



Governance Brief

Improving Decentralized Forest Management in Cameroon: Options and Opportunities from Ten Years of Experience

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This Policy Brief:

- (1) outlines recommendations for change and improvement;
- (2) describes the legal and institutional infrastructure of decentralized forest management in Cameroon;
- (3) describes how basic mechanisms of decentralized forest management operate in practice; and
- (4) summarizes the findings of five years of World Resources Institute (WRI)-Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) research on decentralized forestry policy and practice.

The decentralization of forestry management in Cameroon has succeeded in providing powers to local actors and enabling them to establish community forests, council forests and community-managed hunting zones, and to have access to forestry fees. The impacts of this transfer of power on local democracy, equity, living standards, poverty alleviation, social vulnerability and environmental sustainability are, however, weak. There is enormous room for improvement. This brief formulates recommendations with a view to transforming the promise of decentralized forest management in Cameroon into action and positive outcomes on the ground, notably poverty reduction.

Recommendations

- ◆ **To increase accountability in the management of and investment in wildlife and community forest revenue, monitoring and evaluation indicators must be developed and applied.** *Such indicators are currently being developed.*
 - Researchers, NGOs/projects, social networks, decision makers, local elected representatives and village communities.
- ◆ **To curb corruption and widespread embezzlement in the redistribution and use of forest-based revenue, tangible legal proceedings and administrative and legal sanctions are needed.** *This can be done through: (i) the signing of 'Prefectoral' Orders defining tangible sanctions against embezzlement in the local management of community forests and wildlife revenue; (ii) the dismissal of regional administrative authorities involved in embezzlement; and (iii) the full involvement of the courts so that legal proceedings and sanctions are applied.*

- Decision makers, parliamentarians (as a pressure group), magistrates and local communities.
- ◆ **To curb corruption and widespread embezzlement in the management of forest-based revenue, codes of conduct for management committee members must be designed at village and council levels.**
 - NGOs/projects, social networks and local communities.
- ◆ **To enable local discretion over forest-based fund management, mechanisms must be set up for the direct transfer, in cash, of the 10% of annual forestry fees earmarked for forest-edge village communities.** *This can be done through a series of policy meetings aimed at the signing of a new MINEFI (Ministère des Finances)/MINEDAT (Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale) Joint Order for direct cash transfers and of Municipal Orders relating to the management of council forest revenue.*
 - Decision makers, mayors, local councillors, donors and parliamentarians (as a pressure group).
- ◆ **To promote downward accountability and local democracy, appropriate social methodologies and democratic procedures are required to govern the choice and constitution of management committees effectively.**
 - NGOs and social/policy researchers.
- ◆ **To enhance equitable and efficient local reinvestment of wildlife income, management committees must be granted full and independent powers to manage revenue allocated to forest-edge village communities.** *This can be done through the Signing of a Joint Ministerial Order (Ministry in Charge of Forests – (MINFOF)/MINEFI) giving full powers to the Comités de Valorisation des Ressources Fauniques (COVAREFs) for the management of this revenue, without interference by officials of MINFOF or administrative and council authorities.*
 - Decision makers, donors and parliamentarians (as a pressure group).
- ◆ **To empower local communities in forested Cameroon, the principle of an Equalization Fund for forest-based revenue – intended as a nation-wide redistribution of annual forestry fees – must be revised, since it is rejected by forest-edge communities and rural councils.**
 - ◆ **To promote decision-making reform, full involvement of pressure groups and advocates, including key donors, will be required.**
 - Researchers, NGOs/projects and parliamentarians.

Introduction

Cameroon embarked on the decentralization of forest management with the promulgation of the 1994 Forestry Law (RoC 1994). Until then, forest management had been based, on the whole, on laws introduced in France in 1830, following the French Civil Code (Le Roy 1982). Between the colonial period and 1994, Cameroon's legal tenure arrangements placed forests under exclusive State ownership and management. A Provisional Zoning Plan designed in 1993 defines the various 'public' uses of forestry and agro-forestry areas and introduces meaningful change in forest tenure. Similarly, the 1994 Forestry Law (RoC 1994), along with subsequent legal and administrative instruments, constituted a major policy shift.

