

**SNAPSHOT VIEWS OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY FORESTRY
NETWORKS: CAMEROON COUNTRY STUDY**

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March 2003

This is one of series of reports commissioned by CIFOR as part of its study of 'Learning from International Community Forestry Networks'. All these studies were carried out within a tight budget and very brief time frame, which necessarily implied an anecdotal and impressionistic method of data collection. CIFOR and the authors acknowledge that the findings in these studies are thus partial. In our view, however, they do provide interesting insights into the complex world of networking and advocacy and are thus being made available to help networkers and those promoting community forestry to reflect on and, hopefully, improve their work. Please check with the authors before you cite or quote these works. The author gratefully acknowledges many forms of support received from individuals and institutions. These included Chimere Diaw, Rene Oyono, Yolande Fouda, Michael Vabi, Jaap Vermaat, Alaian Djiegoue and Louis Djomo. I am indebted to officials and community members associated with the Kilum-Ijim Project for their invaluable support during the field visit to the Bamenda Highlands Project. Some of the individuals who rendered support at short notice included Christian Asanga, Thomas Mainimo, Denis Yisa, Hilda Ngek, Celina Munguo, Tata Grace Mban and Samuel Kunkavi Ngek. I am also indebted to the contribution and support I received from participants to the Cameroon Lessons Workshop, as well as from my research partners Cyprain Jum and Rene Oyono.

Executive Summary

This study is a component of a research project whose broad scope was to "review the experiences with international networks designed to promote community forestry, to assess how much "value added" they have provided or could potentially provide to activities at the local and national level, and their ability to advocate for community forestry at international levels. The purpose of this study was to prepare a situation report on the above objectives within the context of Cameroon country experiences. The situation report was compiled on the basis of a fact-finding mission that used a wide range of data collection techniques including desk study, informal interviews, a national stakeholders' workshop and a "quick and dirty" field visit to the North-West Province where the researcher visited a field office of a community forest project and attended a community forest consultation meeting.

The study was broadly structured into two components. The first component was meant to give an overview of broad trends in forest policy as well as situating community forestry within the broader forestry context of the country. The second component investigated networks with particular reference to their visibility, the tools used, their major intervention areas, their structuring, linkages among them and their policy and other impacts. An underlying theme was to draw lessons with regards to networks and networking.

The following broad observations were made with respect to the contextual setting:

1. Cameroon has a varied vegetation mosaic consisting of humid forests, Savanna grasslands with montane forest patches, and well as semi-arid Sahel. The moist tropical forests are by far the most important of these vegetation categories in terms of economic importance, being a source of commercially valuable timber species.
2. For the entire colonial period up to the mid-1990s, the forests of Cameroon were managed through a centrally-directed structure and process, which expropriated resources and control over such resources from local communities, and excluded such communities from accessing forest resources as well as economic benefits accruing from them.
3. A variety of interacting factors including donor pressures, international economic interests, local political considerations, sheer weight of local tenurial and use pressures, as well as pressure from civil society movements¹ – ushered in a pro-people trend in policy, which culminated in the enactment of the 1994 forest law and its complementary decree of application.
4. Forest-sector reforms immediately preceding the 1994 law included a zoning plan that divides forests into a permanent zone, exclusively owned and managed by the state – and a non-permanent zone, owned by the state but used and managed in conjunction with other actors including municipalities, private individuals, and local communities.
5. The 1994 law entitles communities to benefits of the forests through community forests, which are excisions of the non-permanent forest estate not exceeding 5000 hectares, which are then managed in partnership with the state through management plans and agreements. Communities derive economic

¹ Including international and local community forestry networks.

benefit from the commercial exploitation of the forests, from which they also draw resources for their subsistence needs.

6. But decentralized forest management in Cameroon is rather restricted because of size restrictions to community forests, which are further confined to the non-permanent zone. Communities often inherit secondary forests of diminished economic value since such forests are subject to salvage logging by companies, which often end up in conflict with the communities. Harvesting restrictions specified in the management plans as a premium for sustainable offtake impose further limits on the magnitude of the benefit.
7. Decentralization through the conferment of community forests upon communities has only resulted in conditional empowerment without addressing the fundamental issues of ownership and control of forests and the land on which they grow.
8. The process of establishing community forests is long and costly, riddled with implementational contradictions between the supportive law and its decree, and vests too much discretionary power in state-level actors at the expense of the communities.
9. Overall, the implementation of community forests in Cameroon appears to take the focus and resources away from other community forestry activities, particularly those practised by communities outside the humid forest zone.

Some of the lessons learnt with respect to networking structures and processes included:

1. A state-aligned local network formally institutionalizes community forests in Cameroon. Though its "civil society plus state" outlook is seen as enhancing delivery in terms of policy and grassroots impact, the partnership is seen as considerably eroding the network's autonomy. Not surprisingly the network has still not crafted a broader vision of community forestry that transcends the insular concept of community forests, which the network helps implement in partnership with state institutions.
2. There is a sizeable complement of other local, regional and international networks operating in Cameroon, which offers considerable scope for cross-scale insights and synergies, but unfortunately coordination among all these networks is considered weak.
3. The various networks have different combinations of intervention domains (e.g. awareness raising, capacity building etc), with those that have wider intervention areas being seen as building on "internal synergies". Although those focusing on a few areas may result in "high specialization", some form of coordination was argued for, to enable filtering of specialized insights to other networks and contexts.
4. The various networks use different combinations of networking tools, depending on their priorities and resource endowments. No particular combination of tool was necessarily considered better or worse than the other, but developing tools that enable more effective contact with grassroots communities was emphasized.
5. Some form of "formal linkage" or "coordination unit" was suggested as a way of ensuring that the activities of local networks feed into the scope of the work of international networks, as well as minimizing duplication among the networks. A suggestion risked by one informant related to the establishment of

”an official clearing house” for tracking and monitoring, the ethics and mechanics of which are open to debate.

6. No fundamental contradictions were noted between government policy and the agendas of international community forestry networks, at least in terms of the envisioned objective functions like decentralization, sustainable management, poverty alleviation and community empowerment and participation. Some of the contradictions were seen to arise from differences in emphasis, with networks accused of often sensationalizing issues instead of engaging government in positive dialogue

Learning from International Community Forestry Networks – Cameroon country experiences

1. Introduction

This study is a component of a research project whose broad scope was to “review the experiences with international networks designed to promote community forestry, to assess how much ‘value added’ they have provided or could potentially provide to activities at the local and national level, and their ability to advocate for community forestry at international levels. The more specific objectives of the umbrella project were to (1) synthesize lessons emerging from international community forestry networks through a collaborative process, emphasizing on the networks’ ability (or inability) to provide ‘value added’ to local and national processes and to advocate for community forestry at international levels, (2) share these lessons with the main stakeholder groups, and in general to synthesize lessons on best practices to realize the greatest payoff in community forestry management by way of community forestry networks.

The purpose of this study was to prepare a situation report on the above objectives within the context of Cameroon country experiences. The situation report was compiled on the basis of a fact finding mission that used a wide range of data collection techniques including desk study, informal interviews and a national stakeholders workshop that was convened towards the end of a two week country study visit. Given time limitations both the informal interviews and the stakeholders’ workshop were not necessarily representative of all the actors involved in community forestry issues in Cameroon. A “quick and dirty” field visit to the North-West Province, where the researcher visited the Bamenda Highlands Project and attended a community forest consultation meeting in Oku, hopefully makes up for this lack of representativeness by capturing some “voices from the grassroots”. An open and participatory research approach that emphasized on promoting ‘social learning’ about community forestry networking in the country was adopted². Cameroon was one of the two countries selected from the African region on the basis of prior familiarity of the researcher, donor interest and the extent to which the country has pioneered with decentralizations that have important implications on the forest sector.

The next section gives an overview of Cameroon’s forests and related tenurial issues, whilst section three gives an overview of broad trends in forest policy in Cameroon, with an emphasis on underlying drivers, and the role that community forestry networks might have played. Section 4 gives an overview of the process through which “community forests” get decentralized to local communities, with section 5 highlighting how this constitutes only a narrow way of how communities relate to their forest environments, and how it falls short of thoroughgoing community empowerment. Sections 6 to 8 give detailed as well as synthesized analyses of community forestry networks and networking structures and processes in Cameroon. Section 9 considers policy and other impacts at a variety of levels, whilst the penultimate and last sections offer further “voices from the field” and a synopsis to pull the various lessons together, respectively.

