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network paper 25b
July 2001

DFID



Rural Development Forestry Network

The Development of Community Forests in Cameroon: Origins, Current Situation and Constraints

André Djeumo

The Forestry Taxation System and the Involvement of Local Communities in Forest Management in Cameroon

Timothée Fomété

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ISBN 0 85003 533 3

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY FORESTS IN CAMEROON: ORIGINS, CURRENT SITUATION AND CONSTRAINTS

André Djeumo

SUMMARY

The introduction of the concept of community forestry into Cameroon's forestry legislation by means of the idea of community forests was a great innovation in the Central African sub-region. Observers in the forestry and broader development sectors alike felt that this represented a revolution in the Cameroonian forest sector. However, seven years after the adoption of the new law of January 1994, the expected level of change does not seem to have been achieved. Only around 10 community forests have been assigned and are now more or less managed by the communities. This paper outlines the origins of this new concept in Cameroon and the strategies developed by the forest administration to put it into practice. It then presents the current situation as regards applications for community forests, analysing their geographic distribution. This is followed by a reflection on the difficulties of implementing the concept of community forests with a particular focus on the difficulties faced by village communities. The key constraints highlighted are socio-cultural (including a very varied understanding of what is meant by 'community' or 'legal entity'), institutional and financial (relating to the costs of preparing an application file and the management plan

necessary for any community forest to be assigned).

INTRODUCTION

With 22 million hectares of forest, Cameroon has the second largest forest reserve in Africa after Congo Kinshasa. Apart from its economic importance at national level, this forest also has a variety of other complementary functions. For the people living nearby, it plays a social and cultural role as well as an economic one. For the international community, it is also of ecological and scientific interest. These multiple and sometimes competing interests in the way the forest is used often lead to controversy. Changes in thinking by Cameroon and the international community about the sustainable management of forest ecosystems have led the Cameroon Government to review its 'traditional' forest management system which marginalized the local populations who are wholly dependent on the forest for their subsistence.

The passing of a new forest law in 1994 was a clear expression of Cameroon's desire to improve the level of participation of local communities in the management and conservation of forests. Guaranteeing

communities the benefits of forest management was intended to encourage them to better protect forest areas at the same time as seeing their living conditions improve. This devolution of responsibilities to the population was outlined in administrative texts formalising the notion of community forests. The application of regulatory provisions in this respect currently constitutes the most widely publicised process of decentralising natural resource management in Cameroon. It has also been the area most subject to research and field-testing (Diaw and Oyono, 1998). Many reservations have been expressed about the practical implementation of this administrative and institutional innovation. The subject of this paper is the progress that has been made in the seven years since the law was passed. It begins by tracing the origins of the community forest ‘concept’ in Cameroon, then outlines how the concept has been implemented, followed by a review of the current situation and concluding with a description of problems encountered.

ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPT

In Cameroon, the State has for a long time been the exclusive proprietor and manager of forest resources. Around it gravitated logging companies and other elites, accumulating wealth to the detriment of the State and especially the increasingly impoverished local populations. Some authors point out that communities have been participating in forest management for thousands of years although their political right to do so only dates back, with very few exceptions, twenty years or so. Bigombe (1998) argues that local populations have been marginalised in forest management since colonial times, more specifically (in the case of Cameroon), French colonisation (which

focused particular attention on the problem of how to control land), with a State which dictated everything and monopolised the flows and networks for the use of resources, relegating populations to the role of mere bit-part players.

Legislation since then has attempted to improve the extent to which the interests of the populations living near the forest are taken into account. Time and time again the subject of forest use rights has come up. In the laws of 1981 and 1983 they were only provided for in non-classified forests, and within socially-based initiatives relating to forest use. Regrettably, none of these strategies to promote better forest management succeeded in producing the expected results. Instead the country witnessed a ‘disastrous’ management of forest resources, characterised by logging companies ‘mining’ the forest, uncontrolled allocation of logging licences, widespread illegal logging, etc.

