apparatus. This status gives them the right to participate in decision-making bodies and represent the interests of their community. In time, this should reduce feelings of inferiority experienced by the Baka, and, above all, weaken the subjugation of the Baka based on their way of life.

#### 4.1.4. Recognition of community conservation by indigenous forest peoples as a way to enhance sites of special biophysical or social interest

Article 3(19) of the Decision on the rules for forest interventions<sup>28</sup> defines sites of special biophysical or social interest as:

An area whose installations or resources must be protected because they have social, ecological or wildlife value. This definition includes:

- seed orchards, nurseries and arboretums;
- mudflats and salt pans;
- floodplains;

28 Decision No. 0108/D/MINEF/CAB of 9 February 1998 implementing the rules for forest interventions.

- breeding areas for rare or endangered wildlife (category A);
- areas with a high number of endemic plants or wildlife;
- areas known for wildlife migration;
- spawning grounds;
- fish farms;
- concentrations of plants or groups of plants known to be important to the survival of a rare or endangered animal;
- areas or features of the natural environment valued by local people;
- resorts or tourist sites;
- hunting lodges.

The Forestry Act should designate indigenous forest communities as community conservation agents for sites of specific biophysical and social interest, given their knowledge of the forest, their tradition of using forest and wildlife resources sustainably, and the social and cultural importance of the forest to them. While this approach has not yet been trialled in Cameroon, it has the benefit of making indigenous forest peoples agents of conservation.

#### **4.1.5. Clarification of the legal status of community-managed hunting areas (ZICGC) and co-managed hunting areas (CoZIC)**

The community-managed and co-managed categories of hunting area are not provided for in Cameroon's legislation. Their legal status is therefore unclear. Community-managed hunting areas, a hybrid category, are created under the general hunting area framework, sometimes in a permanent state forest, but are managed as community forests.

The legislation should clarify whether community-managed hunting areas are protected areas in the same way as general hunting areas. This would highlight indigenous peoples' role in conservation. Likewise, the legal status of co-managed hunting areas, which are not leased, must also be specified.

#### **4.2 Strategic and practical aspects**

As regards strategic opportunities, our research highlighted that the 1993 land tenure policy is currently being revised. Below, we identify three key short-term measures that should be implemented.

##### **4.2.1. Increasing the number of technical and financial partners and projects targeting community conservation**

Our research only identified a few organisations that have ongoing projects related to community landscape management and community conservation. Firstly, the COBALAM project (2020–2025) is being implemented by the Rainforest Alliance and partners. This project aims to promote community landscape management in Cameroon. Secondly, the “Keta” project (2019–2022) is being implemented by the Forest Peoples Programme. This project aims to strengthen the active participation of indigenous forest peoples in the sustainable management of natural resources to better promote, protect and defend their indigenous rights.

##### **4.2.3. Conducting research to document traditional knowledge and identify short and medium-term measures, where appropriate, to make community conservation models more sustainable**

Community conservation comes in many forms. Depending on the way of life of the community that practices it, it can be built around land uses that shift over space and time. This is the case for hunter and gatherer communities (indigenous forest peoples), and nomadic herder communities (indigenous savannah peoples, Mbororos). It can also be based on land uses that are relatively unchanging. This is the case for sacred forests or co-managed conservation areas (ZICGC, CoZIC) and community agro-forestry landscapes, for example.

##### **4.2.3. Mapping key stakeholders for land and natural resource governance in the Ngoyla-Mintom forest block, organising multi-stakeholder consultations, advocating community conservation and strengthening collaboration between institutions for the conservation of forest biodiversity**

In relation to the specific case study of this research, in the short-term, we propose mapping the stakeholders active on land and natural resource governance issues within the Ngoyla-Mintom forest block in detail. The aim would be to capitalise on the land classification process applied to existing permanent and non-permanent state forests. It would also offer communities practising community conservation avenues to express their rights.