² A key consideration emphasized during the methodological workshop convened at the inception of the project was that the study was definitively not an EVALUATION, but “an attempt to learn lessons from experiences”

2. Cameroon's forests and related tenurial issues

After the Amazon Basin, the forests of Central Africa comprise the world's second largest contiguous expanse of moist tropical forest. About 26 million hectares of such forests fall within Cameroon's national territory with much of it being confined to the lowlands in the south and east of the country (Ruiz Perez, et al. 1999). With increasing altitude, especially towards the northern parts of the country, the moist tropical forests grade into Savanna grasslands, which, at higher altitude, get interspaced with patches of submontane and montane forests (Vabi, 2002). The Bamenda Highlands and the Mount Cameroon region are some of the areas with vegetation that is distinctively of a montane nature. Savanna-type vegetation grades into semi-arid Sahel towards the extreme northern parts of the country (Nurse et al., 1995). Of the above vegetation types the moist tropical forests are by far the most important in terms of strategic national interest, being a source of commercially valuable timber species.

Each vegetation type presents unique economic and livelihood opportunities to a range of stakeholders including the local communities. The commercial exploitation of timber is the predominant forest-based activity in the humid forest zone. To communities living in or close to such areas, the commercial value of timber in the forests presents scope for more immediate benefit. Forest-based opportunities for communities in the montane forest zone mainly include those that are based on the subsistence as well as social and cultural values of the forest (Vabi, 2002). The forest sector is therefore central to Cameroon's social and economic development, with the sector reputedly accounting for more than 8% of the country's foreign exchange earnings (Vabi, 2002).

Access to forest resources, however, has less to do with the above natural vegetation categories than it has to do with tenurial regimes, which broadly define what resources, can be accessed from which portion of the national territory. A national landuse plan conducted in 1993 broadly divides Cameroonian forests into a permanent and non-permanent forest zone. The permanent forest estate either falls under state forests, which are directly under state control, or council forests that are under the control of councils in their status as local government units. State forests are permanently set aside as reserves, sanctuaries, wildlife and botanical parks and gardens as well as game ranches, which are used for production, reforestation, recreation, protection, research and teaching (Diaw, no date). Council forests are the sole property of the individual councils, which manage such forests on behalf of the government subject to a simple management plan approved by the forestry authority.

The non-permanent forest estate consists of forestlands that are the private property of individuals or those forestlands designated as community forests, and whose management will have been delegated to communities. Non-permanent forests additionally include communal forests, which are forests that are neither the private property of the state nor individuals. Community forests are therefore a sub-component of these communal forests, which include former fallow land after reconstitution of the forest cover (Diaw, no date). Various stakeholders can use non-permanent forests for a variety of other purposes including cropping, livestock rearing and logging. When it was undertaken in Southern Cameroon the zoning plan

classified 8, 989,571 hectares of forestland as permanent forests, with about half of that being classified as non-permanent forests. The plan reflects the need to reconcile environmental protection with economic development in order to ensure sustainability (Penelon, 1997; Community Forestry Network, 2001).

Achieving balance across a range of priorities in order to attain certain goals is indeed the very basis of policy. But no goals or priorities remain the same over time, which means that policy is best considered in dynamic perspective. The next section attempts a brief overview of trends in forest and related policies in Cameroon. Emphasis is placed on the major informing issues and goals as well as the underlying drivers of the various policy changes, or lack of change, and their related impacts on people and forests.

3. Overview of trends in forest policy in Cameroon

No formal policies existed in pre-colonial Cameroon, but some measure of sustainable management and equitable access to resources was guaranteed by existing customary tenure systems that were based on collective ownership of resources along group lines including families and clans (Diaw et al. 1997). Land and resources were generally more abundant in relation to human resource needs. Pressure on the resource base was further mediated by low-impact subsistence livelihood systems, based on shifting cultivation as well as hunting and gathering, which allowed for long fallow periods and the regeneration of secondary forest.

The incipient phase (1910-1930) of the colonial period marked the advent of industrial forestry with an export led focus, which was mainly based on selective extraction of precious wood such as ebony (Diaw et al., 1997). The period also saw the setting up of a complementary infrastructure of mainly private European sawmills to support the export-led thrust of the policy. Concern about rapid mining of forests only came to the fore during the later phases of the colonial period when the country was under British and French rule (1930-1960), in response to which some forestlands were set aside as protection forests and production forests to allow for recuperation and rehabilitation. For instance, Ottotomo and Muyuka-Kompina were established as production reserves in the South-West in 1930 and 1932. Protection forests also established in the early 1930s include Douala in the Littoral Province and Campo in the South Province (Diaw et al., 1997). The setting up of production and protection forests in the 1930-1940s period was however not peculiar to Cameroon alone since many such forests were established throughout much of Africa at about the same time. The “protected area” philosophy appears to have had its roots in broader international events like the American Dust Bowl and related debates about environmental degradation, emanating from imperial forest traditions, and filtering to Africa through related Indian experiences (Beinart, 1984). Despite the advent of protectionist concern, a capital led focus based on extraction of commercially valuable timber species still remained a central pillar of forest policy during the entire colonial period, and beyond (Diaw et al., 1997).

Though being peripheral to its main thrust, colonial forest policy could not avoid considering the stake of local communities in protected and other forests, in which or close to which such communities lived. There was a major difference in British and French colonial traditions on how the so-called natives could fit into colonial society,

which then, was divided into a privileged upper class of colonial rulers and an underprivileged lower class of native subjects (Mamdani, 1996, 1999). The French pursued a strategy of assimilation in which most facets of social and economic development, including the control of land, were centralized under state control. In contrast, the British pursued some form of separate development under a system of indirect rule in which the natives ran their “own affairs”, including the exercise of customary and indigenous land and resource rights (Ngwasiri, 1998). In practice, the British system only accorded limited autonomy because it operated through Native Councils that were directly controlled by colonial administrators. Furthermore, contrary to the then espoused notions of empowerment through either “decentralization” or “assimilation” both systems accorded the local population only limited rights of use, with the state retaining effective powers of ownership, control, licensing of use etc. (Diaw et al, 1997).

With regards to broader socio-economic development the French system emphasized on rural upliftment through a Department of Engineering for Rural Development, which was funded by the state, whilst the British emphasized on community development through local initiative. The new thrust when the two were fused into a Department of Community Development under the Ministry of Agriculture in 1976 was organizing for local development. Although the concepts of social and community forestry arrived at about the same time in the late 1970s they did not necessarily translate into autonomy for local forest management by the local communities. The prevailing policy environment at that time still over-emphasized on industrial and production and protection aspects of forestry, and hence there was virtually no momentum and capacity for community forestry within the national forestry services (Community Forestry Network Newsletter, 2001). A surge in logging activities associated with the export led focus of the policy saw the creation of 31 companies between the period 1960 and 1973 (Diaw et al., 1997).

The period 1973-1985 saw a trend towards the consolidation of the French colonial tradition of state control through the re-centralization of the control of land, which was effected through an Order passed in 1973. The order over-empowered the state on issues of land ownership and management at the expense of local communities, but related regulations were more benign with respect to issuing of logging permits, an area in which the prospective loggers³ retained considerable influence (Diaw, et al., 1997). However, some degree of regulation through national organizations charged with the renewal of permits (National Office for the Regeneration of Forests - ONAREF) and the conducting of inventories (National Centre for Forest Development - CENADEFOR) slowed down the hitherto considerably rapid increase in the number of logging companies. A range of community forestry activities including reforestation and agroforestry initiatives were implemented towards the end of the period in question, particularly in the drier Sahel and Savanna zones. The initiatives were however restricted to addressing perceived gaps in the supply of some woodland products and services, but they fell short of tackling the fundamental issues of access, ownership and control of forests by forest-dwelling and forest-dependant communities (Diaw et al, 1997). The initiatives were also undermined by the prior nationalization of rural land in the early 1970s, which partly removed the incentive

³ The loggers are mostly international.

structure for people to save and invest in the land in order to derive maximum benefit from it (Ngwasiri, 1998).

