

# Building collaboration through Action Research: the case of Ottotomo Forest Reserve in Cameroon

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## SUMMARY

The Ottotomo Forest Reserve in the Central Province of Cameroon is one of the protected areas in the country where several management strategies have been tested with varying degrees of success (e.g., the Tropical Shelterwood System (TSS) silvicultural technique was piloted in this forest more than 30 years ago). From 1994 with the enactment of the new forestry legislation in Cameroon, the management strategy shifted considerably, moving away from the classical 'fences and fines' to a collaborative approach whereby the aspirations of the local communities are taken into consideration. This paper attempts to provide an account of a collaborative management efforts facilitated by CIFOR in the reserve. Using a series of Participatory Action Research (PAR) tools, this paper identifies specific management problems, attempts to analyse those problems and establishes collaborative arrangements for future management inputs into the reserve. The paper ends with a series of lessons learned from this exercise.

Keywords: Ottotomo Forest Reserve, inertia, stakeholders, collaborative arrangements, change

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of forest management is rooted in rules and practices of access to resources. In pre-colonial Africa, these resources were governed by lineage property. Thus access to forest resources was placed under the regime of the commons, as these resources were considered as a common property. As such, these resources were determined by the rule and the practice of 'open access'. Colonial administrations, by laying down the rule according to which forests and lands 'were without masters' (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1982), introduced a private State property. Though since that period, forest management in Cameroon is under State control and is rooted in a technocratic system.

In Cameroon, after more than decades but less than a century of exclusion, the need of significant involvement of local communities in forest management is for the first time, recognized by the State and the management through the 1994 forestry legislation (Asanga 2001). To that effect, there has been growing interest within the country around the paradigm of community participation in forest management over the last ten years. It has generally been admitted that the State management approaches have had little success and that one major factor in the failure may have been the lack of community involvement, as noted by Muam Chi (1998) and Asanga (2001). The recognition of the need of collaboration is a key issue in community participation and in innovative forest management systems, as emphasized by Fisher (1995) who stated 'collaborative approaches to forest management have clear advantages in

their potential to provide benefits to local people in exchange for the costs of conservation'. Thus collaborative management offers a solution to the conflicting nature of forest management, generally characterized by misunderstandings and struggles (Hilhorst and Aarnink 1999, Van den Berg and Biesbrouck 2000).

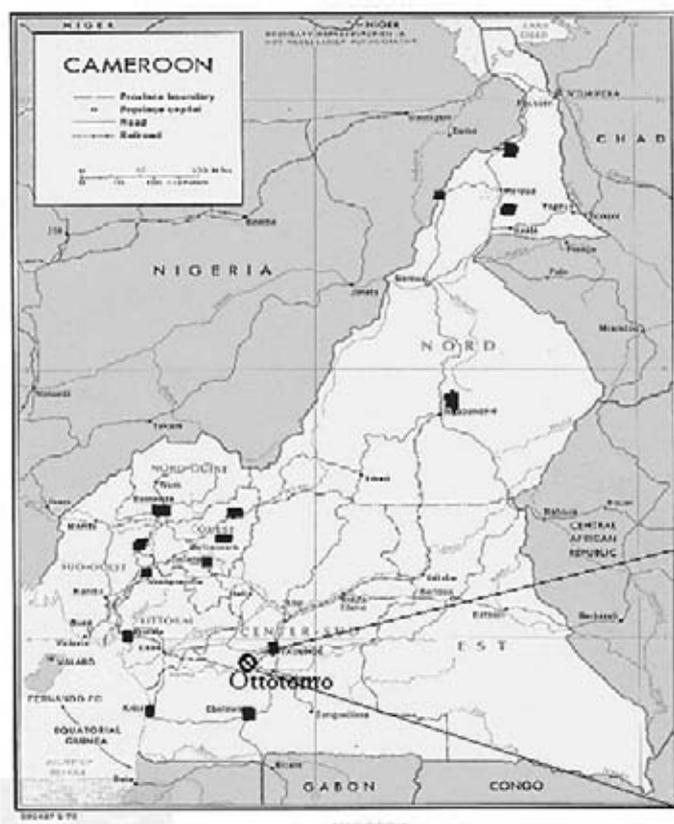
The present paper seeks to document collaborative management efforts facilitated by CIFOR in the Ottotomo Forest Reserve in Cameroon from 2000 to 2002. This is an example of a site where the local people depend heavily on the forest for their well-being and represents one of the 'blocks of nature' in Cameroon where attempts have been made to achieve an innovative approach of forest management through meaningful dialogue and negotiation. The participatory action research (PAR) work was based on two parameters: (i) observing and analyzing factors of inertia in management practices and systems, (ii) stimulating change in policy and management practices and systems, (iii) observing and analyzing the reactions of these practices and systems to the whole process of facilitation, in order to draw 'generalize' lessons. Two key questions have completed this PAR process: firstly, what should be the future of the Ottotomo Forest Reserve? and secondly, how could various interests and concerns be combined without threatening the long-term management and the sustainability of the Reserve? The first section presents the methods used during this research. The second section is a historical 'review' of the relationships between the State and local