The 1994 reform, carried out in a context of restructuring the political landscape in Cameroon, and under pressure from calls for democratisation, for the first time formalised the involvement of local populations in forest management via community forests. The latter were introduced for the first time in acts governing the forest following a reclassification of the whole forested area in Cameroon (see Box 1). This reform is a legal instrument delegating responsibility to the local communities (Vabi *et al.*, 2000). Cameroon, which is characterised by a multitude of ethnic groups and cultures, made a commitment to follow this new and unknown path. Today it is the leader amongst the countries of the sub-region who are queuing up to benefit from its

Box 1 Classification of forests in Cameroon

The 1994 Law classifies forests in Cameroon into two main categories:

A. The permanent forest estate (*forêts permanentes*), also known as ‘classified forest’ (*forêts classées*), which can only be used for forestry or as wildlife habitats. The law specifies that at least 30% of the national territory should be classed as permanent forest. This can be of two types:

- i) State forests (*forêts domaniales*) – comprising protected areas (national parks, wildlife reserves) and production forest reserves;
- ii) Council forests (*forêts communales*) – managed in a decentralised manner by elected local councils on the basis of management plans approved by MINEF.

B. The non-permanent forest estate (*forêts non permanentes*), consisting of forested land which can be converted to non-forest uses. This includes:

- i) Private forests (*forêts privées*) belonging to individuals;
- ii) Communal forest (*forêts du domaine nationale*), a residual class including all forests not included in categories A or B (i) above.

The different types of logging rights (all controlled by MINEF) available in the various forest types are outlined in Table 1. Local people have recognised usufruct rights in all types of forest.

Source: Adapted from Brown, 1999

experience as they revise their own legislative texts in favour of participatory management.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONCEPT

The Government of Cameroon, aware of the difficulties inherent in the implementation of community forest activities, which constitute a real first in the sub-region, negotiated the establishment of the ‘Community Forestry Development Project’ (CFDP) with the British Government. Amongst the CFDP’s main objectives were:

- to create a viable unit within MINEF to be responsible for implementing the community forestry aspects of the 1994 Forest Law;

- to study the legal and institutional framework of community forests;
- to increase awareness amongst the public and among institutions involved in the community/participatory management of forest resources.

Close inspection reveals a lack of coherence between the provisions of the Forest Law and the presidential decree concerning its application. As a result, there was confusion about how to obtain community forests. In order to achieve a common understanding regarding this new activity amongst MINEF directors and others involved in the sector, two important meetings were organised by the CFDP to try to define the notion of community

Table 1 Comparison of conditions applying to different types of logging rights and to community forests

	Concessions - forest management units (FMUs) (<i>unités forestières d'aménagement, UFA</i>)	Sales of Standing Volume (<i>ventes de coupe</i>)	Exploitation permit (<i>permis de coupes</i>)	Individual felling authorisations (<i>autorisation personnelles de coupes</i>)	Community forests (<i>forêts communautaires</i>)
Location	As of 1996, FMUs are supposed to become the principal class of cutting right in state forest (class A1), replacing the former logging licences (<i>licences de coupe</i>).	Primarily allocated within communal forest (class Bii). Exceptionally may be granted within the permanent forest estate for salvage logging (<i>ventes de récupération</i>) as part of development projects.	Allocated within communal forest (class Bii)	Allocated within communal forest (class Bii)	Allocated within communal forest (class Bii)
Maximum area	Up to 200,000 ha	Up to 2,500 ha	None	None	Up to 5,000 ha
Maximum volume of timber	None	None	Up to 500 m ³	Up to 30 m ³	None
Who to?	Licensed timber operator. Allocation by competitive bidding (sealed bid auction)	Licensed timber operator	Licensed timber operator	Non-professional (e.g. a villager)	Registered community. Allocation on submission of an application file
Requirement for a management plan	Must have a management plan prepared during a period of three years following the allocation of the concession	No management plan needed	No management plan needed	No management plan needed	A five-year Simple Management Plan must be prepared prior to the final allocation of the forest to community
Other conditions	Requires the setting up of a processing unit.	Only certain quantities and types of timber can be extracted in a given area over a specified period		Timber is for personal use only	
Other comments	Valid for a renewable minimum term of 15 years	See Box 2 for most recent developments			Valid for a renewable minimum period of 25 years.