More pro-people forest reforms in the late 1980s were part of broader reforms in the institutional, political and economic sectors of the country. Such reforms were far reaching and they included: economic liberalization encompassing the adoption of market led development strategies and privatisation of public enterprises; political liberalization involving the adoption of multipartism and the reform of electoral systems; administrative delegation involving the transfer of more powers to regions; as well as the opening up of space for civil society (Diaw, no date; Vabi et al., 2000). Internally, the reforms came alongside an economic crisis characterized by declining prices of the main foreign currency earners including oil, rubber, coffee, cotton and cocoa (Vabi et al, 2000). At a broader level, there was mounting pressure from external organizations, especially the Bretton Woods institutions, to liberalize the economy, reduce public expenditure and reorganize state institutions to render them more efficient (Vabi, et al., 2000).

Forest-sector reforms were preceded by sector-based studies followed by the adoption of forest development plans, restructuring within the sector and enactment of new and considerably more democratic laws. The Tropical Forest Action Plan was one of the notable plans drafted in this period paving the way for the enactment of policy and legal instruments that took cognisance of the fragility of forest ecosystems in the humid zone, and the need to achieve balance across conservation, sustainable management and community participation objectives (Diaw et al., 1997). Many research and development projects and events like meetings, seminars and conferences emphasizing on various tenets of the above objectives, were ushered in by the new developments (Table 1). These included the inception of the West African regional component of the Forest Trees and People Programme (FTPP) in 1991, mainly to provide networking and information services in the area of community forestry. With regards to restructuring to meet new challenges, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MINEF) was set up in 1992, amalgamating responsibilities hitherto divided across three ministries, including that of Agriculture, Tourism and Plan and Scientific Research (Diaw et al., 1997). Such amalgamation was, however, not quite thoroughgoing as some forest-related aspects like land tenure legislation and industry and taxation still remain under separate ministries. The landmark to related legal reforms was the enactment of the 1994 forest law and its 1995 decree of application, which, for the first time in the country's history, provided for a legal instrument for community involvement in forest management.

Cameroon overhauled its legislative framework as a means of increasing the efficiency of industry, ensuring sustainable natural resource management and promoting community participation in forest management. The reforms were shaped by the interacting interests of a range of actors within Cameroon and beyond. The 1994 forest law was, to a significant extent, imposed on the Government of Cameroon as a condition for financial support under structural reforms funded by the Bretton Woods institutions, particularly the World Bank (Ekoko, 1997; Brown and Schreckenber, 2001). The Bank's major concern was to improve the efficiency of industry. Although some local politicians, especially those in the opposition, were concerned about securing the interests of the ordinary Cameroonian in the ensuing developments, they were overridden by a compliant executive branch of government

that was wary about jeopardizing the Bank's support at a time when the country was emerging from a crippling economic crisis⁴ (Ekoko, 1997). Meanwhile an international environmental lobby that came to prominence at about the same time emphasized on long-term environmental and existence values of the forests than on direct use, and therefore championed protection and sustainable management (Brown and Schreckenber, 2001). The emphasis on community participation mainly arose from the country's adoption of the resolutions of the 1992 Earth Summit. The next section outlines the instruments and processes through which communities can participate in forest management in Cameroon.

Table 1. Examples of forest-sector development projects initiated in various parts of Cameroon during the late 1980s to mid 1990s

Project	Execution/funding	Year Initiated	Zone	Objectives/Activities
Mount Kilum/Ijim	MINEF, ODA, EU, BLI, WWF/GEF	1987 1992	North-West	Conservation, Sustainable management, Biodiversity
Korup	MINEF, GTZ, WWF, EU, WCI, USAID	1988	Ndian, South-West	National park, Rural development, Participatory management, Conservation
Mount Kupe	MINEF, WWF, BLI, ODA, EU	1990	South-West	Conservation, Sustainable management Biodiversity
FMRP/ Mbalmayo	ONADEF (ODA until 1996)	1991	Mbalmayo	Regeneration, Training, Development
FTPP	FAO	1991	Region wide	Network, Information, Institutional inventories
So'o Lala	ONADEF/OIBT	1992	Nyong & Mfoumou	Protect So'o Lala forest, stabilize population
Api-Dimako	MINEF, CIRAD/FAC	1992	Lom-Djerem	Sustainable supplies to forest industry, Development, Satisfy local populations
Ecofac	MINEF, EC, EDF	1992	Dja, South-East	Village forestry, Research, Park Development, Conservation
South Bukundu	ONADEF/OIBT	1993	Koumba S. West	Integrated pilot development, Regeneration, Development
Tropenbos	IRAD, OIBT, ONADEF, Tropenbos Project and Universities	1994	Ocean	Sustainable production of timber and forest products, Research, Development, Forest Management Plan
Mount Cameroon	MINEF, ODA, GTZ	1995	Limbe, Buea S. West	Herbarium, Genetic reservoir, Reconstitution of ecosystems, Environmental education
GEF/, CGB	GEF/WB, GTZ, WCS, WWF, Tropenbos, Netherlands	Were he legal inst	6 reserves e.g. Dja, Campo, Nki, etc.	Conservation, Sustainable Management, Biodiversity
TIGER	GB (NERC)	1992-95	Mbalmayo	Carbon and water flows, Land use, Mapping, Climate
Lokundje-Nyong	CIDA	1995	Bipindi, South	Multipurpose development, Participatory management
SIKOP	ONADEF, OIBT	1995	Ngumbe,	Conservation, Research &

			Ndom Littoral	Development, Agriculture, Tourism
UICN/Dja	MINEF/UICN	1995	Dja, Lomie	Participation, Research and Development, Agriculture, Tourism

Source: Diaw et al., (1997).

4. Decentralizing forest management through community forests in Cameroon⁵

The 1994 forest law and its complementary 1995 decree of application provide the legal framework for decentralized forest management in Cameroon, which is officially institutionalised through the setting up of community forests. Contrary to widely conceived notions of broad ranging relationships between people and forests, the concept of community forest has a restricted legal definition in Cameroon. Community forests are portions of forestland, not exceeding 5000 hectares, excised from the non-permanent forest estate and entrusted upon local communities to manage and benefit from them. Legal entrustments over community forests are bestowed upon segments of the nearest adjacent communities that are able to constitute themselves as legal entities that can receive the decentralized entrustments through a management agreement with the Forest Department. The range of organizations that potentially qualify as recognized legal entities is limited to associations, cooperatives, common initiatives groups and economic interest groups. Any legal entity is entitled to only one community forest but a village or settlement can have more than one legal entities or community forests, whilst a legal entity can draw its membership from more than one village or settlement.

The law and decree were further complemented by the publishing, in 1998, of a Manual of Procedures for the Attribution, and Norms for the Management, of Community Forests⁶. The manual elaborates on the procedural aspects relating to the application for, and implementation of community forests. Prior to the formal submission of the application dossier communities are required to hold widely publicized consultation meetings, whose attendance should ensure representative deliberation on issues considered, including the appointment of a management officer, laying down the objectives of management and identifying the boundaries of the forest. Officers from relevant local branches of the government provide technical support to the consultation meetings, which can be suspended by a local administrative officer, if they are deemed to be not adequately consultative. Subsequent to the consultative meeting the application dossier consisting of the following stipulated documents is prepared: a stamped application setting out the objectives of the forest; a plan showing the location and boundaries of the forest; documents giving the name of the community concerned and the address and curriculum vitae of the appointed manager; and, a description of activities previously carried out in the forest. The application dossier is also required to state the intended uses of the forests, which for example, can include production, protection, hunting or multiple purpose use.

Completed dossiers then enter a tortuous and extended approval process in which they are submitted to the Divisional Delegate of MINEF and then forwarded to the

⁵ This section mainly draws from the Manual of Procedures (Government of Cameroon, 1998)

⁶ A commonly used shorthand for this document is Manual of Procedures, abbreviated as MoP.