communities living in and around this protected area. The third deals with the problems and conflicts that have emerged from the ‘cohabitation’ between these two stakeholders, while lessons drawn so far constitute the fourth section.

### THE RESERVE, THE STATE, AND THE LOCAL PEOPLE

The Ottotomo Forest Reserve covers an area of 4 472 ha (Figure 1). In 1929 it was gazetted as a ‘Native Authority Forest’ by the French colonial administration (Colonial Order n° 2180 of 1929), without any agreement with local people (Zibi 2002). This led to the shift of the regime of forest property from a ‘community/ lineage property’ to a ‘private State property’. The Reserve is situated in the central province of Cameroon, located in the humid forest zone.

FIGURE 1 The Ottotomo Forest Reserve in Cameroon



This protected forest belongs to the semi-deciduous forest of Cameroon. Timber is an important forest product in this zone, as shown by ONADEF (1999) in its inventory. Other products derived from the forest include the dried endocarps of the seeds of *Ricindodendron heudelotti* (Euphorbiaceae), those of the *Panda oleosa* (Pandaceae) known as ‘shell nut’ and of *Irvingia gabonensis* (Irvingiaceae), which are collected seasonally and may be sold (ONADEF 1999). There are a number of other plants, which provide fruits and nuts, including *Dacryodes edulis* (African Plum) and *Garcinia kola* Heckel (Bitter Cola). In addition there are several species providing wild

vegetables: *Achea*, *Amaranthus spp*, *Celosia spp*, *Hibiscus esculentus*. Plants yielding medicinal products used by the local people include *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*, and *Stautia stipitata* (ONADEF 1999). Forest spices and stimulants are produced by *Afrostyrax lepidophyllus*, *Garcinia cola*, *Cola acuminata*, etc. Rattan/cane (*Ancistrophyllum secundiflorum*), chewing-sticks of *Garcinia sp*, and saplings of various forest trees for use as building poles are collected for village use and may be traded. The sap of the *Raffia sp*, and to some extent that of the oil palm, *Elaeis guineensis*, is collected and used as a beverage. Local people practice, on a daily basis, activities such as farming, fishing, trapping, hunting, and gathering as well (ONADEF 1999).

### A long and discontinuous State intervention

Though it had no formal management plan until 1999, a first series of ‘management’ operations were conducted in the Reserve from 1930 to 1943, notably regeneration, and was stopped by the Second World War. The history of the State management of this Reserve in post-independent Cameroon is marked by a lot of disturbances. It is in 1972 that a State agency, the Fonds National Forestier et Piscicole (FNFP), restarted regeneration activities in the Reserve, until 1979. In 1989, another State agency, the Centre National de Développement des Forêts (CENADEFOR), realized inventory operations in the Reserve. After 1979 regeneration activities took off again with the Office National de Régénération des Forêts (ONAREF), in 1983.

In 1990, ONAREF became the Office National de Développement des Forêts (ONADEF). This new agency has intensified regeneration activities over the last five



years, and have designed a management plan in 1999 (ONADEF 1999). During the designing of this management plan local communities were informed and consulted. But according to villagers, the design operations did not take into consideration their aspirations and they were not involved in the process of decision-making as far as the management of the Reserve is concerned. In other words, the management plan was designed without the participation of local communities and without a substantive collaboration.

It should be remembered that the new forestry legislation of 1994 talked of the participation of local communities in forest management, but powers were devolved to them only for the creation of community forests and for the management of portions of forestry fees. Protected areas and forest reserves have remained a 'State affair'.

