

Community forestry and the challenge of aligning with Cameroon's green economy

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Initiated more than two decades ago through forest legislations and policy reforms in Cameroon, community forestry has experienced mixed opportunities partly due to its evolution. After humble beginnings, it is now better established due to a review of the legal framework. With the demand for environmental standards, it attempts to align with the green economy. In Cameroon, the reforms aimed, among other objectives, at implementing a forestry based on people

(Bigombe, undated). According to the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), these reforms concerned the institutional, legislative and regulatory frameworks and a new mapping of forest territories (Minsouma, 2008). The participation of local communities in forest resource management was at the centre of this reform via the introduction of decentralized forest management concepts. In its approach, community forests encompass (i) communal forests; (ii) community forests; (iii) the annual forest royalties; and (iv) community managed hunting zones (Oyono *et al.*, 2007). One of the main expectations is to transform these efforts into a dynamic process to empower rural communities in forest resources management; this will ultimately contribute to improving their livelihood options and foster local development. This dual objective of ensuring the balance between conservation and development matches the approaches of both sustainable development and green economy. The contribution of this natural resource management model to the green economy is poorly understood.

This paper presents the contribution of community forestry to the green economy and describes the current and future challenges in terms of integrating or aligning community forestry objectives to those of Cameroon's green economy.

A. Contribution of community forest to the green economy

Community forest produces goods and services that contribute to improving the economic and social conditions of rural households, and sustainable natural resources management (MINFOF 2009). Overall, the forestry sector is one of the main drivers of development in Cameroon with a contribution of over 6% to the GDP (COMIFAC, 2010). Paradoxically, the annual income bracket of community forests currently logged makes only a small contribution to this activity, ranging between 1,500,000 FCFA (€2,288) and 25,000,000 FCFA (€38,135) (Oyono *et al.*,

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2007). Because community forestry plays an increasingly significant social and economic role, an ecological combination is therefore needed for this sub-sector to fully play its role within the green economy and this requires sustainable resource use as well as a reduction of environmental waste.

According to the law, a Simple Management Plan (SMP) is one of the major requirements for communities to obtain and manage community forests. The revision of exploitation guidelines for community forests has resulted in authorizing communities to exploit the forest during the initial two years, helping them to receive revenues that permit the elaboration of the required management plan. . The mechanism for acquiring and appropriating community forests in savannah areas is based on the fact that forests can also be established in non-forest zones. This mechanism therefore encourages communities to reforest degraded areas, and also to help communities to have a better control of their resources, including wildlife. Several thousand trees have already been planted in the north by communities to green some savannah areas. Community forestry is thus no more exclusively dedicated to timber management. In the south-east region for example, over 20% of incomes generated by Community Hunting Zones (ZICGC) have been reinvested as contributions from communities to the on-

going fight against poaching. The bulk of funds received by local communities are devoted to the development of social infrastructure such as building schools or health centers. From 2000 to 2004, the 16 ZICGCs exploited in the South-East, have generated about 43,000,000 FCFA. Experts from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-Jengi Project) have constituted the following percentages in terms of achievement by COVAREF (Bigombé Logo *et al.* 2005): 33.27% for the operation of the segments of Community Wildlife Management Committees (COVAREF); 18.90% for the building of headquarters for the various sub-branches of COVAREFs ; 14.40% for education; 8.31% for the establishment of community farm fields; 5.18% for village water pumps; 6.62% for the purchase of equipment (vehicles, bicycles, etc.) 3.13% for the material support to Baka Pygmies; 0.80% for village electrification; 3.10% for habitat improvement; and 6.25% for the safety of some ZICGCs (Oyono *et al.*, 2007).

Between 2000 and 2010, six COVAREFs have benefited from 274 million FCFA (about €417,310), with a general progressive increase over time (**Figure 1**).