Provincial Delegate and next to Community Forestry Unit via the Sub-Director for Inventories and Management and then to the Director of Forestry. Applications for forests that span more than one province are referred to an even higher office, i.e. that of the Minister responsible for environment and forests. Subjecting the plans to scrutiny by various levels of the forest service hierarchy conceivably allows for the following: arbitration in the case of boundary and tenurial disputes; verification to ensure that the forests concerned are not under forest operating licences; and, checking to ensure consistency with the law. Community forest applications are given precedence over forest operating licences, with the latter being given time to expire before the former become operational. After being scrutinized by higher level offices the applications are sent to Senior Divisional Delegate or the Governor of the area concerned for approval, with the approved applications being sent back to the community via the Divisional Delegate.

Communities whose applications are approved then go on to prepare simple management plans, which form the basis of a management agreement between the community and the Forest Department. The management plan should provide the details of the community, location of the community forest and its priority use, description of the community forest and an action programme for the management of the forest. The details of the community required include the name of the community or its legal entity, date of its establishment, villages included as well as its location from the provincial to the divisional, subdivisinal and district levels. Descriptions of the community forest cover considerable detail including a historical outline of the previous uses of the forest, maps (based on community forest surveys) depicting the compartments of the forest as well as natural and man-made features, physical and natural resources inventories for each compartment of the forest together with the proposed uses of each compartment. Action programmes include annual and five-year action plans together with customary and logging use rights of the local population for each of the compartments. A management agreement formulated on the basis of the management plan gives instructions on the management of the compartments and resources concerned and additionally includes the management plan and the articles of association of the approved entity. Management agreements and plans are renewed after a minimum duration of 25 years.

Communities entrusted with the management of community forests can negotiate private law contracts with timber exploiters for the commercial exploitation of timber from their forests. The contracts authorize the felling of timber in three ways: sale of standing volume, exploitation permits and individual felling authorizations, with each providing a different regime of exploitable quantities and associated regulatory requirements. For instance, the exploitation of timber by standing volume requires a forest exploitation inventory compiled by an approved individual, with the inventory further being subject to approval by the Provincial Delegate of the Forestry Administration. The political economy of the apportionment of related costs is such that the community bears the cost of the inventory whilst the commercial exploiter pays the annual forest fees assessed on the basis of surface area, the felling fees that depend on the value of the species and some other parameters such as volume or weight, and a graduated surtax on the export of unprocessed forest produce. The exploiter and the relevant community then also negotiate an amount, which the exploiter contributes towards the development of social amenities of the community concerned.

The exploitation of timber by means of exploitation permits is subject to similar inventory requirements as those in the preceding paragraph, but the exploiter is only liable to pay the selling price of the timber. The total volume of trees cut under a single exploitation permit should not exceed 500 cubic metres. Individual felling authorizations likewise only entitle the communities to the selling price of the forest produce, with each authorization permitting a volume of not more than 30 cubic metres. Individual felling authorizations do not require forest exploitation inventories although they should specify the operating zone and a breakdown of the number of trees per species that may be felled. Communities can also enter into commercial contracts for the exploitation of non-timber forest products from their forests, but such exploitation must be in accordance with the simple management plan of the forest concerned.

The institutional⁷ infrastructure for decentralized forest management as set out in the new forest law and its decree of application provided an entry point for a complement of organizations whose mandate was to pioneer with the establishment of community forests. For instance, a technical cooperation agreement between the governments of the United Kingdom and Cameroon, prior to the passing of the law, provided funding and technical support to the Community Forestry Development Project (CFDP), which was seconded to the Forest Department in the Ministry of Environment and Forestry. The goal of the project is to ensure effective and equitable community based forest resource planning and management, whilst its purpose is to develop capacity within MINEF at headquarters and field level, and other institutions, to implement community forestry. Some of the earlier achievements of the project included successfully lobbying for the setting up of the Community Forestry Unit (CFU) as a permanent structure within MINEF in 1997, and development of the procedural framework for the establishment of community forests, which culminated in the approval of the Manual of Procedures in 1998. The creation of the Community Forestry Network in 1997, which was then housed within the Department of Forestry, was also a brainchild of the CFDP. The network was set up to help institutionalise community forests through capacity building and information sharing (Community Forestry Network, 2001). An increase in the number of applications as well as attributed community forests signified the role of the above institutions at the field level. Whereas only 3 applications had been processed in 1997, the number had soared to 98 by December 2000, these being from 7 of the 10 provinces of Cameroon (Table 2).

Table 2 Provincial and areal breakdown of applications for community forests in Cameroon, as at Dec 2000.

Province	Number of applications	Surface area in hectares
Centre	16	75,178
West	1	3,320
East	46	144,642
Littoral	3	15,000
North West	9	9,421
South West	3	17,735

⁷ Following the new institutional economics perspectives institutions are considered as rules of the game whilst organizations are considered as the players (North, 1990).

South	20	75,134
Total	98	340,450

Source: Community Forestry Network Newsletter 006 of 2001

The above reforms and related developments have constituted what has widely been hailed as a promising test case⁸ of decentralization. Although the generic merits of decentralization are now more readily understood and appreciated there is still need to critically analyze the empowerment significance of specific sets of decentralizing reforms. The next section highlights some of the ways in which decentralization in the forest sector in Cameroon has fallen short of broader, inclusive and more thoroughgoing forms of people involvement in forest management.

5 Shortfalls of the current model of involving people in forest management in Cameroon

The "community forest" model of decentralizing entrustments over forest management to local communities in Cameroon still needs to resolve several contradictions including those relating to concepts of forest, community forest, entrustment, as well as that of community. Restrictive definitions ascribed to most of these concepts within the law diminishes the importance of the many other ways in which local communities relate to their forest environments. For instance, under Cameroonian law a forest is understood as "any land covered by vegetation with a predominance of trees, shrubs and other species capable of providing products other than agricultural products" (Government of Cameroon, 1998). The law thus appears to create a false dichotomy between forestry and agriculture despite the many linkages that exist at the farm-forest interface. The emphasis on "products" no doubt reflects the Cameroonian situation in which the commercial value of timber from the forest is by far the most important in terms of strategic national interest. A rather insular notion of forests as being solely constituted of "products" or commodities, however, contradicts the role of forests at the level of the local communities where such forests cater for broader subsistence, socio-cultural and other needs. At the policy level the distinction between forests and agriculture appears to be based on the untenable assumption that forest-sector problems can only be resolved within that sector alone. In practice, a holistic perspective to forest sector problems is necessary since some of the underlying causes are of a cross sectoral nature. For instance, Brocklesby and Ambrose-Oji (1997) emphasize that policy aimed at controlling deforestation needs to give as much, if not more, attention to slash and burn agriculture as it gives to logging. A similar argument is echoed by Nurse et al (1995). Shifting agriculture is prevalent among forest dwelling communities throughout much of Cameroon. Pressure on the forests is also aggravated by the general agricultural expansion associated with population increase, a driver for which policy solutions often get steeped in controversy.

As outlined in preceding paragraphs the term community forest has a very restricted legal meaning in Cameroon. The fact that community forests can only be excised from the non-permanent forest estate appears to imply that there are no communities in the other forest categories, or that communities residing in these other areas are in

⁸ For instance, see Diaw (no date); Diaw et al., (1997) and Brown and Schreckenber (2001)

no way involved in forest activities, which is not the case. Expressed in alternative terms the requirement appears to equate with "no non-permanent forest estate equals no community forest". But the non-permanent forest estate is only a small proportion of forest and other lands in Cameroon, with the geographical implication being that the distribution of community forests is skewed in favour of areas where non-permanent forests occur, namely in Southern, Central and Eastern Cameroon (Table 2). Moreover, salvage logging rights are also awarded in the non-permanent forest estate, which means that communities are not only set up in confrontation with loggers but also that they inherit forests of poor economic value (Vabi, et al, 2000).

Many people-plant interactions fall under the broad and inclusive rubric of **community forestry**, at least inasmuch as it has come to be understood among the international pro-people forestry fraternity. In the case of Cameroon these range from subsistence extraction to farm forestry to tree plantations in such far flung areas as the Savanna and Sahel zones, as well as cocoa agroforests in some parts of the humid forest zone of the south. The overall effect of the law is to take the focus away from these and other broad range of activities in which people variously relate to their forest environments (Brown and Schreckenberg, 2001). The concept of "community forestry" is thus not as popular as "community forest" in Cameroon, with the latter being formally institutionalized through the Forestry Department with support from the donor community, whilst many aspects of the former receive little or no policy attention.

