Case-study: An elitist appropriation of the community forestry and the management of the Annual Forestry Fee in a Cameroonian village

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Abstract

This case study research is a significant example of the difficulties that encounter the enforcement of the decentralization of the forestry sector in Cameroon. By using an anthropological approach, it analyses the effective management of a community forest and the management of the Annual Forestry Fee (RFA) at the local level of a Cameroonian village. It shows that, in practice, local communities have not been empowered since local and regional elites have exploited these two decentralized entities for their own interests, exercising a powerful control over them and holding almost the whole decision-making power.

Introduction

1. The decentralization of forestry sector in Cameroon includes several parts. In this research, two parts have been investigated and compared:
   - The transfer of responsibility and management power to the local communities for the creation of a community forest.
   - The transfer of 10% of the Annual Forestry Fee (RFA) to the local communities.

2. For both entities, three objectives of the decentralization of the forestry sector in Cameroon have been evaluated:
   - The participatory objective: to increase the participation of local communities to decision-making on the management of forest resources.
   - The democratic objective: to contribute to the development of local democracy. The whole community does not participate directly in the management of the community forest and the RFA but is represented by authoritative representatives (management committees) that have been democratically elected by the communities.
   - Social and economic objective: according to the law, the income generated by the decentralization for local communities has to serve the development of the community as a whole. The projects have to be approved by the majority of the members of the management committees.

Methodology

- Anthropological fieldwork of six weeks in the East Province of Cameroon: formal & informal interviews; participant observation.
- Strategic analysis (Olivier de Saedeleer, 2003): approach of the local social reality through the analysis of conflicts present in the local area. The decentralization of forestry sector in Cameroon is apprehended as an arena where actors develop strategies around common stakes.
- Comparative approach: systematic research on each decentralized entity present in the village.

Results

1. Failure of the participation of local communities: the two decentralized entities have been hijacked by two political opponents struggling for the control of the region
   - The current Mayor of the town and a Deputy at the National Assembly are in a political conflict for the next local elections. Local development, and hence decentralization, is their new warhorse to gain popularity among the local communities.
   - The Deputy has taken control over the community forest: he imposed a « partner » who was in charge of selling the timber to buyers; he is one of the three signatories of the contract between the community forest and the partner; he controls the appointment of the members of the management committee, etc. BUT no real financial investment.
   - The Mayor controls the management of RFA assigned to the communities: he accepts or refuses the projects; he never transfers the money to the management committee at the village level; he chooses his « partners » himself, etc. At the level of the village, the management committee of the RFA has become a sub-management committee.

2. Failure in the construction of local democracy: local communities have no power in the election of the members of the management committees
   - In both decentralized entities members of the management committees are appointed on the basis of their social status and political belonging.
   - Elites and notables are the most represented in the committees. Consequently, « dominant » families, it is to say families that have the more elites and notables among them, hold the most power within the decentralized entities.
   - Members are appointed to their positions by a dominant minority of the community rather than elected by the entire community such as it was yet provided for by the law.

3. Failure of decentralization in terms of sustainable local development
   - Embassments at different degrees in the two decentralized entities, but extremely difficult to know who is responsible for them: « quality of tutors: people accuse people in function of their political belonging.
   - Regarding the community forest, while the money that was appointed to community development and that came from three timber deliveries has been reimbursed. So no project has been realized.
   - Looking at the RFA, the City Council is accused to take a part of the RFA normally assigned to the communities. Few projects have been realized since 1994 and, when projects are realized, they do not fit with sustainability.

Conclusions

1. The « community » is not the homogeneous entity such as conceived of by the development policies
   - In practice, the community corresponds to several groups of actors with heterogenic interests and strategies regarding the resources and stakes.
   - There is no « individualism » that is materialized in strategies that ensure the permeability of power to elites and notables.
   - The decentralization of forestry sector is a perfect opportunity to put their strategies into action.

2. The clientelist takeover of the decentralization of forestry sector by political elites breaks down the whole participatory nature of the process
   - Although the decentralization should be an instrument to reduce the influence of the State on the management of forest resources, government officials take that process over.
   - By using this clientelist practices, the political elites aim at gaining social and economic capital (feel well, in the political arena) and, then, allow them to strengthen their position in the political structure.

Where do we go from here?

1. Creation of a global « platform » of community forests and timber companies
   - This platform would allow community forests to be directly in contact with potential purchasers on the timber market.
   - As a result, the management boards of community forests would not have to go through political elites to develop their business.

2. Increase in the non-political support to local communities
   - Local communities should receive more support from independent and non-political organizations that will help them to truly benefit from their new legal system.
   - Local communities should get more advices and trainings on issues such as participation, local democracy, establishing community forests, management, etc.
   - There should also be some independent organizations ensuring that the revenues coming from decentralisation (community forests, RFA and other taxes) are returned to local communities and spent on community development projects.

References


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