Cameroon has a vast forested domain. Out of a total surface area of 47.5 million ha, dense rainforest occupies 23.9 million ha, 17 million ha of which are exploitable for logging. At the end of the 1990s, the country plunged into a severe economic crisis characterized by the weakening of the urban middle classes, the exodus of town dwellers to rural areas, and disruption of rural economies. About 49.6% of the country's 15.8 million inhabitants live in rural areas, where purchasing power dropped significantly and livelihoods were severely disrupted (RoC 2003). Under these conditions, rural communities' concerns for their well-being were increasingly directed at the exploitation of natural resources, especially timber, for revenue that they generate.



A facies of Cameroon's humid dense forest.
Photo by Patrick Nyemeck.

Theory indicates that to obtain positive and sustainable policy, political, socioeconomic and environmental outcomes, decentralization in the area of natural resources must be *democratic and substantive* (Manor 1999; Ribot 2003, 2005). Decentralization is often purported to have the following advantages: (i) more effective service delivery; (ii) reduced administrative transaction costs; (iii) increased popular participation; (iv) stronger powers for local governments, local authorities and local communities; (v) greater sense of responsibility amongst local actors; (vi) equity in access to resources and financial benefits and distributional equity; and (viii) environmental sustainability etc. (see Box 1).

Box 1: What is democratic decentralization of forest management?

Democratic decentralization, also called political decentralization, emerges when powers, rights, responsibilities and resources are transferred to subnational or local authorities who represent and are accountable to the local population. These authorities – acting on behalf of the local population – are elected democratically. In a ‘social contract,’ they are thus obliged to account for their actions to the people who elected them. In the case of Cameroonian forest management, these authorities include municipal administrators, municipal councillors and members of various village management committees; they must, therefore, be responsive and account downwardly – that is, to the population.

In a democratic decentralization reform, powers are transferred to local authorities. The powers that are transferred are exercised within a set of rules designed to insure sustainable forest use while maximizing local discretion. Such arrangements – involving minimum standards while guaranteeing that local representatives have discretion – enable local authorities to respond to local needs without threatening higher-level social and economic values. No advocates of decentralization advocate transferring all powers over natural resources. There are nevertheless many powers that are meaningful to local people that can be transferred while still protecting the resource base.

Sources: Ribot (2003); Oyono (2004).

The remainder of this brief describes Cameroon’s forest management decentralization mechanisms, their implementation and their outcomes. The material presented below is derived from research

undertaken over the past five years by the CIFOR-WRI team. These observations and empirical work are the basis of the recommendations outlined above.

The Structure of Cameroon’s Forest Management Decentralization

The provisions of the 1994 Forestry Law establish forestry, wildlife and fisheries regulations. Its Application Decree details the modes of implementation (RoC 1995). These tools, along with subsequent orders and circulars, form the legal bases for the decentralized management of Cameroon’s forests. As a whole, these forestry reforms have three objectives: (i) to promote community participation in forest management; (ii) to contribute to poverty reduction; and (iii) to contribute to sustainable forest resources management. These reforms establish four basic mechanisms that are the foundations of decentralized forest management in Cameroon: (i) council forests; (ii) community forests; (iii) annual forestry fees; and (iv) community-managed hunting zones.

Council Forests

A council forest ‘is any forest that has been classified and assigned to a council concerned or that was planted by the council on council land’ (RoC 1994). Constitutional reforms in 1996 establish the ‘council’ as the basic decentralized territorial unit. The 1994 Forestry Law and its Application Decree transfer to these entities ownership rights over the biophysical unit within their jurisdiction (the council forest) and over the financial benefits accruing from the exploitation of its forest products, including timber (RoC 1994, 1995). At present, only five such councils, the Dimako, Moloundou and Yokadouma Rural Councils in the East Province and the Djoum and Sangmélina Rural Councils in the South Province, have an established and classified ‘council forest’ in accordance with the law. The Dimako case – the most advanced – was among the case studies conducted for this brief.

