

Profiling Local-Level Outcomes of Environmental Decentralizations: The Case of Cameroon's Forests in the Congo Basin

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Since the mid-1990s, Cameroon has launched a process of decentralization of the management of its forests. Among other innovations, this decentralization process has transferred powers over forests and financial benefits accruing from their exploitation to local communities. This article explores and profiles such local-level outcomes. It shows that the experiment has not yet brought up expected positive results and very often generates internal conflicts, a new social stratification and the marginalization of traditional authorities. Second, the article argues that decentralized management is not producing positive economic results, as there is no significant economic change in the case study villages. Third, it demonstrates that the experiment is leading to negative environmental results, such as the degradation of many community forests in the forested Cameroon. The author recommends that policy makers, researchers, nongovernmental organizations, and the local communities design a monitoring framework for decentralized management.

Keywords: devolution and decentralization; outcomes; forestry elite; ecological risks; monitoring framework

Decentralization is broadly defined as a process of transfer of powers, responsibilities, and resources from the central state to lower territorial units and/or locally elected bodies and authorities (Mahwood, 1983; Ribot, 2002; Smith, 1985). Presented as the best form of decentralization by Manor (1999) and Ribot (2003), democratic decentralization implies that authorities or decentralized entities representing the local populations are elected by them and are accountable to them. During the past 2 decades, decentralization stood out as a critical issue in debates related to liberalization, democratization, poverty reduction, and environmental sustainability in third-world countries. Since the beginning of the 1990s, waves of natural resource management decentralization experiments are being implemented in Africa (Larson, 2004; Ribot & Oyono, in press), generating both positive and negative outcomes (Larson, 2004), as shown by Mapedza and Madondo (2002), Madondo and Mapedza (2003), Bigombé Logo (2003), Muhereza (2003), and Kassibo (2004).

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Social and policy researchers paying attention to these decentralization experiments around the world have identified five types of outcomes likely to be produced by decentralization processes (Larson, 2002; Manor, 1999; Ribot, 2002, 2004). These types of outcomes are social outcomes (justice and equity), economic outcomes (wealth and human well-being), political outcomes (local democracy), ecological outcomes (natural resource sustainability), and policy outcomes (relevant lessons from field initiatives and policy development).

In 1994, Cameroon launched a restructuring of its forest management policy, trying to adjust it to internal demands for democracy, justice, human well-being, and donors' requirements of (good) governance. The World Bank, for example, played a central role in the revision of the forestry code in 1994 and in the restructuring of the overall forestry policy (Brown, 2002; Brunner & Ekoko, 2000; Karsenty, 2002). Change in Cameroon's forestry policy therefore has three major goals: (a) to promote popular participation in forest management, (b) to promote sustainable management, and (c) to contribute to fight against poverty. The main instrument set up to lead the changes in forest management orientations is the forestry legislation of 1994 (Brown, 2002; Ekoko, 1998).

This forestry legislation outlines the transfer of management responsibilities and powers to the local communities, long-time frustrated by their exclusion from the public system of forest management and related approaches applied by both the colonial and postcolonial state (Bigombé Logo, 1996; Bomba, 2004; Diaw & Njomkap, 1998; Oyono, 2004a). The process of decentralized forest management involves decision makers, donors, experts in the Ministry of Environment and Forests, timber companies, council authorities, and local communities. The local communities saw this policy change as an answer to their age-old demand of access to financial benefits from forests (Milol & Pierre, 2001). Devolution of powers and management responsibilities within the forestry sector was also perceived by the local communities as a response, developed by the central state and donors to environmental injustice and to their historical frustrations.

Information and public knowledge related to the process of forest management devolution in Cameroon is, on the whole, insufficient. This article attempts to fill this general gap. More specifically, it draws a profile of local-level outcomes emerging so far from the management of community forests and of financial benefits accruing therefrom, on the one hand, and from the management of forestry fees by village communities, on the other hand. This article demonstrates that the decentralized management of forests is facing many challenges and insists on the predominance of negative outcomes over positive outcomes. Theorists are establishing a causal relation between decentralization and positive outcomes (Manor, 1999; Ribot, 2002; Töttemeyer, 2000), arguing that decentralization leads to social justice, local democracy, and

sustainability. This global and theoretical viewpoint should be tested by empirical evidences. In connection with that, this article shows that when natural resource management decentralizations are not supported by practices of (local) democracy and are marked by individuals' calculations for engaging in financial accumulation, elite capture, and corruption, and when the whole process is not monitored, the achievement of positive outcomes is jeopardized. The article also argues that when a process of decentralization is largely upwardly defined and planned, like it is in the case of Cameroon, it is difficult to achieve positive outcomes. To conclude, the article recommends the design of mechanisms aiming at monitoring ongoing processes.

