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## **Community Forestry and Poverty Alleviation in Cameroon**

Timothée Fomété and Jaap Vermaat

## **A Conservation Partnership: Community Forestry at Kilum-Ijim, Cameroon**

Anne A. Gardner, John DeMarco and Christian A. Asanga

## **The 4Rs: a Valuable Tool for Management and Benefit Sharing Decisions for the Bimbia Bonadikombo Forest, Cameroon**

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# A CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP: COMMUNITY FORESTRY AT KILUM-IJIM, CAMEROON

Anne A. Gardner, John DeMarco and Christian A. Asanga

## SUMMARY

Community forestry in Cameroon is often seen as a way to redirect some of the benefits of timber exploitation to local communities. This paper presents a case study from the Kilum-Ijim Forest which is in an area that has insufficient valuable timber to be of logging interest but is, on the contrary, of great conservation value. Although the interests of the conservation community and local people differ, there is significant overlap and a common interest in maintaining the forest in its present extent and natural state. This has permitted the development of community forestry as a partnership between the conservation community and the local population.

## INTRODUCTION

The last few years have seen a growing interest in community forestry in Cameroon, as increasing numbers of communities take advantage of provisions in the 1994 forestry law that permit the legal attribution of community forests. Much of the interest in community forestry has been in the southern part of the country where there is high potential for income generation through timber exploitation and where community forestry is often seen as a means of redirecting some of the benefits to be gained from timber exploitation towards

community development. The situation in the Bamenda Highlands region of Cameroon (Mount Kilum and the surrounding hills and plateaux) is different, as the forests here do not contain enough valuable timber to interest commercial loggers. Instead, in this region, community forestry has developed as a partnership between the conservation community, who are interested in the montane forests as important centres of endemism, and the local population, who are interested in the more direct benefits to be derived from the forest such as water, fuelwood, medicines and honey. This partnership has by and large been a successful one, and the management of the Kilum-Ijim Forest by the surrounding communities serves as an important example of biodiversity conservation through community forestry.

## THE KILUM-IJIM FOREST

Forests once covered much of the Bamenda Highlands region of Cameroon. Over time, however, the forests were progressively cleared for farmland and grazing land until today there are only patches left, generally along peaks and ridges where farming is more difficult. The Kilum-Ijim Forest, at 20,000 hectares, is the largest of these remaining patches and is the most important remnant of Afro-montane forest in West Africa. It is located on Mount Kilum (3011 m) and the

adjoining Ijim Ridge (2000 – 2500 m) and is recognised as a globally important centre of endemism. Fifteen montane bird species endemic to Cameroon are found in the forest. Two of these, Bannerman's Turaco, *Tauraco bannermani*, and the Banded Wattle-eye, *Platysteira laticincta*, are restricted to the forest and a few nearby forest fragments and are classified as endangered according to IUCN criteria. At least six species of mammals found in the forest are endemic to the Bamenda Highlands, and ten to the Cameroon highlands. While reptiles and amphibians have been less thoroughly studied, 11 species endemic to the Cameroon highlands have been identified, of which two are restricted to the forest. There are at least 40 species of plants endemic to the Cameroon highlands, and five of these are found only in the forest.

The area around the forest is among the most densely populated in Africa. With about 200,000 people living within a day's walk of the forest, human pressure on the forest is high, particularly for new farmland. The process of deforestation has accelerated over the last two decades, as a rapidly growing population has combined with declining economic conditions to increase the demand for new farmland. The most recent land rush came in the late 1980s when drastically reduced coffee prices sent many farmers further up the slopes for new land to plant alternate cash crops of beans and potatoes. In 1992, it was estimated that at the then current rates of clearing, the Kilum-Ijim Forest would have disappeared in five years had efforts not been made to protect it.

## PROTECTION OF THE FOREST

Attempts to conserve the Kilum-Ijim Forest began in 1931 when the Conservator of Forests for the Bamenda Division drew limits for the proposed Kilum-Ijim Forest Reserve, known then as the "Bush of Hill Forest Type". In 1975, after several failed attempts to gazette the forest reserve, the Conservator was successful in demarcating part of the forest, although the boundary was not universally respected. All further attempts to completely demarcate the forest failed and by 1986 the forest had been reduced to 50% of its 1963 size because of agricultural encroachment and other human influences such as forest fires and grazing animals, especially goats. Other, more subtle, influences of human use that resulted in forest degradation were the commercial exploitation of *Prunus africana*, which began in 1976 (now illegal but still occurring), as well as the selective removal of plant and animal species for food, medicines, carving and fuelwood.