Community Forests

The Forestry Law of 1994 offers village communities in Cameroon the possibility of establishing community forests. A community forest is defined as ‘a forest of the non permanent forest estate, subject to a management agreement between a village community and the Administration in charge of forests. The management of this forest is

entrusted to the village community concerned, with the technical support of the Administration' (RoC 1995). A community forest is a non planted forest that can be set up only in an area over which the village community concerned has customary rights. The law states that a village community wishing to establish a community forest should organize itself into a legal entity. This entity can be a common initiative group, an association, an economic interest group or a co-operative.

A significant innovation in favour of local populations, which encourages the creation of community forests, appeared in the wake of the law. This is the pre-emption right, which institutes the priority attribution of any forest likely to be established as a community forest to the neighbouring village communities. The objective of this prescription is to give priority to village communities, rather than logging companies, when a forest may be allocated under a *vente de coupe* – a sale of standing volume in small logging units of less than 2500 ha (MINEF 2001).

Annual Forestry Fees

Though provided for under the 1994 Forestry Law, the allocation of annual forestry fees by logging companies was not implemented until fiscal year 1996/1997. The annual forestry fee *'comprises two elements, an access right calculated from a minimum rate of 300 CFA francs per hectare per year and an exploitation right calculated by logging area for the duration of the latter [...]* The product of these fees is distributed as follows: 50% to the central State, 40% to rural councils in whose domains the exploited forests are located, and 10% to neighboring villages' (RoC 1996).

This Article of the Finance Law was changed in fiscal year 1997/1998 and the fees were fixed as follows: *ventes de coupe*, 2500 CFA francs per hectare; concessions, 1500 CFA francs per hectare; and permits, 1500 CFA francs per hectare. The Finance Law for fiscal year 2000/2001 then lowered the minimum fee for concessions to a rate of 1000 CFA francs per hectare. Annual Forestry fees are paid by certified cheque, and function as, *inter alia*, a kind of 'eco tax' derived from the 'polluter pays' principle – that is, financial compensation paid to repair the damage caused by industrial forestry development.

Community-managed Hunting Zones

The current forestry law makes a brief reference to community hunting areas, but this provision has not actually been put into practice. Nevertheless,

some NGOs and conservation projects in the South East region have experimented with community-managed hunting zones (ZICGCs, as they are known in French); ZICGCs are forest areas allocated to village communities. Another kind of hunting zone, known as *Zones d'intérêt cynégétique* (ZICs, French acronym), is allocated to professional hunting guides. ZICGCs and ZICs stem from a rather loose interpretation of the legal instruments relating to the allocation of forest (and therefore wildlife) resources to local communities and from concerns related to the management of protected areas in South East Cameroon (MINEF 2000). These two instruments enable village communities neighbouring wildlife-rich areas to carry out traditional hunting activities and also gain access to a portion of wildlife taxes.

Village community access to financial benefits from wildlife resource exploitation is defined by Circular No. 2978/MINEF/DFAP/AC of 14 October 1999. With regard to ZICs, the principal tax paid by hunting guides is redistributed according to the pattern of annual forestry fees: 50% for the central State, 40% for the councils concerned, and 10% for forest-edge village communities. When ZICGCs are leased to hunting guides, local communities receive direct compensation as well as 10% of the annual lease tax. Leasing is currently the prevailing method for exploiting ZICGCs. According to Ontcha Mpele *et al.* (2005), 16 ZICGCs exist in South East Cameroon. The local management of ZICGCs is the responsibility of COVAREFs (wildlife resource enhancement committees).



The Secretary General of the Ministry of Environment and Nature Protection receiving a delegation from CIFOR headed by Doris Capistrano during her visit to Cameroon.
 Photo by Patrick Nyemeck

Implementing Decentralized Forest Management

The following section provides an outline of the implementation process for these four decentralization policy options. While the exploitation of community forests and the redistribution of annual forestry fees seem to be the more advanced and scaled-up experiments, the exploitation of ZICGCs, which exist only in the South East, and of communal forests, of which there are only five, remains marginal.