The Ottotomo Forest Reserve management plan has three main objectives: (i) to promote a rational and participatory management of the Reserve, (ii) to contribute to the improvement of human well-being, and (iii) to promote ecotourism within the Reserve. On the whole, this management plan is based on 4 functional components:

- timber production and aquaculture, in an area of 1'575 ha
- a regeneration zone, with young plantations, in an area of 516 ha
- conservation and protection, in an area of 796 ha
- an area of use rights intended for local people, for gathering and collection of wood for domestic purposes.

The management plan does not mention fishing and hunting. Although the management plan of 1999 included an element of community participation, the state management of forests has never been participatory and the local community was still not involved in the management decisions even though the forestry legislation opened room for this five years earlier in 1994. It is in this way that there was a need to carry out PAR exercise in the site (2000-2002).

### Box 1 The local discourse and narrative about the State and the forest

"Our ancestors occupied this forest as far as back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1930, the colonial administration occupied the area on a unilateral decision, and sent most of the people out without due compensation. After several years, the population increased and cultivable spaces became small, and land conflicts became apparent. From 1930 to 2002, is 72 years that this blurred situation has lasted. This is deeply irritating the local communities. Isn't it said that the land belongs to the first occupants? If this is recognized, what has been done so far? No land, no compensation, no accompanying measures, no road. It should not be believed that we are claiming our land that has turned out by the wave of events to be the State property. We want to tell you, in two words as in thousands, that the lack of information about forestry laws, the lack of harmony between

the laws in force and customary regulations does not favor dialogue. In all the villages, people are not well informed about what is going on as concern legal aspects of forest management. Only a few educated elite are aware. The forest management agencies and the Ministry of Environment and Forests have not contributed to enhancing communication with inhabitants of this area about regulations in force".

**Source:** Speech presented by a local elite, Mr Lin Zibi Mbia, to administrative authorities, ONADEF officials and CIFOR Board of Trustees, on the occasion of CIFOR BoT visit to Ottotomo Forest Reserve on April 2002.

There are fourteen villages in and around the Reserve. These villages fall within two local administrative units called *groupements*<sup>1</sup>: (i) the *groupement* of Nkong-abok, and (ii) the *groupement* of Nkongmeyos. According to Zibi (2002), the settlements in this area were structured before 1901. There are 1 239 inhabitants in and around the Ottotomo Forest Reserve (ONADEF 1999). The highest population concentration is found north of the Reserve, around the village Koli. Population pressure on the resources is high, north of the Reserve with resultant frequent internal conflicts. When the Reserve was gazetted in 1930 there was a buffer zone for the locals to carry out their activities. As the population grew, and with the arrival of cocoa in the late 1930s, the total buffer zone was gradually transformed into cocoa plantations by the inhabitants as cocoa was fetching a high price on the world market, at that time. Today, most of the inhabitants especially the young people have migrated to urban areas because of lack of meaningful employment and other social amenities in the area, but the Reserve has remained the object of attack with growing encroachment from the local population and also from illegal forest exploiters from neighboring towns and villages who harvest most of the valuable tree species.

### METHODS

By early 2000, the research project had initiated contacts with communities around the Ottotomo Forest Reserve by developing a common vision of the situation using diverging techniques such as brainstorming and discussions with a wide range of stakeholders (local communities, forest administration, NGOs and administrative institutions). This was followed by village-based stakeholder analysis (in the three research villages) to understand gain a holistic view of the problem and its context. The rationale is that

<sup>1</sup> Two or more villages grouped as a basic administrative until at the local level and headed by a '*chef de groupement*'.

divergent management goals of different stakeholders interfere with effective and benign forest management (which we define to include human well being), unless there is a conscious effort to harmonize or identify complementarities. Restitution meetings were later held in the villages to share the information obtained.

At the beginning, all attempts by the research team and local facilitators to promote dialogue were met with disdain and hostility. Only after a second attempt to explain the research objectives did a real dialogue begin. All the villages in the area were visited, and repeated discussions and debates occurred over many months. At the same time, meetings were held with all the stakeholders, such as government officials, the forest administration and representatives of Association Terre et Développement, a local NGO. These groups proved less difficult to engage in a positive dialogue than the local communities. The difficulties encountered in engaging the communities in meaningful dialogue convinced the team to spend more time in local villages to facilitate the necessary dialogue. Facilitating dialogue within communities was mostly in the form of sharing ideas and views during village meetings, and informal discussion with villagers. Thereafter, the issue of collaboration between community and other stakeholders were addressed. For example, the mistrust between ONADEF and the local communities had been going on for a long time. The first project workshop that was held with the concerned stakeholders was an opportunity to rebuild the relationship between ONADEF and the communities as the local communities freely expressed themselves as well as sharing their views with others. Similar workshops involving concerned stakeholders have been regularly organized to foster such collaboration. To further enhance collaboration, the research project had to sign a formal agreement each with ONADEF and ATD.