In 1983 and 1985, the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP), now BirdLife International, carried out surveys in the area that led to the establishment of the Kilum and Ijim Mountain Forest Projects in 1987 and 1992 respectively, in order to stop further forest loss. (Since 1995, the two projects have been joined together as the Kilum-Ijim Forest Project.) Respecting the government's original intention of gazetting the forest as a state reserve and learning from past attempts to demarcate the forest, the projects worked in collaboration with the communities adjacent to the forest to negotiate boundaries beyond which no

further clearing for farming could take place. This work was carried out by commissions consisting of representatives of the community, traditional authorities and administrative authorities and was completed in 1991 in Kilum and 1994 in Ijim. This demarcation has been largely respected and has halted the rapid destruction of the forest.

## LONG-TERM MANAGEMENT OF THE FOREST

While the original intention of the Kilum and Ijim Mountain Forest Projects was to protect the Kilum-Ijim Forest by designating it as a government forest reserve, the importance of community involvement in the management of the forest was recognised very early on. The communities around the forest have a strong interest in the forest, depending upon it for a wide range of products, the most important being fuelwood, medicines, honey and building materials. Most watercourses in the project area originate in the forest and the role of the forest as a water source is widely understood. In addition, the forest has significant cultural and spiritual value to the local population. However, until the promulgation of the new forestry law in 1994, management of the forest was seen to be a government responsibility, no matter how high the levels of community participation in the process might be. This situation changed with the 1994 forestry law which allowed for the establishment of legally recognised community forests, in which management could be devolved to the communities bordering the forest, on the basis of an agreed forest management plan.

Since 1994, the Kilum-Ijim Forest Project has been working with the 44 communities surrounding the Kilum-Ijim Forest for the establishment of legally recognised community forests that will cover the entire forest. The process is significantly advanced and it is expected that the last of the communities will have their community forests legally attributed within the next 18 months. Despite the inevitable conflicts and problems associated with any kind of natural resource management in an area where pressure for land is very high, the process of communities taking responsibility for forest management with support from the Ministry of the Environment and Forests (MINEF) is generally working very well. All three main actors (communities, traditional authorities and administrative authorities) are increasingly taking responsibility for forest management functions that were either not carried out in the past or were carried out by outsiders (e.g. projects). By the time the Kilum-Ijim Forest Project officially winds down in 2004, there is every reason to be optimistic that the system in place will be effective in managing the forest in the long term.

## CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS

The foundation on which the work of the project is based is a convergence of interests between the conservation community (as represented by BirdLife International, for example) and the local population. On the side of the conservation community, the interest is in ensuring the continued survival of the many rare and endemic species found in this unique forest. For the local population, there is a multiplicity of interests

ranging, as described above, from ensuring a water supply for the community to the use of various forest products and cultural concerns. These interests are different, but there is a significant overlap between them in that both the conservation community and a majority of the local population favour maintaining the forest at its present extent and in a natural state. It is this convergence of interest that has enabled the project, MINEF and the communities to work together in a truly collaborative way for the common goal of forest conservation.

Other strategies could have been chosen for the conservation of the Kilum-Ijim Forest. Indeed, as mentioned above, the original plan was to gazette the forest as a government forest reserve. However, it was the communities' strong, demonstrated interest in the forest that prompted the change in strategy. Those more familiar with the forests of southern Cameroon, with their high potential for income through timber exploitation, are often surprised at the high degree of motivation for forest management exhibited by the population around the Kilum-Ijim Forest, despite the forest's low potential for income generation. The experience of Kilum-Ijim clearly shows, however, that communities may value their forests for far more than just cash, to the extent that they are willing to contribute the significant time and effort needed to manage the forest in the long term, as well as voluntarily give up the option of converting the forest to other land uses which may produce greater cash benefits. Where there is convergence between a community's interests and the objective of biodiversity conservation, there is clearly potential for

using community forestry as a strategy for biodiversity conservation. The forest's low potential for income generation does mean, however, that communities are unlikely to undertake the process for legal attribution of a community forest without some outside support. Just to deposit a required document with the appropriate government service, for example, requires cash to pay for someone to travel to the capital. Thus, what has been developed at Kilum-Ijim is conservation partnership, with each partner contributing to a common objective.