Establishment of Council Forests

In the pioneer case of Dimako, which has served as a source of inspiration for other councils, the establishment of the council forest involved the following steps:

- ◆ classification of the forest, for which local communities were consulted;
- ◆ organizational arrangements, which led to the formation of the Consultative Management Committee, with a representative of each of the 17 villages that comprise Dimako Rural Council as well as statutory members, and a Monitoring Committee;
- ◆ drafting of a management plan, by a joint French-Cameroonian project, using socioeconomic data and forest inventories;
- ◆ legal and administrative procedures, including: (i) approval of the management plan by the Ministry in charge of forests (formerly MINEF, now MINFOF) (ii) a Prime Ministerial Decree with regard to the official classification of the forest on behalf of the council in June 2001; (iii) official authorization, implying that exploitation of the forest could begin.

Logging of the Dimako council forest began in 2005. Revenue generated to date is estimated at 72 210 000 CFA francs.

Community Forest Implementation and Exploitation

The *Manual of Norms and Procedures for the Attribution and Management of Community Forests* – a methodological guide produced by the Community Forestry Unit of MINFOF – proposes the following stages for establishing a community forest:

- ◆ public awareness and information campaign at the level of the village community applying for a forest;
- ◆ formation of a management entity;
- ◆ delimitation of the future community forest;

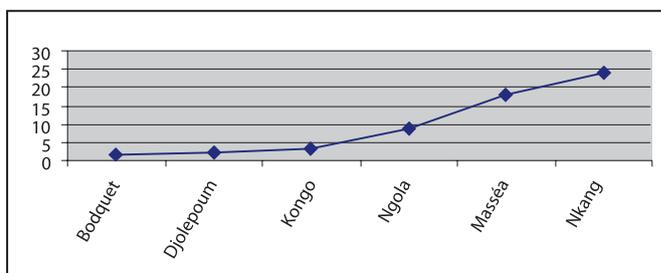
- ◆ designation of the community forest;
- ◆ development of a simple management plan;
- ◆ approval of the simple management plan by the services of MINFOF;
- ◆ signing of the management agreement between MINFOF and the village community concerned.

Once the management agreement has been signed, the village community can begin logging. There are three forms of exploitation: (i) artisanal logging under the control of the community itself; (ii) artisanal logging in partnership with a logging company; and (iii) industrial logging. The latter was targeted in 2001 in Circular No. 677/2001, signed by the Minister in charge of forests, addressing the illegal logging of community forests and making industrial logging much more difficult. Illegal logging refers here to, among other things, the opening of roads and use of trucks in the forest.

Statistics published by the Community Forestry Unit of MINFOF, dating from December 2004, show that 326 applications for the attribution of community forests had already been examined, with 76 granted. According to the same official sources, some 167 community forests have now been attributed.

Village committees – known as ‘management entities’ – are responsible for the management and exploitation of community forests and related revenue. An overall assessment based on various sources shows that annual revenue generated by community forests ranges from 1.48 million CFA francs for a low-revenue-yielding forest to 23.8 million CFA francs for a high-yielding one. The following figure presents the annual revenue of selected cases.

Figure 1. Annual revenue of selected community forests, in 2003 and 2004 (million CFA francs)



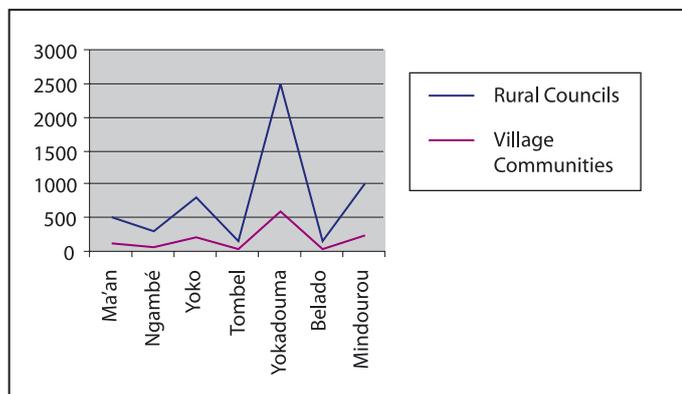
Allocation of Annual Forestry Fees

To disburse the 50% of annual forestry fees intended for rural councils and forest-edge village

communities, the General Department of Taxation issues cheques to the mayors of the localities concerned. Each recipient rural council has a 'regional' management committee chaired by the mayor and composed of local representatives of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, MINFOF, the local Revenue Collector, and representatives of village committees.