Study Area and Method

The research from which this article is drawn was carried out in the humid forest zone of Cameroon; that is, in Southern Cameroon. Thirty villages were covered in the following districts: Lomié, Dimako and Mbang (east province), Ebolowa (south province), and Kribi (south province). A first series of villages, about 22, were selected for a first round of research. Main criteria included the allocation of forestry fees to village communities, the implementation and management of a community forest, and the existence of a management committee. Among the 22 villages, 5 were concerned with community forests and 17 with the two types of forestry fees. The process of data and information collection was then completed by a second round of investigation in the 8 remaining villages (2 with community forests and 7 with forestry fees) to triangulate some basic observations.

Research methods used included

- interviews with relevant institutions and organizations in urban centers, mainly the Ministry of Environment and Forests, the Forestry Revenue Securitization Program, regional services of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, rural councils, regional services of the Ministry of Territorial Administration, nongovernmental organizations such as the Stichting Nederlandse Vijwilligers (SNV), and timber companies;
- extensive participatory observation at the local level, with iterative field trips in selected villages for a period of 2 years;
- analysis of historical trends to capture ecological change across time, with mainly transects designed by the local communities and showing how community forests were before the launching of exploitation operations and as they were 3 years later;
- structured and semistructured interviews with key informants at the local, provincial, and central levels, including officials at the Ministry of Environment and Forests, officials at the Forestry Revenue Securitization

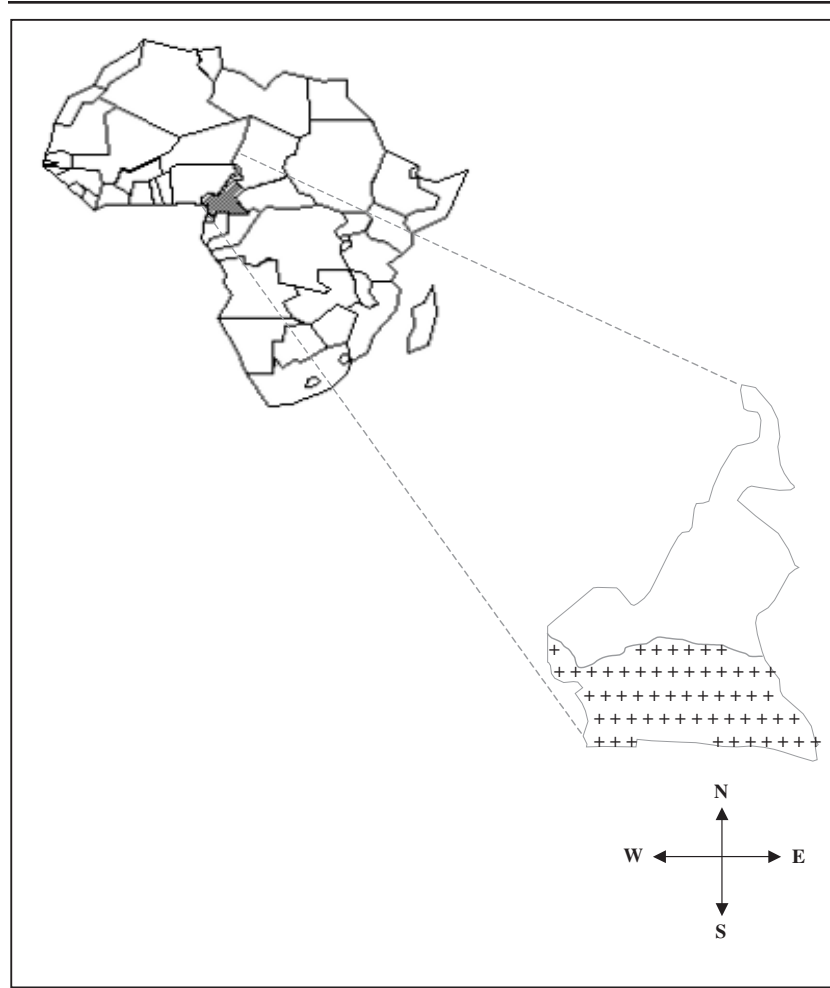


Figure 1: The Cameroonian Rainforest Zone in Cameroon

Programme, municipal authorities, regional staff of the Ministry of Environment and Forests local nongovernmental organizations, regional administrative authorities, village chiefs, priests at the village level, and so forth;

- focus group discussions at the local level, including committee members, lineage chiefs, young people, and so forth; and
- design of agroecological matrices to assess ongoing impact of small-scale logging on community forests.