Source: Adapted from Brown (1999)

in the Cameroon context and to analyse the different articles of the acts governing community forests. The recommendations of these meetings clarified some of the complexity of this concept. At the time, a degree of disinterest was noted on the part of certain 'traditional' senior foresters who were not familiar with this new management approach based on partnership and considered to be a crucial element for sustainable management. This resulted in them feeling distanced from what had been the mainstay of their work, namely conventional conservation and control of forest logging. The long process in which the CFDP had become involved required the organisation of other workshops in which various people and organisations were consulted. These included, for example, the central and external departments of MINEF, research bodies, national and international NGOs, and individuals interested in community forests and field projects. The outcome of this process was the production of the 'Manual of the procedures for the attribution, and norms for the management of community forests', a document which officially became a legal instrument in Cameroon on 20th April 1998.

This manual clarifies the different procedures required to obtain and manage a community forest. It describes the standards and procedures concerning the presentation and the processing of applications for community forests, and also defines the minimum consultation procedures required for the legal allocation of a community forest (Garber, 1998). Developed without any real experience of community forest management, the manual's main aim was to kick-start those activities which, three years after the law was passed, and due to lack of

clarity in the legislation, had not yet resulted in a single community forest being allocated. It was accepted by all in the sector that the benefit of experience would later allow the manual to be amended as necessary to make it more practical and functional. While the manual was being prepared, a new Community Forestry Unit (CFU) was set up to oversee the implementation of community forests at national level. It was initially created by a ministerial decision in 1998 and then later integrated into the Ministry of the Environment and Forests' (MINEF) organigram by presidential decree No. 99/196 on 1st September 1999.

The key elements of the strategy adopted by the CFU, with support from the CFDP, were:

- i) *Strengthening of the Unit's capacity to carry out its essential mission.* This involves the selection and training of staff interested in community forestry to work in the Unit. In addition, MINEF personnel have to be provided with the financial resources and small-scale technical equipment they need to enable them to give the legally required technical support to populations who decide to apply for a community forest.
- ii) *Creation of a training programme on community forestry.* Since the activity of community forestry is new, the Unit has developed five training modules on community forests for the staff of MINEF and other ministries and bodies concerned. A national training programme based on the different modules is currently being implemented. In spite of some constraints, its aim is to develop the technical and

operational capacities of the different actors directly involved in the management of forest resources in general and of community forests in particular.

iii) *Public information on community forests.*

The Unit hopes to inform much of the general public about the legal provisions regarding community forests via radio and television programmes, posters and leaflets. In addition, the Unit intends to support the activities of the Community Forestry Network, created in 1997 to promote the exchange of experiences between all those involved in community management of forest resources. Finally, with the help of the UK Government, the Unit has established a documentation centre on community forestry to allow all those with an interest in these activities to learn about its development in Cameroon and elsewhere in the world.

iv) *Development of an appropriate legal framework for the involvement of rural populations in resource management.* This will involve the strict application of the provisions of the Manual and continuous evaluation / monitoring of the activities of the other partners in the sector and the rural populations in the field. The results thus obtained will allow the current legal and institutional framework to be improved, and in particular it will allow the law, its application decree and the Manual of Procedures to be amended. Proposals might include the shortening of the community forest allocation process; the speeding up of the delimitation of permanent and non-permanent forests to give a clear idea of the

areas in which community forests can potentially be allocated; and the subsidy or reduction of the costs of establishing community forests, currently the subject of serious debate at a time when the Unit has about 90 applications to handle. To date the Unit has about six qualified staff involved in monitoring activities, training and social forestry. After two years of operation, it is time to review the status of these activities. This is the subject of the rest of this paper.

