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community forestry in Cameroon: Case study of
Lomié**

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Countries in Africa as well as in the whole third world are facing serious environmental degradation due mainly to the inefficiency of the natural resources management based only on the strategies of the central state. Meinzen-Dick R. and A. Knox (2000) recognised the limited effectiveness of the state in managing natural resources, especially at the local level. Aware of the situation and trying to improve it, Ngaido and Kirk (1999) underline that many states are reformulating their land- and resource-management policies and devolving decision-making power to local communities and organisations.

This devolution process occurs by granting property rights to local people. However, as Lynch (1999) emphasises, community-based property rights already exist among indigenous people, and something is seriously wrong when they are obliged to request their respective national governments to grant them property rights. Indigenous people and many other rural resource users already have property rights and are seeking state recognition of their rights, not a grant of new rights from the state.

But it is essential, for purposes of sustainable development of the countries, conservation of the natural resources as well as the well-being of the local communities to well understand the impact of various management systems of communities, private sector and/or of the state (FAO, 1999).

It becomes very important for national policies and approaches of each country to take into account the economic, social and cultural aspects of the people's lives, without forgetting their mobilisation and the recognition of their traditional rights, as well as the priorities in the short- and long-term of the various stakeholders. According to Quisumbing et al. (2001) and Place et al. (2000), there is increasing evidence that land tenure institutions in rural areas of developing countries are evolving from communal ownership to individualised ownership in response to population pressure and the growing profitability of agro-forestry devoted to commercially valuable trees.

Often it is asserted that the lack of conscience or knowledge of the rural population leads to some losses of bio-diversity. Indeed these people have a better comprehension of the local ecology but have also good reasons to consume the resources instead of preserving them (W.B., 1999) because they have access to the resources that they do not control and consider themselves strangers in their land and resources. For these reasons, it follows from the forest principles at the UNCED in Rio de Janeiro 1992 that the sustainable management of the forest

resources and the forest lands should meet the social, economic, ecological, cultural and spiritual needs of present and future generations (paragraph 2b).

Ngaido and Kirk (1999) raise the concern of whether governments in developing countries and countries in transition are really convinced that local institutions are efficient resource management structures. In spite of their political will, some of these governments are delaying the decentralisation and devolution of resources management and the building of local capacities for the sustainable use of those resources.

However, important technical, financial and material supports are made at the level of bilateral and multilateral co-operation to encourage the developing countries to adopt eco-development (UNDP, 1997). That is why the high demand for land and resources for economic purposes led people to conclude that if bio-diversity should be preserved in the long-term the benefits of conservation should outweigh the land's economic potential (World Bank., 1999). Supporting such views, Manig (1999) emphasises that it is only when the resources have become scarce and experience has been accumulated through intensive utilisation that the utilisation system become fragile and resources can be degraded so that the economic utility of the resources approximates its ecological utility. Only then are mechanisms developed in order to preserve the resources. In this situation it is economically sensible for individuals and small groups to invest in the sustainability of the resources utilisation. Sharing this view, Bromley (2001) point out that communities of resource users cannot possibly resist the economic and political pressures from the national capital in order to defeat plans for excessive resource extraction.

This means that the assistance for the conservation of biological diversity must be limited in time and stimulate the rise of sustainable strategies of conservation, based on initiatives of the communities that make their livelihood from the resources without compromising their future. In situations in which resources are available in superabundance and are, thus, virtually "free goods", the utility is either not considered, or undervalued. Likewise, in modern societies, sustainability did not become a subject of intensive discussion until the environment and the environmental quality degradation occurred. Resources, in the process of becoming scarce, create considerable potential conflicts, which can be reduced by the establishment of institutions. It is not the purpose of such institutions to secure the sustainability, the existence or the productivity of resources; they are rather a means of regulating property rights. The resources are transferred to a specific group or people, whose plan for the utilisation of the resources can be more easily rejected on the basis of the existence of these institutions (Manig, 1999)

The creation of local institutions with real decision-making power seems to be one of the solutions for a sustainable forest resource. Swallow and Bromley (1992) emphasise that the structure of government under which a common property regime operates determines the type of institutions that can be established to govern relations among members and between members and non-members. The most demanding type of institution to govern is that which takes on the power of a "right." To be implemented, rights must be: (1) formulated and promulgated; (2) communicated to those to whom they apply (members and non-members alike); (3) interpreted; (4) enforced; (5) legitimised by the persons or groups to whom they apply; and (6) adapted to changing needs and circumstances.