The Implementation Process of Forests Management Decentralization in Cameroon

Cameroon is located in the Central Africa region. This region includes the Congo Basin, considered as the second largest forest ecosystem of the world, after the Amazonia. According to White (1983), Cameroon contains moist forest of two of Africa's four major biogeographical regions: the Afromontane region and the Guineo-Congolean region (see Figure 1). The Guineo-Congolean facies (Southern Cameroon) covers a total of 267,000 sq. km, about 56% of the land area of the country (Gartlan, 1992; Létouzey, 1968). This rich and dense forest has been subjected to commercial logging since the end of the 19th century, specifically since 1891 (Schanz, 1914), under German colonization.

The richness of Cameroon's forest was underlined during the Germans' presence in Cameroon by Schanz (1914), who noted that "Kamerun is the richest among our colonies: it has approximately 15-20 million hectares of forests we could exploit easily" (p. 11). Hédin (1930) reported that from 1910 to 1913, Germany exported 44,000 tons of timber from Cameroon to Europe. France, which jointly took over Cameroon with Britain in 1918, exported 165,000 tons between 1924 and 1928. This forest is therefore a commercial good and source of financial accumulation since the colonial period (Rice & Counsell, 1993). From 1984 and 1985 to 1994 and 1995, for example, Cameroon has produced 25,034,254 cubic meter of timber (Ministry of Environment and Forests, cited by Nguiffo, 2004). As for other natural resources, Cameroonian timber generates consistent income for the state and huge benefits for timber companies. In postindependent Cameroon, timber exporting became a major source of revenue for the state. In 2002, Cameroonian forests generated approximately U.S. \$345,000,000 including U.S. \$42,000,000 of tax revenue for the state (Ndzana Modo, 2003).

However, given these financial stakes, Cameroonian forests have also become a source of conflict, because local communities and many other components of the society very often do not have access to forestry benefits. One of the most outstanding conflicts over these forests and the financial benefits they generate is a *conflit de langage* (conflict of language). Since the colonial period and the expropriation of local communities' customary lands by the colonial state, there has been a permanent *conflit de langage* over lands and forests in Cameroon (Oyono, in press). On one hand, the state, using legal instruments such as forestry ordinances, forestry decrees, and forestry legislations, argues that it is the owner of the forests (Barume, 2004; Diaw & Njomkap, 1998; Le Roy, 1982). On the other hand, local communities, brandishing their long-time presence in these spaces, claim their historical and social rights over the same forests (Bigombé Logo, 1994; Bomba, 2004). This *conflit de*

language, rooted in verbal violence, very often leads to material conflicts (Nguiffo, 1995; Verhagen & Enthoven, 1993). With the wind of change generated by the democratic transition outlined in Cameroon in the beginning of the 1990s, this *conflit de langage* was transformed into violent demands of access to forestry royalties and of more environmental justice in general (Mimbimi Essono, 2004).

As a response, the government of Cameroon, under the guidance of the World Bank, launched a significant restructuring of its forestry policy, by, primarily, devolving management responsibilities and powers to local communities, as noted earlier. Experts call this policy innovation *decentralization of forest management and of benefits accruing therefrom*. Local communities saw in this reaction the answer to their age-old demand of justice and to their frustrations with the financial benefits from commercial logging (Bigombé Logo, 1994; Oyono, 2004b; Oyono, Kouna, & Mala, 2005). Two basic innovations are implemented in this decentralized management: (a) the creation of community forests at the village level, their exploitation, and the management of incomes generated by the sale of sawings and timber and (b) the access of village communities to forestry benefits, in the form of fees or royalties. Under decentralization, both community forests and commercial logging are channels of direct and instantaneous access to cash income and could therefore meet local communities' expectations.

In the Cameroonian context, a community forest is a forest located near a given village with customary rights on it and submitted to a management agreement signed between the village community and the administration in charge of forests. This is a contract by which the administration entrusts a piece of forest from the national domain, with a maximum area of 5,000 hectares, for its management, conservation, and exploitation for the interest of the community (République du Cameroun, 1995). The management of this forest is entrusted to the village community concerned, with the technical support of the administration in charge of forests. Community forests are equipped with a simple management plan, which defines the activities to be carried out. Community forests are a new and potentially very innovative class of forest exploitation unit, by which it is intended that, for the first time in Cameroon's history, rural populations can gain direct, legal access to forest products, including timber.