CURRENT STATUS OF COMMUNITY FOREST APPLICATIONS

Apart from a few initiatives registered in November 1999, the Unit received its very first requests for community forests (about 20 applications) in February 2000. By the end of October 2000, the Unit's statistics show 82 community forest initiatives from all over the country covering a total surface area of about 272,935 ha (Table 2).

Table 2 shows that the greatest number of applications (44) are from the East Province, which holds much of Cameroon's timber resource, followed by 17 from the South, 8 each from the North West and Centre, 2 each from the Coastal and South West provinces, and just one from West Province.

The general situation is as follows:

- 7 forests allocated and regarded as functional¹;
- 11 applications in course of reservation;
- 42 applications with reserved forests or

¹ By May, 2001, 104 applications had been received and 12 community forests allocated.

Table 2 Distribution and surface areas for community forest applications in October 2000

Province	Centre	East	Coastal	North - west	West	South	South - west
Surface area (ha)	35 470	133 642	10 000	8 204	3 320	68 574	13 725
Number of applications	8	44	2	8	1	17	2
% of applications	10	46	5	3	2	29	5

which have received agreement in principle from MINEF and for which Simple Management Plans are being produced;

- 11 applications rejected (mostly because the requested forests were located in the permanent forest estate);
- 11 incomplete applications.

The rejected applications concern forests located in the permanent forest estate for which there is no alternative for the communities concerned, apart from a modification of the zone boundaries or the marking of the definitive boundaries in the field following negotiations with local populations. As for the incomplete applications, some were poorly put together while others consist of extracts from forest maps sent to the Unit via the Sub-Division of Forest Inventories and Management which cannot in any way be considered to be community forest applications.

The applications in course of reservation are those which have been sent to the Sub-Division of Forest Inventories and Management to verify the zoning as well as those for which the reservation forms are being produced or which have been submitted to the Minister for signature.

A prerequisite for the allocation of a community forest is that the community must constitute a

legally recognised entity. Attempts to define the term 'community' in the specific case of Cameroon have not always ended in agreement. If we accept, like many of the experts, that the concept of community has to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, this stage of monitoring the progress of activities may be a good time to consider the most advantageous types of legal entities for village communities.

Types of legal entity chosen

To obtain a community forest, communities are obliged to constitute a legal entity. Four options are available: associations, cooperatives, common initiative groups (CIGs) and economic interest groups (EIGs). In practice these entities are governed by different laws, depend on clearly defined ministries and were created to attain very specific objectives. Some critics believe that this is one of the reasons why they are difficult to apply to community forest management. Thus, for example, each type of entity requires three to seven members while the legislation governing community forests requires that the legal entity includes the whole community concerned. As a result, in some cases, entities have been formed with fictitious names. Table 3 highlights some of the advantages and disadvantages of each type of legal entity for community forest management.

Table 3 Some advantages and disadvantages of different types of legal entity

Legal entity	Advantages	Disadvantages
Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easy to form and manage - Exempt from taxes - Receives subsidies, donations and bequests if it is recognised as a public utility by the President of the Republic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cannot receive subsidies, donations and bequests as an ordinary association - Cannot distribute benefits to its members
Co-operative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exempt from taxes - The benefits are shared according to individual transactions - Receives subsidies, donations and bequests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weighty and complex management structure
Common initiative group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easy to form and manage - May be transformed into a cooperative - Can distribute benefits amongst its members - Receives subsidies, donations and bequests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No legal provisions regarding management structure
Economic interest group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easy to form and manage - Can distribute benefits amongst its members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The main aim is the improved economic activity of its members - Not tax exempt

A study of the 82 applications received by October 2000 reveals that communities have opted either for associations (46) or for CIGs (36). A detailed field survey might give more insight into the multiple reasons for these choices but they certainly include:

- the choice may be made on behalf of communities by a supporting institution. The latter often steers the choice towards the type of legal entity they can most easily create for their target communities;
- decisions may be heavily influenced by MINEF staff. About 24 communities were obliged to replace their CIGs with associations because the local MINEF officer responsible for handling their application files felt this was the most

appropriate option as it prohibits the distribution of benefits to members. This position had a considerable influence on other initiatives in his department in which he was invited to participate;

- communities may follow the recommendations in the 'Manual of Procedures'. This advises against associations as the latter cannot benefit from subsidies, donations or bequests. Instead it recommends the CIG, for which model statutes are available at the ministry of agriculture, as the entity that is probably the best suited to community forest management.

The fundamental problem concerns the degree of representation in each entity. Informal

interviews in areas in which entities had been set up to manage part of the forest have shown that, although the population may know the entity exists, they do not know (or comply with) clauses concerning subscriptions (which are the initial source of revenue), the holding of general meetings, etc. Djeumo (1998) has highlighted two important cases:

- i) the COFAYET Community where some members of the board established to manage the community forest were completely ignorant of both the documents governing their entity and those relating to the creation and the management of their community forest;
- ii) the Mbimboué community in the East of Cameroon, which benefited from the very first community forest allocated in 1997 and in which an atmosphere of fear and tension prevails between its members some of whom have been imprisoned for financial malpractice and ignorance of the statutory provisions of the clauses governing their community.

Given the revenue which may be generated from the management of community forests, the present-day statutes for all types of entity need to be amended and brought to the attention of all the members of the community concerned so as to avoid situations of conflict (as in Mbimboué) detrimental to the sustainable management of community forests.

Geographic distribution of community forests

The uneven geographic distribution of initiatives may be due to a number of factors

such as lack of information on community forests, the presence of conservation projects or logging companies, and the availability of timber.

Lack of information

The 'Manual of procedures' was only distributed to the five forest provinces of Cameroon (South West, Coastal, Centre, South and East), where each Provincial Delegation received a batch of 1000 manuals. Thus a lack of information may in part explain why almost no applications have been received from some areas of the country, in particular the far North. This may be compounded by a lack of motivation on the part of the people in this part of the country who may conceive that practising community forestry would not be in their interests. Community forestry originated in countries like Nepal, Pakistan and India as a means of encouraging people, with financial and technical support from the forest administration, to regenerate degraded areas for the production of fuelwood and various non-timber forest products. Although the far North of Cameroon, where desertification is a problem, could benefit from this approach, such initiatives are not favoured by current legislation. In this part of the country, and more specifically in the forest transition zone, wildlife resources are more significant than the timber resources sought in the South. Consideration is currently being given to the possible development of a management manual dealing with the community hunting zones² defined in the forest law. For the moment, no applications

² For more on community hunting zones see the papers by Egbe, Olsen *et al.*, Djoh & Wal, and Wal & Djoh (Papers 25e (i),(ii),(iii) and (iv), respectively) in this mailing.

are forthcoming from the far North of Cameroon, and the percentage of applications from other savanna regions, in particular the North West and West, still remains low.

Presence of conservation projects

From discussions with MINEF field staff, it emerged that enthusiasm for community forests is considerable only in areas where there are conservation projects and NGOs ready to support communities in their project. This is the case with the SNV (Netherlands Development Organisation) in Lomié which, alone and via the OCBB (a local NGO), supports about 31 % of all initiatives in the country (i.e. about 20 applications). In the same way, four applications from the district of Messamena have been supported by the PFC (*Community Forest Project*), six from the North West are supported by the Kilum-Ijim project of Mont Oku, an application from the community of Mboke is supported by UDD-APEC, a Canadian NGO, and applications from the CIG Poko and the CIG Grobam in Dja and Lobo are supported by CAFER (the national NGO), etc.