Village communities should form village-level forestry fee management committees (MINEFI/MINEDAT 1998). The 10% of fees intended for these communities is not given to them in cash, rather these committees are expected to submit community project proposals to the 'regional' management committee for funding. According to the Forestry Revenue Enhancement Program, during the two fiscal years 2002/3 and 2004, the amounts of annual forestry fees paid to the central State and to councils were 9.2 billion and 10.1 billion CFA francs, respectively. Village communities as a whole were entitled to 1.9 billion CFA francs. The following figure shows total annual forestry fees allocated to selected rural councils and constituent villages during fiscal years 2002/3 and 2004.

Figure 2. Annual forestry fees allocated to selected rural councils and constituent villages, fiscal years 2002/3 and 2004 (million CFA francs)



Community-managed Hunting Zones

In villages with ZICGCs, COVAREFs are responsible for identifying local development problems, seeking appropriate solutions and ensuring the implementation of all projects of community interest in the villages. A COVAREF may cover one or more villages (Ontcha Mpele *et al.* 2005). The revenue managed by COVAREFs is derived mainly from the leasing of the community-

managed hunting zones to professional hunting concessionaires, who pay rental or access rights for the period of the lease. Other financial resources are also derived from a portion of fees for: (i) the leasing of professional hunting zones (ZICs) located near the villages; (ii) related felling tax; (iii) capture tax; and (iv) auction sales, damages and interest paid by poachers to the regional forest and wildlife service.

The financial resources of COVAREFs are deposited in accounts at the Post Offices in the nearest towns. This money is accessible to the chairs and treasurers of these committees. The money can, however, be withdrawn only with the approval of an official of the regional forest and wildlife service. The amount of wildlife revenue in COVAREFs, from 2000 to 2004, ranged from a low of 1.9 million CFA francs (Njombi-Lobo) to a high of 17.3 million (Salokomo).

Research

The research undertaken for this policy brief is based on a set of studies on environmental decentralization and governance in Cameroon carried out jointly by CIFOR and WRI between 2000 and 2006. These studies were conducted with four main objectives: (i) to generate knowledge and public and strategic information on forest management decentralization and forest governance; (ii) to contribute to the improvement of policy and legal frameworks relating to the decentralization of forest management, associated financial benefits and forest governance; (iii) to contribute to the improvement of practices in the management and exploitation of community forests and related revenue, council forests, wildlife revenue, annual forestry fees and other forms of revenue or compensation; and (iv) to disseminate results, policy lessons and recommendations in other countries in the Congo Basin, in order to support incipient forestry reforms.

This study began in the East and South provinces of Cameroon, with extensions in the North West and South West provinces. Five key questions guided the research: (i) who are the local/peripheral actors in the context of the decentralized management of Cameroon's forests? (ii) what are the powers transferred to these actors? (iii) what are the mechanisms for holding these newly empowered actors accountable? (iv) what institutional arrangements have been established for governance of and popular participation in environmental decision-making? and (v) what are the social, economic, political and ecological outcomes of these processes?



Timber is an important source of revenue in Cameroon.
 Photo by Paolo Cerutti

To answer these questions, this study identified and monitored the performance of 15 community forest management committees, 1 rural council (for the Dimako Council Forest), 1 council forest management consultative committee, 4 rural councils (for annual forestry fees), and 15 village annual forestry fees management committees. Additional committees were studied through informal visits to other villages. Many different actors in the village communities were consulted in an iterative manner. Decision makers, project managers, municipal councillors, field practitioners, researchers, key and strategic informants, logging operators and strategic groups were interviewed at the central, regional and local levels. The Forestry Law – the Application, in effect – and related orders were reviewed and analyzed.

Results

Security of Transfer

The forestry law *transfers*, to regional and local entities, rights of ownership over forest units of the permanent and non permanent forest estate and rights of autonomous management of financial benefits derived from their exploitation. Not all of these transfers are secure, however.