This mapping study would make it possible to identify potential alliances to advocate reforms in favour of community led conservation. Such alliances could also be harnessed to support multi-stakeholder consultations on memorandums of understanding concerning the Ngoyla wildlife reserve and existing community forests. The aim here would be to promote the forest management methods of the Baka peoples of Ngoyla.

## Conclusion

The current legal framework does provide for community conservation to a limited extent, but seeks to promote conservation by highlighting the economic potential of timber, non-timber and wildlife resources.<sup>29</sup> Community forests are the only community conservation mechanism expressly recognised in Cameroon where communities can choose to pursue community conservation, outside permanent state forests.

The current draft land law reform text includes the provision of “community protected areas”. This could provide significant opportunity for community conservation and collective tenure for indigenous communities; however implementation will likely remain a challenge given the extent of existing concessions.

Our analysis of stakeholder perceptions identified two models of community conservation: community led conservation and hybrid community conservation. Community led conservation is the product of customs, norms and shared values rooted in the beliefs and traditional ways of life of specific communities. Community led conservation is found in: (1) Indigenous Peoples from forest areas whose ways of life and subsistence activities are still limited to small-scale hunting, foraging and hedge-and-field (bocage) agriculture and (2) Grassfields peoples. Community led conservation is also found in other ethnic groups within the country.

Under community led conservation models, activities are dictated by the communities’ belief in the sacred status of an area. The prohibitions applied to these areas have helped conserve these forests and groves for several generations.

Hybrid community conservation is a community conservation model that includes government intervention. One major difference between these community conservation models is that local and central governments are not involved in community led conservation. This is not the case under the hybrid community conservation model, where local and central governments play a key role in the recognition of their legal status.

Hybrid community conservation models – including community hunting territories, protected conservation areas or conservation-oriented community forests – are, where they exist, often the result of lengthy processes. In terms of both skills and resources, these processes may be beyond the reach of local and indigenous communities practising community led conservation. Moreover, they do not always align with the values governing community led conservation models. This explains why the Baka peoples of Ngoyla perceive community forests as a “Bantu matter”.

Our research indicates that indigenous forest peoples’ traditional ways of life do not destroy forest biodiversity. The community led conservation practised by indigenous forest peoples in Ngoyla is however threatened from many sides. By studying the experiences of the indigenous peoples of Ngoyla, we identified the following challenges for community led conservation:

- Baka communities are treated as though they are the same as non-Baka communities. Their ways of life and local knowledge are not effectively taken into account by the legal processes around conservation.
- Their survival and cultural identity depend on natural resources in forests classified as protected areas (non-timber forest products, game, medicines, etc.), but their access to these forests is restricted.
- Some Baka people have been assimilated into communities with different ways of life from their own. This has led to the involvement of Baka people in intensive and illegal hunting and illegal logging in community forests.
- Baka people are employed by Bantu in monoculture farming and on plantations.
- The Baka people’s territories of life have been reduced to camps on land that is often under the authority of village chiefs from other communities.
- National legislation does not recognise the Baka people’s collective land tenure practices.
- Baka people are involuntarily displaced and forests converted to other land uses.
- The impacts of climate change are increasingly apparent.

Our examination of existing community conservation initiatives found that the government shows little enthusiasm for community led conservation, whereas technical and financial partners are relatively mobilised. The preferred conservation model remains conservation via protected areas despite the limitations associated with this approach. The main argument for this approach is that it maintains ecological functions.

We also noted weaknesses in biodiversity conservation based on the Forestry Act. For example, the competent sectoral administrations do not always consult one another or work together effectively. Sometimes their remits conflict when it comes to forest biodiversity conservation.

Cultural identity, belief and the sacred status of forests and their resources are at the heart of community led conservation models. The sustainability of these conservation models therefore depends on the ability of legislators to enshrine these values in law. Other stakeholders must work to provide training for communities, so they are better equipped to overcome the challenges they face when implementing their conservation efforts.

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