### COMPLEMENTARY STRATEGIES

While the main thrust of the Kilum-Ijim Forest Project's strategy for forest conservation has been to build upon this convergence of interests, it should be recognised that other, complementary strategies have also been employed in order to facilitate the establishment of a community-based system of forest management. For example, MINEF and the local administration, with the support of the project, at times employ conventional law enforcement measures to deal with individuals in the community who are contravening agreed rules and damaging the forest. Presently, the various communities are active in enforcing forest management rules at their level. Offenders are frequently dealt with through the traditional village justice system, or by newly created committees set up for this purpose. However, further measures are often supported and even demanded by the broader communities when local efforts are unsuccessful. Thus the use of conventional law enforcement measures does not signify

the failure of community management, but is a necessary back-up system that ensures that the agreed interests of the community and government will be respected within the overall legal framework of Cameroon.

As noted earlier, the main threat to the forest in recent years has been the demand for new farmland. In recognition of this reality, the project has also invested considerable effort into training in agriculture, livestock rearing and related activities which may help people to earn a better living from the land they have outside the forest, as well as from the forest itself (notably from beekeeping). These training activities are not intended as compensation for 'giving up' the forest and, in fact, the provision of material inputs that could be viewed as compensation is kept to a minimum. Rather, the programme is an attempt by the project, as a working partner with the communities, to help the communities find solutions to a pressing problem that impinges on the forest. A study of these so-called livelihood activities by an outside consultant suggests that they have been largely effective in stimulating people to shift their attention to other options for increasing food production and income generation, rather than joining the scramble to open up new farms or grazing areas in the forest. Presently, project support for these livelihood activities is already being phased out, without any major backlash on the part of the communities being apparent. Thus, while these activities may have played a significant role in increasing support for forest conservation, it does not appear that the communities are expecting ongoing inputs of this nature as an 'incentive' to maintain the forest. Again, this supports the

key observation that in the case of the communities around the Kilum-Ijim forest, the forest itself seems to provide sufficient incentives for people to want to protect it in the long term.

### BIODIVERSITY IN THE LONG TERM

Despite the convergence of interests in the case of Kilum-Ijim, it is important to stress that the interests of the conservation community and those of the local population *are* different. It is equally important to note that a community that is managing a forest to meet its own objectives will not necessarily achieve the objective of biodiversity conservation. Therefore, the question of how to ensure that community forestry will lead to biodiversity conservation must be addressed.

At Kilum-Ijim, several actions have been taken to ensure long-term biodiversity conservation. First, in approaching communities to propose the idea of community forestry, the project team, including MINEF, was always very clear and open about its own objective of biodiversity conservation. Thus, it was unambiguous from the start that any long-term management of the forest would have to encompass two sets of objectives: that of biodiversity conservation and that of sustainable use of the forest by the population. In other words, the conservation community was recognised as a stakeholder in the forest and it was accepted that its interests would have to be accommodated in any negotiations regarding management of the forest.

Secondly, the project and MINEF developed detailed conservation objectives for the forest. These included objectives concerning, for example, the extent of various vegetation types in the forest, the presence and number of certain rare and endemic species of various taxa, the structure of the forest, etc. This allowed the project to translate its broad objective of biodiversity conservation into concrete ideas that are easily discussed and understood, and which can be practically implemented and verified. The specific conservation objectives are used as the basis from which technical advice to the communities is formulated and guide the project during negotiations about forest management plans. Thus the resulting plans should ensure that the forest will be managed in such a way that both community and conservation objectives are met, if not one hundred percent, at least to a high enough degree that both partners will support the plan in the long term.