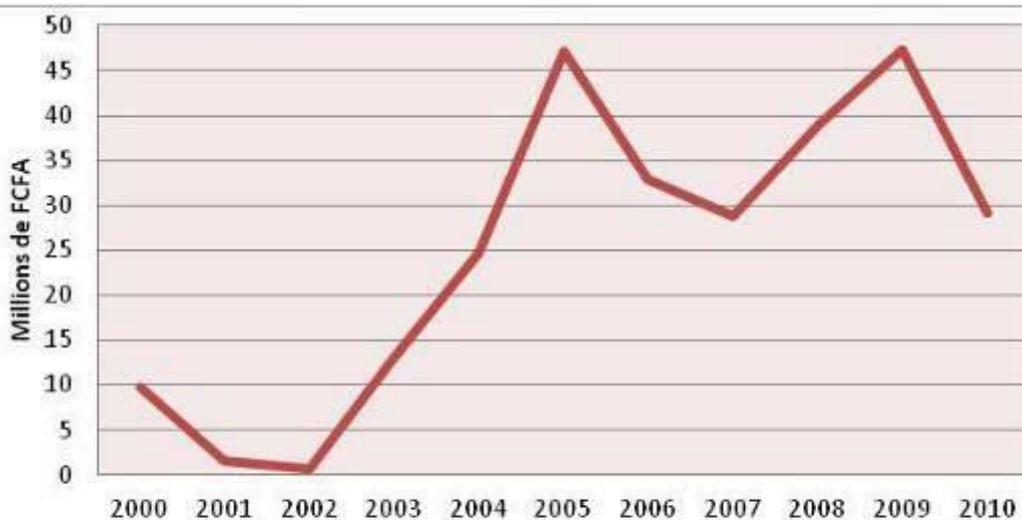


Figure 1: Evolution des recettes (million de FCFA des 6 Comités de Valorisation des Ressources fauniques (COVAREF) au Sud Est Cameroun de 2000 à 2010 (Source: données WWF, non publiées)

The legal framework also restricts the negative impact of community forest exploitation on the ecology of the landscape; if it now forbids the physical transport of wood collected from community lands, it also restricts the hauling trails to a width which will not allow the entry of heavy trucks. Some of the communities have also started processing wood waste, thus reducing raw material loss. This is the case for the Model Forests of Dja and Mpomo (FOMOD) in the Eastern region of Cameroon, where these residues are transformed into pens. Other communities around Mambele, recycle wood residues into coal, which are then sent to urban markets located hundreds of kilometers from the production zone. In the Lomié area in the Dja-Odzala-Minkebe trinational landscape (TRIDOM) between Cameroon, Gabon, and Congo Brazzaville, the communities in Makobitol and Nemeyong have also created Common Initiative Groups (CIG). They organize the logging and sale of wood from community forests and the allocation of revenues to applicant-households. These funds are used for the purchase of equipment and the construction of houses, to the tune of €330, 1/9 being given to the technician in charge of building the roofs. Moreover, the members of the community are authorised to recycle the poor quality wood as building material or to sell it.

Even if land title issues remain a trial for the communities who wish to adopt a community forestry approach, the softening of the legal framework is certain. In fact, this has enabled the establishment of the first community forests belonging to indigeneous Baka people from Mambele, in the eastern region of Cameroon. In addition to using the resources, these populations can peacefully practice their rituals which also facilitate a sound management and maintenance of community lands, since the people want to safeguard the areas where these rituals are practiced. We often overlook this function of community forestry which enables culture to be perpetuated, and this holds true for the forests of indigeneous populations in the East of Cameroon and the sacred forests in

the western and north-western regions of Cameroon where all the economic, ecologic and social functions of green economy are fulfilled.

B. Current and future challenges of community forestry

In Cameroon, the number of community forests has increased over the years. In 2008, the number of simple management plans approved by the Ministry in charge of forestry, was 174 out of a total 402 applications received (Minsouma, 2008). The greater concentration is found in the eastern region and is explained by the high local demand for timber. According to Smith (2010), 75% of domestic wood consumption of wood logged in Cameroon comes from artisanal logging. This wood comes not only from community forests, but also from individual logging permits. Special attention should therefore be given to this sub-sector, notably at the ecological level.