Overall, projects support more than 50 % of initiatives. Many of these projects appear to continue to exist in line with their capacity for mobilising populations to apply for community forests. The support they give to the communities concerned is very varied, ranging from institutional back-up to material, technical and financial support. Field research, particularly in the East province from where 60 % of initiatives originate, has shown that no community has financially supported the process from its own resources. This gives cause for reflection on the true sustainability

of the 'proactive' structures created to manage the community forests. These often come into conflict with the traditional structures which appear to be losing their authority. This unfortunate situation has arisen in Messamena district in East Cameroon, where some traditional Chiefs have gone to the authorities to ask them to stop the allocation process for their community forest because the economic power held by the members of the entity created to manage the forest seems to be taking precedence over their own traditional and ancestral power.

Presence of logging companies

In some areas, a large number of the initiatives are financed by logging companies. These will often release considerable sums of money on the basis of a contract signed with the community, with the intention of proceeding to an immediate and short-term felling of the timber in the aforementioned forests. Although some initiatives supported by NGOs or conservation projects appear to be problem-free, in all other cases conflict seems to be the norm. Conflicts of interest regularly bring the satisfactory progress of a project to a halt. In the district of Yokadouma, in East Cameroon, a community was paid 4 million FCFA by a logging company for the future use of their forest. A little later, the same community received a more attractive offer from another logger and therefore wanted to reimburse the first logging company. When the latter refused, the two parties had to contact the authorities to settle their dispute. This situation all but blocked the allocation process for this forest for many months.

The great interest of logging companies in community forests is explained by the fact that products originating from community forests

are supposed to supply the processing industries which would not otherwise have the timber to stay in business. The real problem is that these companies often work with individuals and/or communities who are very badly organised or whose organisation they disrupt and who, in addition, are not prepared for this type of project. This is what happened in Mbimboué (an allocated forest which was almost completely logged without any real benefits for the villagers, and where certain members of the board are today in prison) and also in Yokadouma in East Cameroon.

As both community forests and Sales of Standing Volume permits can be allocated in the same class of communal forest, they are in direct competition with each other (see Box 2). The allocation of Sales of Standing Volume permits and Forest Management Units (FMUs) is now carried out by inviting tender submissions which are checked for their

technical and financial quality. The potential permit holder must then pay a deposit to the Treasury as well as the annual royalty for the surface area. Some local companies, as well as certain expatriates who are used to quite unorthodox practices, find these new measures intolerable. Assuming that community forests would simply be another type of logging permit, they have therefore tried to encourage communities (at a cost of several million francs) to apply for community forests on their behalf. Evidence of this is that the progress of a good number of community forest applications is monitored more closely by these logging companies than the communities involved.

Logging permits are issued in the forest zones. The application of the provisions of the finance law on the decentralised tax system and the implementation of certain parataxes, in particular the payment by logging companies to communities of 1000 FCFA per m³ of timber

Box 2 Community forest or Sales of Standing Volume

The fact that both community forests and Sales of Standing Volume permits can be allocated within the communal forest has led to some competition between the two. To prevent logging companies from obtaining Sales of Standing Volume permits in areas which communities might wish to have allocated as a community forest, a new Prime Ministerial act is currently being approved. This will give communities living near the forest the right of pre-emption (*droit de pre-emption*). MINEF hopes that this will encourage communities to get involved in the sustainable management of their local forest resources. It is intended that Sales of Standing Volume permits should in future be planned on a regional basis and be subject to tender. Information about potential Sales of Standing Volume permits will be widely disseminated to neighbouring communities in the form of a 'Sales of Standing Volume planning document' (DPVC, *Document de planification des ventes de coupe*). The communities will then have a period of three months to show, by means of a simple letter of intent addressed to the Minister for forests, their firm resolve to establish a community forest in all or part of the forests figuring in the DPVC and in which their user rights have been recognised. The letter results in the withdrawal of the forest concerned from the DPVC and begins the process of application for a community forest.

taken, has forced some economic operators to organise meetings with local administrative bodies for the official handing over of cheques to communities located in the areas being used. The rivalry caused by the payment of these dues can also have been a stimulus for certain communities aware of the economic importance of the forest products surrounding them and eager to exploit them via community forests.