A restricted size cut-off of 5000 hectares also means that even in areas where community forests are bestowed upon communities, only a limited number of people can derive meaningful benefit – with the per capita benefit ratio likely to be inversely related to the size of the beneficiary pool. The quantum of benefit together with its predictability, no doubt, comprise fundamental facets of the incentive structure for local people to be interested in entering partnerships with the state for the management of community forests. In practice, the benefits often do not come on time or in adequate quantities or both (Mambo, 2000; Nkwatoh, 2000). Often, the extraction quotas set by the Forest Department as a premium for sustainable management are too low for the realization of significant returns, or the communities lose out in deals that they negotiate with sophisticated partners including commercial logging companies (Egbe, 1998; Mambo, 2000). Benefit and other relations at the level of the local communities are not necessarily of an egalitarian nature either - the village elite reputedly wields considerable influence and often appropriates more benefits at the expense of the less powerful, including women (Mambo, 2002).

There is need to understand the exact ways in which communities get empowered through so-called decentralizing laws. The benefit side of forest-sector decentralization in Cameroon is mainly comprised of the collective economic benefit accruing from the commercial exploitation of timber from community forests⁹. But then the accrual of such benefits is really not secure since it depends on whether management plans and agreements get renewed on an on-going basis. Although communities draw economic benefit from the forests, the state retains *de jure* ultimate control over the forests and the land on which they grow (Egbe, 1998). The insecurity of tenure associated with tenancy of community forests removes the incentive

⁹ Individual members of the community forests also enjoy subsistence use rights to resources within the forest.

structure for long-term planning and investment in the forests. Private title to land could conceivably address the problem of insecurity of tenure, but then all naturally-growing trees on such land are the property of the state, leaving the community forest route as the only way through which communities can derive economic benefit from the forest (Egbe, 1998). However, despite implicit notions of co-equal partnership between the state and the communities, the actual balance of power in the community forest management business is heavily tilted in favour of the state. The community voice cannot effectively be heard within a setting in which enormous discretionary powers in several areas of community forest management are vested in the Forest Department, including: the approval of consultative meetings; the approval of community forest application dossiers; the granting of timber exploitation permits; and the suspension and nullification of management plans and agreements (Mambo, 2000; Vabi et al., 2000). Overall, the law has over 100 sections that have been left at the discretion of administrative authorities including the President, Prime Minister and Ministers (Vabi, et al, 2000).

The identification of appropriate units for natural resource management in decentralized settings is a key question in common property resource literature (Ostrom, 1990; Murphree, 1991; Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). Such units are generally held to accord with notions of "community" defined either on the basis of common interest or shared customs and traditions, presumably constituted on the basis of self identification. The units can also be established on the basis of social, administrative and geographic boundaries, usually through directives or decrees. In Cameroon the criterion of proximity provides the main basis for the identification of communities, which presumably are given the leeway to voluntarily constitute themselves on the basis of self identification and coalescence of interest¹⁰. Resource management structures established on the basis of voluntary self-identification presumably have a more democratic outlook, but they stand in conflict with long-existing traditional management systems from which they expropriate power and influence, and on which they reportedly have a disruptive effect (Nkwatoh, 2000).

And such traditional management systems are prevalent throughout much of rural Cameroon where they permeate various aspects of local people's everyday social life inasmuch as it relates to their forest environments. For instance, Penelon (1997) describes an elaborate tenure system regulated by customary law in which the village territory is divided into three main parts with different regimes of permissible use, including: the home bases; forests close to the village; and the more distant forests. Diaw (no date) describes customary patterns of access to resources in which genealogy provides the primary charter of access, with investment of labour and inheritance claims providing complementary, albeit secondary charters of access to resources. Meanwhile Fon Ngum III of the Oku fondom¹¹ gives a detailed description of the social structure of traditional administration and how it relates to natural resource governance in the Oku area of North-West Province (Forests Trees and People Newsletter 45, 2001). But the role of traditional governance systems remains unrecognized within the law despite their centrality to social and environmental regulation throughout much of Cameroon. In arguing for the law to give due

¹⁰ As outlined earlier, the only organizations which can constitute themselves into legal entities for the management of community forests include associations, cooperatives, common initiative groups and economic interest groups.

¹¹ Fondom is a locally coined word, which is used in place of chieftain or chiefdom.

recognition to such systems Diaw (no date; page 17) points out that "...customary institutions are best suited for providing levers that have authority to negotiate and the legitimacy to assume or delegate the necessary functions of community based management". In highlighting the scope for the law to be harmonised with such traditional systems he points out "...looking closely at the spirit of the law, and not only its letter, it can be asserted that, under the present legal framework, it should be possible to clearly recognize the role of traditional institutions in the establishment of community forests in Cameroon".

In practice, relations in newly established resource management structures that are recognized within the law are often far from being equitable, with the village elite and some more powerful ethnic groups reportedly wielding considerable influence over the composition of such structures, defining the boundary of beneficiaries as well as over day to day decision making (Nkwatoh, 2000). In practice, the criterion of proximity also does not necessarily accord with spatial patterns of use as those closest to the forests are not necessarily the sole users of the forest's resources. The identification of community on the basis of self interest presumably goes some way in matching the social geography of resource users with spatial resource configurations.

Other legal and implementational hurdles also beset the process of decentralizing forest management through community forests. The setting up of community forests is a cumbersome and complex process, which requires high technical expertise, and is therefore costly. Notwithstanding the transaction costs associated with the whole process several stages require considerable amounts of money, including: compilation of documents to apply for legal entity; holding of consultation meetings; payment of transport fees for forest officers for some community forestry issues; carrying out inventories; preparation of simple management plans, etc (Community Forestry Network, 2001). Expert estimates of the total costs of establishing a community forest range from 1 750 000 to 2 450 000 CFA, depending on the size of the forest, its proximity to MINEF, the level of involvement of the populations, the availability or lack of support from projects and NGOs, availability of support from logging companies or from the village elite (Community Forestry Network, 2001). In general, most of the community forests were established through projects implemented by NGOs and drawing on donor support. The complexity of the process of establishing community forests is such that contradictions even exist between the law providing for the establishment of such forests and its implementing decree. For example, the law designates the forest service as the signatory for formalizing community forests, whilst the decree assigns this role to the Divisional Officer, Provincial Governors, the Minister or MINEF (Vabi et al., 2000).

As pointed out earlier, most of the above hurdles need to be seen as presenting scope for transacting positive change in community forest management in Cameroon. Community forestry networks are one way through which facilitators have sought to add value to various facets of community forestry. The next section considers the range of networks reported to be active within Cameroon.

6. The visibility of community forestry networks in Cameroon

Prominent among the networks active in Cameroon is the officially-aligned Community Forestry Network, which was created by the Community Forestry

Development Project in 1997, and initially housed within the Forest Department. The network was set up to enable the exchange of experiences within the scope of the 1994 forest law. As per the network's newsletter of 2001, the mission statement of the network is given as:

Encouraging sustainable forest management through the enforcement and support of the community forestry aspects and process adopted by the 1994 Forest Law

The objectives are listed as follows:

1. Lobbying for appropriate implementation of the community forestry law and its implementation instruments
2. Collection and dissemination of information on community forestry and natural resource management
3. Capacity building of the network and other stakeholders
4. Effective and efficient functioning of the network

Organizationally, the network consists of the following structures: the general assembly; a steering committee; an executive secretariat; thematic working groups; and in-country regional focal points. To date the network has drawn much of its funding from the Community Forestry Development Project (CFDP), which is in turn funded by the British Department for International Development (DFID). Core support from CFDP is complemented by funds collected through membership fees, sale of newsletters and to a less extent joint ventures and agreements with commercial dealers (Community Forestry Network, 2001). The network draws membership from individuals, projects, organizations and public services involved or concerned about community forestry. Because of its origin within a government department and its partnering, through membership, with civil society organizations, the network falls into a category, which an informant termed "civil society with government" model. This formulation was distinguished from another category, which the informant termed "civil society driven networks". The former were seen as being better poised to influence policy and as well as partnering government in the implementation of such policy.