The legal framework governing the establishment of community forests has been reviewed, however the financial capacity of communities to mobilize funds is subject to doubts. Indeed, most of the funds used to support the finalization of Simple Management plans come from international partners. In the absence of these funds, the process will halt and annul the efforts made by communities to manage their forests in a sustainable manner. Ezzine *et al.* (2009) show that the financial support to community forests should be continuous until they become established as small forest enterprises, since an interruption of this support will lead to a lower performance than that of the self-managed forests. The funds required for the exploitation of community forests are actually very high to the extent that communities prefer subcontracting to minimize market-related risks. Such transactions no longer guarantee environmentally friendly management by the new loggers. The initial exploitation of the forest often experiences problems due to the delay in delivering annual operating certificates and waybills which enable

communities to sell in remote markets. This could be due to bureaucratic red tape, perhaps because the State wants to reclaim its control over community forests (Ribot et al., 2006) or to the prevailing corruption in the forest sector.

The contribution of community forests to the sustainable management of wildlife weighs heavily on the incomes collected by communities. This is the case in community-managed hunting zones where this could hinder local development. According to Oyono *et al.* (2007), the emergence of 'new local authorities', the empowerment of management committees through decentralization dynamics, were viewed by traditional authorities as a *coup d'état*. This leads to disunity among villages, or an institutional dualism and increasing conflicts between groups, thus having a negative impact on the dynamics of local community forest management. Concerning Forest Management Units (UFA) one of the essential correlations to community forest is the management by the communities of the annual forest royalty. Indeed, the new decree improves their involvement through the creation of a roadside committee by granting it a measure of authority, namely, that its Chairman can invite resource people to the Committee's meetings. This approach is also stipulated in the provisions for the logging of communal forests which also strengthened the aspects of community forestry by improving the representativity of communities; traditional chiefs are henceforth part of the monitoring committee. Moreover, 30% of the incomes generated by the logging of communal forests are devoted to the development of roadside village communities.

Conclusion

The community forestry approach was established to improve the integration of communities in the management and control of their zones. These areas include forest landscapes as well as other ecological sites that can be subjected to direct or indirect forestry activities. Community forestry was more confined to the management of

community forests from the point of view of wood cutting and sale. It somehow escapes the integrated approach of sustainable wildlife and wood species use in the same space. In purely forest zones, wildlife community management has appeared more efficient and the incomes generated by community-managed hunting zones are more invested in social infrastructures, as compared to those generated by the logging and sale of wood. Community forests have began initiating an optimization of the management of their resources with an improved local organization of those entities, a maximum use of the resource collected and a timid recycling of wood waste. Community-managed game zones located at the periphery of protected areas have continuously produced incomes and have been involved in poaching control activities. In the absence of sustained self financing, these results remain fragile since the communities exploiting the wood still heavily rely on external funding. In case the good performances of community forests do not materialize, especially in terms of the concretization of socio-economic effects anticipated after the review of the Manual of Procedures for the Attribution and Norms for the Management of Community forests, there is a risk that the State will reclaim these areas.

The proliferation of entities managing community incomes could, in the long run, lead to misunderstandings. At least three committees involved in community forestry have been recently put in place: the farmer-forest committee, the Community Wildlife Management Committee, the riparian committee. There is no effective coordination among these three committees even when they are established on the same surface area. The green economy supposes a good planning and thus an inevitable business plan for the activities related to the development of community forestry which should evolve in small enterprises. Therefore, it is important that the will of communities to envisage their local development plan and its implementation should not be inhibited by community

development plans conceived by municipal councils.

The experiences of community forests for the past twenty years reveal both the difficulties and potential of this approach. The low organizational capacity of communities slows down the progress, together with their isolation and various technical challenges. However, a dialogue has been initiated; populations have increased their involvement and are henceforth engaged in the debate on the future of their forests. There remains a lot to be done because the past failures during the inception period of the programme are viewed as part of the learning process leading to a greater involvement of populations in shaping the future of their forests. Efforts to capitalize on the enforcement of the 1994 Forestry Law should be envisaged to improve the orientation of future community management strategies and their actual contributions to the green economy in Cameroon.

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