Availability of timber

The (sustainable) use of timber is an aim of all the community forests allocated to date. This is proof that these forests have mainly been requested in areas where there is timber, in particular in the South and the East. However, in Coastal, West and North West provinces, it appears that all the requests are based in the remaining pockets of forest. The rate at which these activities are developing in the field has led to the fear that economic imperatives may take precedence over ecology – which would be hard to restore. This does not seem to be the spirit of the 1994 law, the implementation of which should considerably reduce the pressure on the existing forest and regenerate that which is in the process of disappearing.

The preceding analysis shows that there has been very little interest from communities acting on their own initiative. While they do exist, they form a very small proportion of the total. The cost of the process, in particular the production of the Simple Management Plan, has led such communities to stop their project prematurely or to sign fake contracts with individuals who are seeking profit for themselves.

PROBLEMS OF EXECUTION

Even if community forestry had the merit of giving forestry the social dimension it was lacking, its actual operation is still problematic (Djeumo, 2000). There are several difficulties linked to the setting up of community forests. One is the absence of a clear definition of the concept of the community to which the forest is supposed to be allocated. Cameroon's legislation seems to be focused much more on the geographical than the social definition of a community. This lack of precision has its origins in the relatively static legal corpus, rather than in the more dynamic anthropological literature (Oyono, 2000). The initiators of community forest projects, most of whom are non-resident elites, use their connections, experience and resources to prepare applications, sometimes together with internal elites such as the traditional authorities to whom they offer responsibilities on the board of the entity which is formed. Oyono (2000) thinks that the fact that most forest land is characterised by anthropological heterogeneity (for example the Bantous and the 'pygmies') and a low level of community activity, especially in southern Cameroon where the social structure is often described as horizontal, may hinder the construction of a true social contract for real community action. In certain situations where one would have expected a resounding success, it has been observed that even belonging to the same ethnic group was not enough to manage a forest. This is what happened in Mbimboué and Bengbis where the closely related populations, who had long co-existed harmoniously, saw their first conflict arise

from the launch of a community forest project in their locality. The Mbimboué forest, which previously belonged to the whole community and could be freely used, is today divided up by family. Brown (1999) notes that Wade's (1988) observation that "territorially defined groups like villages are not a focus for (Indian villagers') identity and needs" could apply equally well to most other predominantly rural societies, in Africa and elsewhere. He goes on to cite Ascher (1995) who says that where a community is identified in geographical terms, resource management is more likely to reside either with those with the greatest political power or with local government. In Cameroon, this situation has been confirmed since a large proportion of applications are submitted by political leaders, especially by those in power (Deputies, Mayors, etc), with whom logging companies like to deal so that they can look to them for support if there are any problems due to malpractice on their part.

In his review of the omissions in the legislative texts governing the establishment of community forests, Michel Vabi (2000) highlights several factors which constrain the actual transfer of responsibility for forest management to local communities. The socio-cultural obstacles including the questions of community and legal entity have been discussed above. Others relate to the 1994 Forest Law and its application decree (description of the forest, access to forest resources, the ability to enter into legal proceedings, excessive use of or delays due to administrative discretion, etc.). Finally, he also notes the problems raised by MINEF's lack of financial resources and the costs of establishing a community forest. As regards

costs, many communities have received agreement in principle from the Minister and have had forests reserved only to find themselves unable to fund the forest survey needed to produce their management plan.

In November 2000, the CFDP organised a forum which brought together almost all the players in community forestry in Cameroon in order to share and learn from each other's field experience. The forum highlighted a number of obstacles faced by village communities, the main ones being shown in Box 3.