Thus the Community Forestry Network has, over the years, played a central role in the establishment of community forests in Cameroon. The network's identity and autonomy are, however, eroded by its over-reliance on a project within the Forest Department¹². Hence, the Community Forestry Network has mainly focussed its attention on community forests and not on community forestry in its broader and more inclusive forms. Geographical biases in the distribution of community forests appear to mirror in the balance of power within the network, with the network reportedly appearing to be tribalized. For instance, an informant indicated that his sense of ownership and belonging in the network was severely compromised by the

¹² Interview with a researcher with the Centre for International Forestry Research, Cameroon.

fact that the network is dominated by scientists from the South East and South West¹³. Governance problems within the network were in part attributed to poor leadership within both the Ministry and the Network¹⁴, with the appointment of a new and supportive Permanent Secretary being acknowledged to have brought a lot of vibrancy into the network¹⁵.

Civil society driven local networks were reported to be broader in scope than the Community Forestry Network, which focuses mainly on commercial timber exploitation in the humid forest zone. For instance, a group of developmental NGOs in Eastern Cameroon has formed a local network, the Dja Local NGO Network, which has a broader developmental mandate in which community forestry falls only as a component of activities undertaken for community development¹⁶. Equally, another such network, the Land Tenure Network (LANDNET), treats forestry issues such as access, ownership and control within the framework of tenurial issues pertaining to the land on which the forests occur¹⁷. These networks therefore take a broader and more holistic perspective with regards to how forests feature in the lives of local communities within a wider range of geographical and other contexts. Some of the lessons and insights emerging from the activities of these networks, particularly the grassroots-based Dja Local Ngo Network, are hopefully shared with the officially-aligned Community Forestry Network since most of these networks have shared membership¹⁸. Looking beyond community forests to broader ways in which people variously relate to their forest environments remains one of the major conceptual challenges facing the Community Forest Network.

Lessons and experiences emerging from networks operating within a narrow geographical scope are likely to be of limited relevance beyond the areas or countries in which they operate. Capturing the cross-scale dimension to community forestry management issues is important because changes initiated at one scale may, at other scales, variously impinge on the desired objective functions, including improved forest management and rural livelihoods. Broader scale networks active in Cameroon include the regional African Forest Action Network (AFAN), a gathering of African NGOs that is mainly involved in advocacy work within the Congo Basin. The network's goal is "to promote the conservation and sustainable management of forests for the wellbeing of the populations" (African Forest Action Newsletter 12, 2001). The network is coordinated from Cameroon by the Centre for Environment and Rural Transformation (CERUT). Another regional network mentioned during the fact-finding mission is the Working Group on Gender and Forests, which is sponsored by the Food and Agriculture Organization, and coordinated through a system of national focal points. The network emphasizes on the important cross-sectoral dimension of gender.

Other large-scale networks active in Cameroon are trans-national networks that have a global focus. One such network is the global multi-donor Forest Trees and People Programme (FTPP), which operates through a system of regional and national focal

¹³ Interview with a researcher with the Centre for International Forestry Research, Cameroon.

¹⁴ Interview with the coordinator of the Community Forestry Development Project.

¹⁶ Interview with the coordinator of the Community Forestry Development Project.

¹⁷ Interview with a senior CIFOR Cameroon researcher.

¹⁸ Interview with an officer of GTZ Cameroon.

points. The IUCN's Collaborative Management Network also operates through contact points in several continents, and was also noted to be active in Cameroon. An informant whose organization participated in some of the network's activities saw the network as mainly focusing at the field level, from where it is reputedly drawing lessons that are being fed into the policy process, with the policy linkages being noted as being still weak¹⁹. Training was another area in which the network was seen to have made notable contributions, with the network having pioneered with the development of a school curriculum on collaborative management. The decentralized focal points of both the FTTP and IUCN's Collaborative Management Network reputedly enhance closer contact with the target institutions and communities

Most informants also readily acknowledged being aware of or being involved in the activities of the Overseas Development Association's Rural Development Forest Network (RDFN), whose main focus was noted as information dissemination. Though the network is centralized in terms of its governance structure, it has established a partnership with the Community Forestry Development Project, which runs a resource centre from which most of the network's publications can be accessed. The World Rainforest Movement (WRM)'s presence in Cameroon was also noted through its advocacy work, especially in Eastern Cameroon, where one rallying point for its advocacy was a road construction project in relation to its potential implications on forest degradation through logging²⁰. The Secretariat of the local Community Forestry Network also acknowledged being in email contact, and receiving literature from RECOFTC, even though this network appears to have an Asian focus²¹.

7. Strategic points of intervention, target institutions and tools used by networks

The thrust of inquiry with regards to strategic points of intervention had three main parts, namely: identifying the ways used by networks to transact or influence change in order to add value to community forest management in Cameroon; assessing perceptions of what network is using which mode; and assessing people's perceptions of the efficacy of each mode. Collated analyses identified five intervention domains through which networks have sought to transact change in community forest management in Cameroon, including: **awareness raising; capacity building; information sharing; advocacy and liaison between government and various other stakeholders**. Different networks employ the various ways of influencing change to various degrees, with some like the Rural Development Forestry Network seen as emphasizing on information sharing, mainly through publications²². Other networks intervene in several areas, with the IUCN Collaborative Management Group seen as concurrently involved in information sharing, awareness raising and capacity building²³, whilst the FTTP is perceived to be emphasizing on information sharing and capacity building²⁴. In addition to advocacy and information dissemination, the local Community Forestry Network was perceived to be important with regards to playing a liaison role between government and various other stakeholders²⁵.

¹⁹ Interview with a GTZ officer.

²¹ Interview with the secretary of the Community Forestry Network.

²² Interview with the secretary of the Community Forestry Network and the coordinator of the Community Forestry Development Project.

²³ Interview with a GTZ officer.

²⁴ Perceptions of secretary of the Community Forestry Network.

²⁵ Interview with the project coordinator of the Community Forestry Development Project.

The overwhelming sentiment with regards to the complement of intervention areas for any network was that it was unwise to have "hard and fast rules"²⁶ about combinations, with the argument being that what each network did depended on resources at its disposal as well as its competencies. An informant actually emphasized the importance of the more endowed networks having several intervention areas as this would build "internal synergies" within the network, which are otherwise quite difficult to foster among disparate networks. A related argument was that there was nothing particularly wrong in specializing within specific intervention domains, with the main challenge being that of achieving balance and synergy across the networks. But such synergy can only occur when there is some form of coordination among the networks, a requirement that is reportedly lacking among the community forestry networking fraternity in Cameroon²⁷. A more cautious informant however argued against being too prescriptive about formal coordination, which because of high transaction and other costs, may see loosely structured modes of coordination being more cost effective²⁸.

Different networks may target to influence change at various levels or combination of levels including the international, national, district or local levels. In general, dissemination networks were perceived to mostly target higher national level actors, including academics, opinion makers, policy makers and NGOs. The impacts of such networks at that level were expressed in various terms, including: influencing policy; shaping policy thinking and debate; mainstreaming new paradigms about natural resource management; and contributing to discourse and debate about natural resource management. Advocacy networks were also perceived to play similar roles at not only the national but also within international policy arenas. Both the dissemination and advocacy networks were, however, seen to fall short when it came to establishing contact with the grassroots. The often untenable assumption of the former is that impact will filter indirectly from higher to lower levels, whilst, in practice, advocacy events often provide conduits through which the value systems of external actors are often advanced under the guise of promoting community interest²⁹. Whilst capacity building networks and those offering liaison services among stakeholders were seen as more cross-cutting with respect to scale of entry, the general feeling was that there is need to build synergies which allow insights to filter up or down the various scales.

All informants considered the effectiveness of networking tools like publications, electronic contact, electronic media and workshops in relation to relevance and appropriateness – with the level of literacy within the target audience being the key consideration. Publications and electronic contact were considered to be more relevant within literate audiences, which in most cases include academics, policy makers and NGOs at higher national and district levels. Such tools were considered least amenable to rural contexts where literacy levels are very low. One of the major challenges that community forestry networks have to overcome in Cameroon is to transcend their apparent focus on higher level actors and instead concentrate on

²⁶ Interview with the coordinator of the Community Forestry Development Project.