- ◆ Of the four mechanisms addressed by the study, the transfer of rights and powers is effective and permanent only in the case of council forests. These powers – the powers to own a council forest, to exploit it and to manage the revenue – are discretionary and rely on the principle of subsidiarity.
- ◆ Powers have been *delegated* to village communities to establish community forests and for the autonomous management

of financial benefits derived from their exploitation. In this case, powers are only *delegated* because the 1994 Forestry Law states that if a community forest is ‘poorly managed’ the Ministry in charge of forests will withdraw the managerial powers from the village community concerned. This process of power transfer is conditional and has the effect of making local managers upwardly accountable to the regional officials of MINFOF, thus reducing local freedom in decision making (see Box 2).

BOX 2: Is a community forest a loan?

Cameroon’s forestry laws and regulations state that community forest management agreements must be signed for 5-year periods, renewable for a total of 25 years. If the forest is poorly managed – sometimes defined as such only by experts – the management agreement is suspended. This happened in many community forests – including that of Kongo – in 2002 and 2003. It raises the question as to whether community forests actually constitute a transfer of powers, a delegation of powers or a loan granted only under certain conditions.

Source: Oyono *et al.* (2006)

- ◆ Decentralized forestry tax revenues are distributed following double standards. Ten per cent of the annual forestry fee revenue is earmarked for forest-edge villages. This 10% is not, however, paid directly to the forest-edge village communities in cash. The communities have very little power over the management of these funds. Instead, in the redistribution process, the funds are retained at the level of municipal (primarily mayors) and administrative authorities. In most cases, local communities are subordinate stakeholders: decision making about socioeconomic amenities to be established at the village level is usurped by municipal and administrative authorities (see Box 3).

Institutional Choice and Constitutional Issues

The choice of management committees as the local institutions receiving powers, and the way in which these local committees are constituted, has resulted in elite capture, conflict and corruption.

- ◆ Although created to undertake the decentralized management of forests and distribution of benefits on behalf of their communities, management committees are actually governed such that external actors

BOX 3: The weakness of local actors in the management of annual forestry fees

In the way that management committees currently operate, chaired by mayors or their representatives who are municipal councillors, local village community representatives are mere observers. They do not participate fully in decision making concerning the local management of forestry fees or the implementation of economic, social and cultural amenities in neighbouring village communities. Most decisions (the types of projects and other undertakings, contractors responsible for carrying out the work, geographical distribution of socioeconomic amenities, amount to be allocated to projects, etc.) are made by mayors.

Source: Bigombé Logo (2003)

(mayors, administrative authorities, NGOs and projects, regional services of MINFOF, logging companies, external elite, etc.) wield substantial influence.

- ◆ To deal with annual forestry fees, management committees were set up hastily by administrative authorities and logging companies. They failed to follow appropriate methodologies that could support the development of local collective action and microgovernance principles in the management of forest-based revenue. Established in this way, these organizations have no locally relevant foundations or legitimacy,
- ◆ Numerous village management committees were established without competitive election or democratic process. Rather, they were instituted through what appear to be very undemocratic mechanisms such as cooption and self appointment. For example, in the case of 15 village annual forestry fee management committees, 40% of the members were 'self-appointed' (mainly elite) and 27% coopted. The result, again, is a lack of local social legitimacy.
- ◆ As committees were designed undemocratically on the whole, their leaders use their powers undemocratically. This poor local exercise of powers – bad governance – is characterized by: (i) the confiscation, by management committee leaders, of decision making regarding the management of community forest revenue; (ii) the resulting institutionalization of embezzlement and corruption; (iii) the absence of downward accountability of these leaders to village communities that 'appointed' or elected them; (iv) the absence of 'modern' or 'traditional' sanctions; (v) authoritarianism via the substitution of village management committees for village communities; and (vi)

the hijacking of committees by the elite. The existence of these practices implies that the institutions are undemocratic and there is an absence of local democracy (see Box 4).