In order to find a solution to all these concerns, the forest administration will have to consider to what extent it, or its supporting partner institutions and others involved in the sector, can support village communities in their initiative to ensure that the allocated forests can eventually fulfil their ecological, social and economic functions. The data available to the CFU indicate that the majority of incomplete applications are submitted by communities themselves, while those applications which have already reached the stage of the forest being reserved are supported by projects or private individuals. There is a need to have such institutions in the field and their important role goes without saying. Nevertheless, it is important to reverse this tendency so that local populations can be the masters of their own destinies in this process. Too many institutions work to mobilise the population in an area and then disappear without having completed the work they started, leaving the people who had pinned their hopes on them in a very desperate situation.

Box 3 The main obstacles encountered by Communities

- 1) **Process of obtaining community forests**
 - the application process seems too long
 - the lack of responsibility of certain MINEF field staff
- 2) **Funding the process**
 - costs of the Simple Management Plan
 - costs of various meetings
 - the absence of dynamic elites and NGOs
 - costs of preparing the application, etc.
 - funding the participation of other administrative services involved
- 3) **Technical capacity**
 - lack of and/or inadequate training of community leaders
 - non-compliance with clauses on the part of logging companies
 - non-compliance with Simple Management Plans by some logging companies
 - inappropriate Simple Management Plans
 - inexperience of MINEF staff in preparing applications
 - overlaps between forest boundaries marked by the cartography division resulting in maps being taken back
 - problem of villages enthusiastic about community forestry but who are caught between those who reject the concept
- 4) **Internal organisation of communities and village groups**
 - conflicts between board members
 - replacement of members of the community without consensus
 - non-compliance with recommendations made by technical authorities for the smooth running of the organisation
 - absence of young people in the organisation
 - limited participation of women
- 5) **Other problems**
 - takeover attempts by those involved in politics
 - propaganda campaigns disparaging community forests projects by those involved in politics
 - uncontrolled bush fires
 - illegal exploitation by logging companies
 - destruction of community forest boundaries by domestic animals
 - refusal by forest product users to work with the organisation

Source: CFDP (2000)

It is vital therefore, that MINEF and its partners reflect upon this and take concrete and effective action to encourage and enable communities to become more effectively involved in resource management via community forests. The main problems, as discussed in this paper, concern the organisation of local populations, the cost of the process and the need to amend the regulations, in particular the decree on forests and the 'Manual of Procedures'. Increasingly, communities are making efforts to find solutions. A good example of this are some communities in the East Province who, to their credit, have used part of the annual forest royalty (percentage of the forest tax given back to the forest-adjacent population) to finance their community forest application. Taking this a step further, might it not be possible to use a part of the special forest fund (set up to contribute to the costs of forest management) or a part of the equalisation fund (created in the new 2000-2001 finance law) to help MINEF field staff fund public awareness campaigns in the villages or to help communities which are eager to get involved in the sustainable management of a part of the forest? This would allow us to move beyond the 'blind pessimism' felt by some today, to look to the future with a bit more optimism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful for helpful comments and advice from Kate Schreckenber and David Brown of ODI, London. I would also like to express my gratitude to Kees de Groot, formerly of the CFDP, Cameroon, for the co-operation and direction provided in the early stages of working on this paper.

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ACRONYMS

CAFER	Support Centre for Rural Women
CFDP	Community Forestry Development Project
CFU	Community Forestry Unit
CIG	Common Initiative Group
DPVC	Sales of Standing Volume planning document
EIG	Economic Interest Group
FCFA	Currency in French-speaking West and Central Africa. Exchange rate: 100 FCFA = 1 FRF 750 FCFA = 1 USD
FMU	Forest Management Unit
MINEF	Ministry of the Environment and Forests
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PFC	Community Forest Project
SNV	Netherlands Development Organisation

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CREDITS

Editors of this paper:	David Brown and Kate Schreckenber
Layout	Caroline Wood
Administrative Editor:	Vicky Pett
Translation:	Claude Karnif (25b(i)), Clare Lord (25b(ii))
Printed by:	Russell Press Ltd, Nottingham on recycled paper
RDFN logo by Redesign	

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This mailing of the Rural Development Forestry Network is funded by
The UK Department for International Development