Participatory sketch mapping and historical transects of the landscape were undertaken in the three action research villages, though not fully representing the reserve area in terms of the number of villages. These techniques were helpful to the team and the local communities to look at resources and management issues from a spatial perspective. This was followed by one internal seminar, which was open to the stakeholders and other collaborators to share field lessons.

## RESULTS

### Stakeholders identification

The Ottotomo Forest Reserve has different status to different groups. In addition to the fact that it is a protected State forest, it is at the same time the center of a legal dualism, that is, both the State and local people claim its ownership. This forest has a crucial value for many generations of local people, in terms of livelihoods and as a cultural inheritance. Equally, its luxuriance and some tree species found would attract logging companies.

Stakeholders identified in the area include:

*Local communities:* activities practiced by the local people in the Reserve have been mentioned. It should however be emphasized that they have a strong interest in agriculture. As part of the Bantu people of Cameroon, local communities give two key functions to agriculture: (i) livelihoods, and (ii) land appropriation, through the private ownership right induced by the transformation of a portion of forest to a farmland (Diaw 1997, Oyono et al. 2003) and Locke's labor theory of ownership (Haddad 2003). Apart from arable land for farming, they want to have secure access into the Reserve for non-timber forest products including bushmeat (Tiani 2001, Mala and Jum 2001). For local development, they do have a strong interest in benefiting from roads, schools and health centers.

*ONADEF and the forestry administration:* ONADEF is the technical State agency in charge of the protection and the sustainable management of the Reserve. Its interest is to check and control illegal exploitation of forests resources, enhance collaboration with forest users and, where possible, contribute to the improvement of the living conditions of the local people. The Ministry of Environment and Forests is also represented regionally by an administrative service.

*Intervening public and private services:* The regional services of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Livestocks, Fishery and Animal Husbandry, and a local NGO known as ATD of Ngoumou, fall into this category of stakeholders. Their interest is to support the local people of the Reserve area in their activities (agriculture, agro-forestry, and aquaculture) and provide information and training where possible.

*Illegal loggers:* The Ottotomo Forest Reserve is located in the neighborhood of Yaoundé, the national capital. Due to 'global urbanization', and the high demand for wood (Plouvier et al. 2002), illegal loggers from Yaoundé encroach on the Reserve. They act in collusion with local young men (Jum et al. 2001), even local agents of the Ministry of Forests are suspected of helping these illegal loggers.

*The council:* in Cameroon, the council or *commune* is equivalent to local government. Therefore, it is responsible for the socio-economic concerns of the villages in and around the Ottotomo Forest Reserve.

*The international community:* The International Tropical Timber Organization (IITO) has given financial support to ONADEF during the past two year. In addition to CIFOR, the International Center for Research in Agro-Forestry (ICRAF) is conducting

a small action-research program with some villages of the area alongside with ATD.

### **The key problems**

There are three major problems: (i) the amount of arable land is insufficient, (ii) there are growing encroachments from local populations who claim customary use right in the Reserve and this has brought them into conflict with the Reserve management agency, and (iii) there is a lack of interaction and collaboration between villages concerned, and between local communities and the State (ONADEF).

This process of problem analysis aimed at generating the same understanding of problems identified, and the causes and the consequences of each problem. It clearly came out that the colonial State did not consult local communities when the Reserve was delineated in 1929. The first causal parameter is represented by the violent character of colonial States and their asymmetrical relationships with the natives, given the fact that they have *de jure*, deprived the latter from the land handed down to them by their ancestors. The second issue is on 'legal dualism', both local communities and the State claim property ownership on the same forest ecosystem. There was also social and institutional 'atomism' – given the fact that there was a discursive compartmentalization and 'interactionist nothingness' between various stakeholders, mainly the State and local communities.

All these causal parameters have led to consequences such as misunderstandings, conflicts between the State and the local people, and encroachments in the Reserve. The consequences have been reproducing and reactivating, in a cyclical manner, by the above-mentioned causes. Subsequently, some global constraints have emerged. First, was the rejection by local communities of the primacy of the State and its ministries and agencies over the forest. Second, was the threat on the ecological equilibrium of the Ottotomo Forest Reserve, and third, was the lack of any alternative or common vision of 'what to do'.