²⁷ This sentiment was echoed by most of the people interviewed informally including network administrators, NGO staff and researchers.

²⁸ Interview with a GTZ officer.

²⁹ This sentiment was strongly expressed by a GTZ official.

connecting with the grassroots³⁰. A related challenge is to develop networking tools that are appropriate to the context of the rural poor. Traditional drama, as well as radio programmes and videos in local languages, and to a lesser extent workshops were considered to be some of the more appropriate tools for networking with and within grassroots communities³¹. At a less disaggregated level, the various networking tools were seen as being complementary to each other, with the combination of tools used by any one network partly being considered to be a reflection of its resource endowments and priorities³².

8. Relating international networks to local networks and to government policy

Linkages that have developed between international and local community forestry networks active in Cameroon are generally of an informal nature, mostly occurring through shared membership, which allows for the diffusion of ideas and materials beyond the registered membership of each network. For instance, commenting on the visibility of an international information dissemination network in Cameroon, one informant pointed out that although he was not a member, membership status did not really matter as he always received the network's publications through a friend, who is a member³³. Both the RDFN and FTTP were also considered to be informally linked with the local community forestry network through the Community Forestry Development Project, that runs a resource centre that subscribes to these networks' publications, which even members of various other networks in Cameroon can access. Mostly being of a horizontal nature, in-country informal linkages allow for sharing and cross-fertilization in which the national-level actors retain considerably autonomy since they are not sucked into vertical linkages in which such autonomy can be eroded, usually through the politics of funding³⁴. However, some form of linkage between international and local networks was considered necessary to ensure that the realities of the grassroots feed into the scope of the work of the international networks³⁵. Thus, some form of balance between the above two considerations appears necessary in crafting relationships between local and international networks.

The need for some form of elaborate linkage between local and international community forestry networks was not recognized by one informant, who felt that the various networks played different roles, and that the major concern should be on how the networks impact on each other³⁶. The informant acknowledged that duplication is one way in which the networks may negatively relate to each other. It, however, appears inconceivable to imagine how the networks can reduce such duplication without some form of "elaborate arrangement" of a mutual nature. An informant suggested some form of tracking and monitoring of the activities of networks along the lines of the idea of a National Observatory for Environmental Actors in

³⁰ Interview with a CIFOR researcher.

³¹ Comments relating to appropriateness were more clearly stated in interviews with a CIFOR researcher, the secretary of the Community Forestry Network and coordinator of the Community Forestry Development Project.

³² Interview with a GTZ officer.

³³ Interview with a CIFOR researcher.

³⁴ These sentiments were captured in an interview with a CIFOR researcher.

³⁵ This point was raised by the coordinator of the Community Forestry Development Project, and was also emphasized during a report-back session of the Cameroon Lessons Workshop.

³⁶ Interview with a senior CIFOR researcher.

Cameroon, which has been mooted within policy circles as a possible solution to the problem of duplication³⁷.

In general, informants did not see any contradictions between the agendas of international community forestry networks and government policy, with most such agendas being acknowledged to be broadly in line with government policy. However, discourses and viewpoints articulated by such networks, for example conservationism, were noted to be closely tied with the politics of funding, often with the availability of such funding being conditional upon the adoption and mainstreaming of such viewpoints in national policy arenas³⁸. Furthermore, sizeable proportions of such funding reportedly get committed to "bloated foreign technical brigades", the overall effect of which is to "give with one hand whilst taking with the other"³⁹. The over-emphasis on tying aid packages with technical support was also argued to work against sustainability as it more immediately "crowds out local expertise", whilst "hindering the development of local capacity" in the long term⁴⁰. Such paternalistic relations were perceived to be crippling to the extent that they partly explain why Africans are generally marginalized in international forestry think-tank, decision-making and trend-setting institutions⁴¹. In presenting a more balanced perspective, another informant argued "I do not believe that the world is 100% perfect, and do not deny that intervention holds something for international lobbies, but I do believe that they are inspired by good intentions"⁴².

As earlier stated, no fundamental contradictions were noted between government policy and the agendas of international community forestry networks, at least in terms of the envisioned objective functions like decentralization, sustainable management, poverty alleviation and community empowerment and participation. Some of the contradictions were seen to arise from differences in emphasis. For instance, an informant pointed out that "networks are often seen engaging in debates in which decentralization may be pushed too far than most governments are willing to accept, especially if there is too large of an academic dose in the network's opinion leaders. They often get too philosophical at the expense of practical issues and practical considerations"⁴³. Commenting on same notions of apparent differences in spite of over-arching similarities another informant pointed out that:

"Cameroon has a policy on participatory management. The government wants to empower local communities, which is what community forestry networks are espousing as well, but they often choose to do this in sensational ways. For instance WRM blocked a road construction project in Eastern Cameroon, but they do not have a local base there. They campaign through emails and publications. The problem is that they are often misinformed and thus campaign on the basis of flawed information. They

³⁷ These sentiments were a GTZ officer. It is possible that the development could be informed by ulterior political motives, including a need to put a tight reign on NGOs that are perceived to support the opposition.

³⁹ Interview with a CIFOR researcher.

⁴⁰ Interview with a CIFOR researcher. These Afrocentric viewpoints are open to debate as some people argue that most of Africa's problems are of its own making as evidenced by fiscal indiscipline, corruption etc.

⁴¹ Interview with a CIFOR researcher.

⁴² Interview with the Secretary of the Community Forestry Network.

⁴³ Interview with the coordinator of the Community Forestry Network.

should have a local presence for them to have a balanced assessment of their campaign issues. In any case, the idea is to improve each other through positive interaction and not just emphasizing on negative aspects. It is not easy to influence through negative approaches. They should also take on board the views of the local people and other stakeholders and not only those of their informants”⁴⁴.

9. Policy and other impacts (of networks?)

Policy impacts

Many policy, legal and institutional changes have occurred in the Cameroonian forest sector since the early 1990s. Notable among these are:

- The participation in, and completion in the early 1990s, of the Tropical Forest Action Plan, which was followed by a series of related pro-people reforms aimed at balancing conservation with sustainable use.
- The setting up of a separate Ministry of Environment and Forestry, which amalgamated roles formerly divided between two separate ministries
- The completion of the 1993 forest zoning plan for Southern Cameroon.
- The enactment of the 1994 forest law, which mainly provided for community participation in commercial timber exploitation in Cameroon
- The subsequent enactment, in 1995, of a complementary decree of application to go hand in hand with the new forest law.
- The creation of the Community Forestry Development Project and its secondment to the Forest Department, as a unit charged with facilitating the establishment of community forests in Cameroon
- The setting up of a Community Forest Unit within the Forest Department, in 1997, to take a lead role in issues pertaining to the establishment of community forests
- The publication of a Manual of Procedures, in 1998, which offers a practical guide on the procedures and norms associated with the creation and running of community forests
- Etc

One of the central questions of this study was to understand policy and related changes, the underlying drivers to such changes, as well as the role that community forestry networks have played in shaping such change. Both individual responses, as well as collective responses from the Cameroon Stakeholders’ Workshop, were to the effect that most of the policy, legal and institutional changes were the cumulative result of many interacting factors. Informants were wary to attribute the changes to one factor in isolation, although pressure from donors was most commonly acknowledged to have played a significant part. Other factors included: political consideration of national interest, the sheer weight of tenurial and use pressures from forest-dwelling and forests dependent communities; the need for the country to conform to international conventions to which it was signatory, e.g. the Rio Declaration; and, the pressure exerted by other actors in “the international back to the people movement”, including NGOs, CBOs and other facilitators such as the community forestry and other networks. Equally, as explained next, changes in

⁴⁴ Interview with a GTZ officer.

community forest management at the grassroots level cannot be attributed to networks alone, but to many interacting factors.