Box 4: The 'dirigisme' of management committee leaders

Several management committee leaders in the Messamena district lack leadership experience and became 'leaders' only because of the 1994 Forestry Law and NGOs. This lack of capacity is demonstrated in many ways. For example, the mandate of the Kompia Community Forest Common Initiative Group (CIG) ended in 2002. The village community therefore called for a general meeting to make a progress report and elect a new bureau – the management body – of the CIG. Not only was there no general meeting, but no meeting had been held there for more than seven months. For more than two years, the executive bureau presented no report. This bureau was accused by the villagers of 'dirigisme' and embezzlement.

Source: Etoungou (2003)

- ◆ The emergence of 'new local authorities' – members of various village management committees – through institutional change related to decentralization policies is perceived by traditional authorities (lineage heads, elders and chiefs) as a *coup d'état*. The result is a schism within the village, or institutional dualism, and increased conflict (over power, pre-eminence and other interests), setting the opposing groups against each other and impacting negatively on local management dynamics and livelihoods improvement.

Accountable Representation

In part because of the way in which committees were constituted, village management committee operations are often governed by concerns of upward accountability – to municipal authorities, regional administrative authorities, NGOs, representatives of MINFOF, logging companies etc. – rather than to village communities.

- ◆ The local management of forests and derived benefits is characterized by the emergence, through management committees, of a local 'environmental elite' – *nouveaux riches* 'middlemen' – cut off from local populations. They are, however, linked to external elites committed to the capture of community forests – such as regional administrative corporatism, municipal authorities and logging companies – through a combination

of financial, social and political interests. This leads to 'externally oriented committees.'

- ◆ Arrangements initiated around the Dimako Council Forest – by the Consultative Management Committee and the Monitoring Committee – are not conducive to the significant involvement of forest-edge village communities in the decision-making process concerning the management and exploitation of that forest.
- ◆ In some cases, however, the decentralized management of forests and related benefits has generated responsible representation and mobilization around daily concerns. In these cases, positive socioeconomic outcomes have emerged.



Small-scale logging of a community forest.
 Photo by Veille & Jum

Outcomes and Impact

Although villages have seen some tangible socioeconomic results from forest management decentralization, this is more apparent in mechanisms that generate direct cash benefits for communities. A substantial portion of revenue is embezzled at the level of both councils and management committees. Decentralized management has not yet led to distributional equity or ecological sustainability, and in some villages has increased vulnerability amongst social categories such as women, generally excluded from this 'forestry game'.

- ◆ The redistribution of annual forestry fees led to socioeconomic benefits in the villages of some rural councils, including, for example, Yokadouma (financing of three community forest applications, construction of ten classrooms, payment of six part-time teachers' wages, purchase of seven chainsaws, purchase of community television sets etc.); Lomié (financing of three community forest applications, repair of five classrooms, construction of two cultural halls), Dimako (construction of four classrooms), and Ebolowa (construction of three classrooms, the roof of a chapel and three small health centres). Despite these achievements, with little economic impact and a strong orientation toward sociocultural infrastructure, this mechanism has not stood out as instruments of local governance, socioeconomic transformation or positive change in many of the villages involved.
- ◆ Some of the 16 community-managed hunting zones exploited under lease in the South East region generated revenue that later funded socioeconomic amenities, for a total of about 43 million CFA francs from 2000 to 2004. According to World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-Jengui) Project experts, this was spent as follows (Bigombé Logo *et al.* 2005): 33.27% for the operations of COVAREFs; 18.90% for the construction of COVAREF offices; 14.40% for educational support to students; 8.31% for setting up community farms; 5.18% for village water projects; 6.62% for the purchase of motorbikes; 3.13% for providing material support to the Baka Pygmies; 0.84% for village electrification; 3.10% for housing improvement; and 6.25% for the protection of some community-managed hunting zones. These percentages are marked by the predominance of expenses related to COVAREF operations, which are not easy to assess.
- ◆ The redistribution of annual forestry fees and their conversion, by rural councils, into socioeconomic projects in constituent villages is characterized by overbilling, the declaration of fictitious projects, and embezzlement (Kouna 2001; Bigombé Logo 2003). Whole villages have been excluded from the redistribution process over many years; projects are invoiced at triple their real cost; council revenue and tax collectors impose imaginary taxes on contractors, take abusive deductions (sometimes 20–30%) from payment amounts, and make this a precondition for contracts (see Box 5). The idea of an Equalization Fund, which would – as planned by experts from the Prime Minister's office – recentralize revenues that would then be redistributed to non-forested areas, would only increase corruption and further decrease the benefits due to forest-edge communities.
- ◆ Financial resources generated from the exploitation of community forests are tangible, as this involves selling planks for cash. Concrete socioeconomic results are found in some villages, where housing improvements, classroom repairs, establishment of community oil palm nurseries, well construction, bee keeping, cultural initiatives, etc., can be seen. As shown in Figure 1, annual revenue ranges