One result of the process of negotiation has been a set of forest-wide rules governing use of the forest, which incorporates the objectives of all stakeholders, i.e. both biodiversity conservation and sustainable use. As an illustration of the extent to which the interests of the conservation community and those of the local population overlap, it is interesting to note that many of the rules governing forest use proposed by the communities were far stronger and more strict than those which the project might have suggested. Individual communities now use the forest-wide rules as the starting point for the development of the management plans for their particular

community forests. Thus, biodiversity conservation objectives, as well as sustainable use objectives, are incorporated into all management plans for the individual community forests.

Finally, to ensure long-term biodiversity conservation, a permanent ecological monitoring unit is being established. The mission of this unit is to provide regular feedback to all the parties interested in the forest on its condition, particularly its unique species and features that justify its protection. Without such feedback, there would be no way to verify that all the effort being put into conservation is actually achieving the stated objectives. While the project is presently working with communities to put in place a system whereby communities themselves monitor both the condition of their forests and the health of their forest management institutions, it is recognised that communities will be most interested in monitoring the forest with respect to their own objectives. In addition, to be effective, ecological monitoring needs to be forest-wide and permanent. It was judged that these conditions could be most easily met in a separate, permanent institution. Such a structure can also play the role of an outside eye on the forest. Should the whole forest management system collapse for unexpected reasons, the unit can at least raise the alarm about the state of the forest.

The ecological monitoring unit will be one of the permanent institutions that will form the overall forest management system in the long term. First, there are the legally recognised community-based forest

management institutions that form the core of the system. They are supported by, and have links with, the traditional governing structures of the communities. It has been proposed (but not yet approved) that a permanent MINEF structure, a technical operations unit, should be created to provide support to community forestry at Kilum-Ijim in the long-term. The third component will be the ecological monitoring unit whose mandate will be to provide the feedback described above. A trust fund currently under development is expected to provide the resources needed for long-term ecological monitoring, as well as for some limited, strategic support to communities, including, for example, technical advice and facilitation of periodic meetings among the various communities managing the forest.

#### **BUT WILL IT REALLY WORK?**

The experience at Kilum-Ijim described above strongly suggests that community forestry can be a viable strategy for biodiversity conservation. In writing this, we are conscious that there will be many people, familiar with the practical details of implementing community-based natural resource management, who will be wondering whether the picture we have painted here is not overly optimistic. It should be recognised, therefore, that Kilum-Ijim has experienced its share of obstacles in the community forestry process. For example, a long-standing conflict over grazing in one part of the forest continues to pit a small group of graziers against the rest of the community. Disputes over inter-village and inter-Fondom boundaries (rife throughout the NorthWest Province)

continue to stall the process in several villages. Communities have experienced administrative blockages in trying to process their applications. A leadership dispute in one village threatened to block the process entirely. The list could be continued but the point of these examples is that conflict resolution is an integral part of any process to establish new rules of land use.

What is encouraging at Kilum-Ijim is that communities value their forests enough to put in the time and effort required to resolve the various conflicts and problems that arise. At times it has been the project which has played the role of facilitator, at other times it has been the traditional or administrative authorities. There would be no point to any of these efforts however, unless the communities were willing to try and find a solution in the first place.

Thus, in our experience, the critical factor favouring success of community forestry as a strategy for biodiversity conservation is a convergence of the interests of the local population with those who promote biodiversity conservation. In such a situation, a partnership can be developed to establish a system of forest management in which the objectives of all stakeholders can be largely met. For biodiversity conservation objectives to be achieved, it is important that these objectives be clearly stated and well understood by all parties, and that the forest management plans explicitly incorporate these objectives. A permanent institution with responsibility for ongoing biodiversity monitoring should ensure that the community and government

institutions involved should receive the information they need to effectively manage the forest.

It is, of course, too early to claim complete success of community forest management at Kilum-Ijim. The real test will be whether the Kilum-Ijim Forest still exists and is well managed decades and centuries from now. Thus far however, there does seem to be reason to be cautiously optimistic that the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those presently using and managing the forest will be able to share the wonders and benefits of the Kilum-Ijim Forest with their own children.

#### **ACRONYMS**

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| MINEF | Ministry of the Environment and Forests                                 |
| IUCN  | World Conservation Union  |
| IUCBP | International Council for Bird Preservation, now Birdlife International |

**Please send comments on this paper to:**

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**CREDITS**

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