Grassroots impacts

During the Cameroon Stakeholders' Workshop a separate working group was assigned to discuss what impacts community forestry networks have had at the grassroots level. The group's presentation was prefaced by three cautionary statements, namely: **that the impacts could not solely be attributed to the activities of community forestry networks in isolation from other factors; that networks influence policy in gradual perspective in not in piecemeal fashion; and that we need not be obsessed with tangible impact alone since there is another equally important category of intangible and subtle impacts that occur at the cognitive level, influencing the way in which people look at the world.** Some of the more direct impacts attributed to the activities of networks, acting together with other organizations and drivers were listed as:

- Communities can now better organize themselves to acquire community forests, with 27 community forests having been acquired to date, with the assistance of the local community forestry network.
- Communities can now better organize themselves to stake their interests in the forests against commercial forest exploiters, with Koungoulou and Bimbia-Bonadikombo being mentioned as some of the cases where communities successfully asserted such rights, mainly with the assistance of advocacy networks.
- The advent of forest certification has created new opportunities in terms of marketing and increased value of wood, and this is being promoted by a variety of networks, including FTTP, AFAN and the local community forestry network.
- New job opportunities have been created at the local level, this mainly being the cumulative effect of the activities of many networks.
- New knowledge has been generated at the community level on how to manage resources.
- The interests of minorities like Pygmies are now better taken into consideration in the management of forest resources, with an example cited being that of the Baka pygmies of Bosquet in East Cameroon. Advocacy networks received greater recognition for such success.
- Etc.

But because networks differ in many facets of their structure and operation, they are perceived to have varying degrees and areas of effectiveness. This being a study of perceptions, I next present a few verbatim generalizations on the relative effectiveness of networks, based on "voices from the field" in Cameroon:

On perceived effectiveness of local over international networks

"The local networks have been most effective in lobbying and fighting for real development in the field"⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The possibility of confirmation bias cannot be ruled out, since this statement was given by the Secretary General of the local Community Forestry Network

On perceived strengths of international as compared to local networks

”The impact of international networks has mainly been at the policy level, particularly in the area of decentralization”⁴⁶

On partnerships between networks and the state

The ”civil society plus state” model of networks has stronger influence at both the policy and grassroots level compared to the exclusively civil society networks⁴⁷.

10. Other voices from the field

(a) Continuity and insitutional memory

An informant pointed out that international networks have generally been in existence for a long time compared to local networks, and that they thus draw on long experience. He pointed out that, in part because of the unsustainability of donor support on which they rely and associated high staff turnovers, local networks often lack both critical mass and managerial capacity to ensure sustained effectiveness⁴⁸.

(b) Donor dependency

Donor dependency together with the related volatility in the funding priorities of donors was stressed as a major threat to the viability and effectiveness of local, as indeed international networks. Informants were wary about offering simplistic solutions to the dependency syndrome, but one of them suggested ”maybe the solution lies in educating the donors”. He suspected that donors shift in response to the movement of people, with whom they are used to doing business, across networks. Such shifts were also attributed to changes in the donors’ grant making strategies, as is evidenced by the recent phenomenon in which most of them prefer to by-pass government in favour of civil society organizations, with the related ”hide and seek” between donors and their recipients usually working against the interests of sustainability. The accounting procedures of some of the donors were seen as being so strict that they erode a ”long-term sense of ownership” of the whole process⁴⁹.

(c) Membership issues

Most networks, including the local and international ones, were generally seen as detached from their grassroots constituencies⁵⁰. In highlighting how this was the case with the local community forestry network an informant argued ”the main problem with the local network is that it is not a network of CBOs but that of mostly national level institutions and opinion makers, so this results in a deficit of direct participation by the communities. There is too much emphasis on support organisations and not the communities themselves”⁵¹. International community forestry networks were

⁴⁶ Interview with a CIFOR researcher.

⁴⁷ Report back of the ”impact group” during the Cameroon Lessons Workshop.

⁴⁸ Comments of the coordinator of the Community Forestry Development Project.

⁴⁹ Although people variously expressed these sentiments, most of the direct quotes in this paragraph were the responses of a senior CIFOR researcher.

⁵⁰ This observation was forcefully argued by a CIFOR researcher.

⁵¹ Interview with a senior CIFOR researcher.

considered even weaker than the local ones in terms of connecting with the grassroots⁵².

(d) On coordination

The issue of duplication among organizations that are championing community forestry in Cameroon has already been highlighted in a preceding section. In emphasizing the need for a more coordinated approach an informant quipped ” They should come into concert so that each of them stops having a piece of the reality but the whole reality”⁵³.

11. Synopsis

Contextual level remarks relating to community forestry in Cameroon

1. Cameroon has a varied vegetation mosaic consisting of humid forests, Savanna grasslands with montane forest patches, and well as semi-arid Sahel. The moist tropical forests are by far the most important of these vegetation categories in terms of economic importance, being a source of commercially valuable timber species.
2. For the entire colonial period up to the mid-1990s, the forests of Cameroon were managed through a centrally-directed structure and process, which expropriated resources and control over such resources from local communities, and excluded such communities from accessing forest resources as well as economic benefits accruing from them.
3. A variety of interacting factors including donor pressures, international economic interests, local political considerations, sheer weight of local tenurial and use pressures, as well as pressure from civil society movements⁵⁴ – ushered in a pro-people trend in policy, which culminated in the enactment of the 1994 forest law and its complementary decree of application.
4. Forest-sector reforms immediately preceding the 1994 law included a zoning plan that divides forests into a permanent zone, exclusively owned and managed by the state – and a non-permanent zone, owned by the state but used and managed by a variety of other actors including municipalities, private individuals, and local communities.
5. The 1994 law entitles communities to benefits of the forests through community forests, which are excisions of the non-permanent forest estate not exceeding 5000 hectares, which are then managed in partnership with the state through management plans and agreements. Communities derive economic benefit from the commercial exploitation of the forests, from which they also draw resources for their subsistence needs.
6. But decentralized forest management in Cameroon is rather restricted because of size restrictions to community forests, which are further confined to the non-permanent zone. Communities often inherit secondary forests of diminished economic value since such forests are subject to salvage logging by companies, which often end up in conflict with the communities. Harvesting restrictions specified in the management plans as a premium for sustainable offtake impose further limits on the magnitude of the benefit.

⁵² Point emphasized by a CIFOR researcher.

⁵³ Point made by a GTZ officer.

⁵⁴ Including international and local community forestry networks.

7. Decentralization through the conferment of community forests upon communities has only resulted in conditional empowerment without addressing the fundamental issues of ownership and control of forests and the land on which they grow.
8. The process of establishing community forests is long and costly, riddled with implementational contradictions between the supportive law and its decree, and vests too much discretionary power in the state at the expense of the communities.
9. Overall, the implementation of community forests in Cameroon appears to take the focus and support away from other community forestry activities, particularly those practised by communities outside the humid forest zone.

Lessons learnt with respect to networking structures and processes

1. A state-aligned local network formally institutionalizes community forests in Cameroon. Though its "civil society plus state" outlook is seen as enhancing delivery in terms of policy and grassroots impact, the partnership is seen as considerably eroding the network's autonomy. Not surprisingly the network has still not crafted a broader vision of community forestry that transcends the insular concept of community forests, which the network helps implement in partnership with state institutions.
2. There is a sizeable complement of other local, regional and international networks operating in Cameroon, which offers considerable scope for cross-scale insights and synergies, but unfortunately coordination among all these networks is considered weak.
3. The various networks have different combinations of intervention domains (e.g. awareness raising, capacity building etc), with those that have wider intervention areas being seen as building on "internal synergies". Although those focusing on a few areas may result in "high specialization", some form of coordination was argued for, to enable filtering of specialized insights to other networks and contexts.
4. The various networks use different combinations of networking tools, depending on their priorities and resource endowments. No particular combination of tool was necessarily considered better or worse than the other, but developing tools that enable more effective contact with grassroots communities was emphasized.
5. Some form of "formal linkage" or "coordination unit" was suggested as a way of ensuring that the activities of local networks feed into the scope of the work international networks, as well as minimizing duplication among the networks. A suggestion risked by one informant related to the establishment of "an official clearing house" for tracking and monitoring, the ethics and mechanics of which are open to debate.
6. No fundamental contradictions were noted between government policy and the agendas of international community forestry networks, at least in terms of the envisioned objective functions like decentralization, sustainable management, poverty alleviation and community empowerment and participation. Some of the contradictions were seen to arise from differences in emphasis, with networks accused of often sensationalizing issues instead of engaging government in positive dialogue.

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