Box 5: Misappropriation in the management of forest benefits

The village of Kongo (Lomié region, East Province) received approximately 12.8 million CFA francs for compensation from *ventes de coupe* between 1997 and 2000. Part of this money, 6.8 million CFA francs, went into the coffers of the Lomié Rural Council. The remaining 6 million CFA francs were given to the village development committee. The committee used 1.9 million CFA francs to build two (unfinished) wells in December 2003, to finance part of the community forest application, and to assist some pupils, widows and widowers in the village in 1999. The study's sources of information show that the remaining 4.1 million CFA francs were used for personal ends by committee members and their external accomplices.

Source: Assembe (2004)

from about 1.5 million CFA francs to 25 million CFA francs. These disparities are explained by a series of factors, such as: (i) method of exploitation (artisanal or industrial, artisanal under the control of the community itself or a logging company); (ii) whether or not the community forest has been hijacked by an elite or logging company; (iii) negotiation strategies; and (iv) market structure.

- ◆ In spite of some important benefits, there is a disproportionate gap between the revenue generated from community forests and the quality and quantity of socioeconomic benefits derived by the villages concerned. Rather, the management of financial resources from community-forest exploitation is characterized by the embezzlement of funds by committee members and strategies for individual enrichment.
- ◆ The establishment of community forests involves significant financial costs for local communities and institutions. This is one of the many factors that hinder local adoption of the process and facilitate the 'hijacking' of several of these forests by the elite and logging companies.
- ◆ With regard to ecological effects, the exploitation and management of community forests is not sustainable (see Box 6). Rather, it is resulting in ecosystem degradation due to the combined weakness of institutional arrangements, the personal enrichment of individual management committee officials, the maximization of profits by forest contractors, and the lack of control by regional forestry services.
- ◆ Revenue generated by timber exploitation in the Dimako Council Forests has been

invested in the strengthening of the council's budget (13 240 050 CFA francs), village-level socioeconomic priorities (41 461 820 CFA francs), direct support in cash to villagers (16 508 000 CFA francs). Nevertheless, village-level socioeconomic priorities seem rather vague, with elements such as scholarships, book purchase, financial support for students, and hiring of temporary teachers in primary schools, which are not easy to assess.

Box 6: Degradation risks for community forests

Villagers mention, with regret, the considerable forest loss caused by the disorderly felling of trees by the logging company, Likeng and Co., with the complicity of management committee officials. The institutional arrangements surrounding the management of the Mboké Community Forest, which are far too favourable to the village chief (also the committee chair), the absence of downward accountability, and the village community's low level of control over management committee members had jeopardised the forest's ecology after only two years. The Mboké Community Forest – which the chief often refers to as '*my forest*' – is, in fact, one of the most threatened in the southern part of Cameroon, due mainly to 'personal enrichment' and the confiscation of community decision making.

Source: Oyono *et al.* (2006)

The Way Forward

Certain aspects of forest policy and the legal and administrative arsenal that support it need to be revised (see Recommendations). This would involve facilitating policy innovation and the improvement of the forestry law and related administrative instruments in force, in the light of results, assets and shortcomings recorded *in and around the field* of decentralized management of forests and derived benefits. Further research on forestry policy in Cameroon should seek to identify ways in which to influence policies and decision making, as well as practices on the ground, through concrete recommendations, advocacy, networking and monitoring.

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