### **Building collaborative arrangements**

As mentioned earlier, the PAR exercise included dialogue through field meetings, village workshops, and public discussion and has generated a common understanding of problems identified and analyzed earlier amongst local communities and the State. At the meso (or regional) level, a stakeholder forum was organized, involving representatives of local communities, ONADEF officials, and decision-makers. These methods were very useful for building collaboration. New situations and difficulties emerged and various stakeholders reacted in a different, and sometimes unexpected, way to the success of the forum (Diaw *et al.* 2001). The facilitation strategy and agenda benefited from the strong trust and support of ONADEF. On the whole, facilitation included among other things the creation of channels of communication and dialogue, the setting up of mechanisms intending to clear up misunderstandings and

misperceptions as the process moves along. While stimulating and improving mutual understanding, the facilitation has had a substantial progress in changing stakeholders' attitudes about resources conservation and management. The process aim was to strategize a 'road map' oriented towards a collaborative management of the Ottotomo Forests Reserve.

### **Setting up a platforms for communication and for learning**

Until the recent implementation of action research in the area, communication and social learning were hampered by the lack of a common framework of understanding. Social learning, defined as a process of understanding each other's knowledge, opinion, and concern (Buck *et al.* 2001), emerged through various local level stakeholder meetings. These stakeholders meetings did bring up 'good' suggestions for discussion and exchanges, with a view of working together. This new initiative included the setting up of a *Comité des villages*, aiming at promoting communication amongst villages in and around the Ottotomo Forest Reserve. The *Comité des villages* was suggested by ONADEF and is made up of representatives of each of the villages concerned with the Reserve, with traditional authorities and young people aware of forest management issue. Similarly, this platform appeared as a relevant framework through which barriers between village level actors could be dismantled and linkages improved.

### **Collaborative view of the future**

A series of participatory visioning meetings facilitated by CIFOR teams have offered prospects, yet the solution consisting of providing additional farm lands to the local communities, though very complex in terms of decision-making, emerged as a fair opportunity. This had to be negotiated with ONADEF and with the State. However, there has been an attempt to overcome this complexity as ONADEF and local communities have agreed on the creation of a buffer zone within the Reserve. This buffer zone is expected to provide additional farm land and cash income agricultural and agro - forestry activities.

### **Development of local indicators of sustainable forest management**

CIFOR has organized a 'regional' workshop on the identification and the development of local and simple indicators of sustainable forest management in the Ngoumou / Ottotomo areas in 2001. The workshop brought together various stakeholders including local communities, village organizations, ONADEF, ATD and representatives of ministries involved in natural resource management. Our hypothesis was that sustainability of forest management in a given area could be achieved only if all key stakeholders agree upon collaborative

management objectives and indicators set up to monitor the process.

TABLE 1 Principles and indicators of sustainable forest management as indicated by villagers

Principles	Indicators
Ecosystem integrity is effective	Many trees;
	animal species conserved;
	rationally exploited forests;
	many trees;
	abundance of non timber products;
	good promotion of pharmacopoeia;
Human well-being is effective	abundance of fish in rivers;
	abundance of fauna.
	Internal conflicts resolved;
	social harmony;
	relevant community organization;
	good support from NGOs;
	access to resource secured;
	Good roads;
	health centers;
	functional schools;
	enough food;
	health centers ;
	strong houses;
many sources of income;	
electricity;	
many wells.	

## CONCLUSION

Three policy processes are being implemented in the area, as well as in the rest of the country: decentralization, local governance and the poverty reduction strategy. With regard to decentralization, the State is ready to discuss the possibilities of transferring management responsibilities to local communities. These can accelerate local governance processes of natural resource management in the area, which are already being formalised with negotiation on oil compensations between the State, the Cameroon-Chad oil pipeline project and local communities. In terms of poverty reduction, benefits are expected from the processes of natural resource governance. Furthermore, local communities anticipate greater public accountability as one of the outcomes of the management of the oil pipeline project compensations. This process is already paying off in terms of access for the first time to information on the incomes of their local councils. Significant challenges still remain. The role of Agence Nationale d'Appui au Développement Forestier (ANAFOR) that has recently replaced ONADEF is yet to be clarified with regard to the Reserve management and the buffer zone initiative.

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