1.2. Problem statement

Devolution and community forestry have become major policy trends in developing countries. There are strong expectations that this will lead to a more sustainable forest management, with regards to both ecological and socio-economic objectives. However, the practical experience has been rather mixed. Often the expectations have not been fulfilled because most devolution processes are characterised by insufficient transfer of power to local institutions. Ribot (2002) remarks that secured power and accountable representation go together. Transferring power without accountable representation is dangerous and establishing accountable representation without power is ineffective.

One problem is that devolution in forest resources management is often restricted, and therefore local people will not invest in the responsible exercise of power if they believe that they will not hold this power for long.

There is more need for theoretical and empirical research on the question: under which conditions can community forestry meet its stated objectives. Taking the case of Cameroon as an example, this study's objective is to contribute to this research.

Forest covers 42% of the national territory of Cameroon (Fomete, 2000) and constitutes one of its major economic resources. Despite the forestry action plans and the efforts over the years to update the forest legislation, forests have decreased at an alarming rate. This has led to the realisation that there is a need to develop a new forest policy which better integrates innovative strategies for the national utilisation of rural lands, reflects the new national economic context and recognises the world-wide concern for sustainable management of the resources.

In 1995 the government adopted a new forest policy. The overall aim of this policy is to protect the environment and conserve its resources. Furthermore it highlights government

strategies for allowing the forest sector to contribute to the socio-economic development of Cameroon by involving non-government organisations, economic operators, and the local population. The new policy specifically aims to “increase the participation of local populations in forest conservation and management in order to contribute to the raising of their living standards”.

This policy further involves the rural population in its implementation through the development of village community forests and seeks to secure substantial benefits to village communities as well as to motivate them to protect the forest. The major tool for the achievement of this objective is the distribution of community forests to local populations.

The legal instruments for the implementation of the new policy are the new forest law (N° 94/01 of 20 January 1994) and its decree of implementation (N° 95/531 PM of 23 August 1995), which creates the Community Forests (CF) as well as the Territories of Community Hunting (TCH).

Ribot (2002) points out that devolution may be more important in decentralised management of natural resources because (1) natural resources are locally specific, diverse, have multiple uses and therefore require local knowledge in designing their management, and (2) access to natural resources and restriction to that access involve existing, new, and often multiple overlapping claims that generate conflicts requiring local mediation. By decentralising the forest management in Cameroon through a global law for the whole country, the government failed to respond to the two aforementioned advantages of devolution.

The creation of the CF/TCH is the way of the government to involve the peasants in the process of conservation of bio-diversity and making them owners of part of the forests so that they can assure their economic and social development. The CF also should constitute a compensation to the injury that protected area caused at the bordering communities (Sobze, 1999).

According to the above decree, the Community Forest is defined as “a forest forming part of the non-permanent forest estate, which is covered by a management agreement between a village community and the administration in charge of forests. Management of such forests is the responsibility of the village community concerned with the technical assistance of the administration in charge of forests”.

The same decree specifies that the community forest management agreement is a contract whereby the forestry administration entrusts part of the national forest to a community for its management, conservation, and use for the interest of that community. The agreement is

accompanied by a simple management plan, which lays out the activities to be undertaken. The maximum surface for a Community Forest is 5000 ha. (MINEF, 1998). The political will of the government, however, is not enough to maintain the genetic, species and the ecological diversity of the country. Several other questions remain:

- 1- What kinds of property rights exist and what kinds of property regime are implemented during the community management of the resources?
- 2- What are the characteristics of institutional arrangements of community management in the region of Lomié?
- 3- What kinds of constraints are facing various stakeholders in the implementation of the new forest policy?
- 4- What kinds of incentives motivate the local communities to carry out the process of community forestry and what are their capacities?
- 5- Bearing in mind the implementation constraints, how can the forest policy be modified to enable a sustainable use of the forest?

1.3. Objectives

The overall objective of this study is to explore and to analyse the major constraints and opportunities for Community Forests in order to determine the conditions that allow a successful achievement of the forest policy in Cameroon. I. e., this study presents how the forest policy is explained and how these explanations can be used to design recommendations for effective change of the policy.

The specific objectives are:

- 1- To develop a theoretical framework for a better implementation of community forestry as a strategy of sustainable use of the natural resources;
- 2- To analyse the forest policy reform and the new forest policy dealing with the community forests;
- 3- To identify the determinants and the consequences of the evolution of land tenure institutions based on the case study in Lomié
- 4- To describe how communities establish locally based management systems;
- 5- To analyse how community forestry increases the living standard in the community and improve the conservation of the forest resources;
- 6- To analyse the benefits sharing method among the members of the community;