The Forestry Legislation force in Cameroon prescribes the allocation of portions of forestry taxes (forestry fees) to village communities living near forest concessions under exploitation. In other words, part of the income drawn from timber exploitation by timber companies must be transferred to local communities (Republic of Cameroon, 1994). Forestry taxes are shared in the following way: 50% to the state, 40% to the rural council in whose jurisdiction the exploited forest concession is located, and 10% to neighboring village communities. Calculations of the sums

to be allocated to these various actors are made on the basis of exploitation types: CFA francs 2,500 (U.S. \$4.5) for one hectare exploited in a *vente de coupe*,¹ CFA francs 1,500 (U.S. \$2.5) for one hectare exploited in a forest concession, and CFA francs 1,500 per hectare exploited by holders of a forest license. Another important measure of the allocation of these forestry fees was based on giving bordering villages CFA francs 1,000 (U.S. \$1.5)² per cubic meter of timber in an exploited forest, notably in a *vente de coupe*.

Outcomes of the Decentralized Management of Forests and Benefits

The notion of outcome is central in any attempt to assess decentralization experiments. In this section, we examine, characterize, and profile local-level outcomes of the process of forest—and relating benefits—management decentralization in Southern Cameroon. Local-level outcomes refer to political, socioeconomic, and ecological results observed in villages covered in the rainforest zone of Cameroon. Some of these results are effective and concrete. Others remain at the virtual stage, hence the notion of infraoutcomes used in the following paragraphs.

POSITIVE SOCIAL OUTCOMES

It emerges from the previous section that forest management decentralization in Cameroon is a supply-led intervention and not really a demand-driven operation (i.e., a process defined and controlled by the central state). It has been recommended to local communities to set up committees for the management of both community forests and forestry fees, through a “Manual of Community Forests” (Ministry of Environment and Forests, 2002) produced by the Ministry of Forests and Environment and through a joint ministerial order published by the Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Ministry of Territorial Administration.³ Traditional sociopolitical organization in the part of Cameroon covered by this article has been characterized by Laburthe-Tolra (1981) as governed by a nonhierarchical model: This author emphasized that in

1. In Cameroon, *vente de coupe* are permits awarded for the exploitation of standing volumes on small tracts of land in the nonpermanent forest, of up to 2,500 hectares in size. They do not require management plans, though they are subject to limitations as to the levels and type of off take permitted. *Ventes de coupe* were suspended a few years ago (Forests Monitor, 2001), but the process of attribution is being reactivated.

2. This particular measure was suspended a few years ago.

3. It is the Joint Ministerial Order No. 00122/Ministry of Finance—Ministry of Territorial Administration of April 29, 1998, laying down the procedure for the use of the revenue from logging intended for neighboring village communities.

these forest societies, there is no effective source of authority and sociopolitical power seems weak. Therefore, in such a social morphology, community action is not effective. However, to some extent, the decentralization process has brought out a community spirit around a community concern (i.e., the management of benefits from forests). Despite various weaknesses, as it will be shown in the following pages, management committees in many villages have given birth to a form of community action characterized by meetings, community discussions, and problem-solving community strategies.

Decentralization of forests and related benefits management is an illustration of the recognition of local communities' rights and powers over forests, thereby reducing the *conflit de langage* into force. To some extent, local communities are empowered, thanks to innovations introduced by this policy change. Decentralization of forests and relating benefits have also created a sphere of social recognition for "forest peoples" or marginalized groups such as Pygmies. More than other human groups of the humid forest zone of Cameroon, Pygmies, considered by historians and ethnologists to be the first inhabitants of the Central African region (Mveng, 1984; Schkopp Von, 1913; Wilkie, 1988), had never been taken into account by successive forestry legislations, as emphasized by Winterbottom (1992) and Oyono (2005).

The colonial state and the postindependent state have always justified this exclusion by arguing that Pygmies are a nomadic and a wandering group; that is, they are globally mobile and have no defined and recognized territory. However, the introduction of community forests in rural Cameroon has provided new options for some sedentarized Pygmies. In the Lomié district, for example, they have been granted official rights and powers over a forest ecosystem, the community forest of Moangé-Le-Bosquet. Moangé-Le-Bosquet is a village exclusively inhabited by Pygmies, unlike other villages where they live in small hamlets near the Bantu (the dominant ethnic group). In August 2000, a management agreement for the Moangé-Le-Bosquet community forest was signed between the Pygmy community of this village and the Ministry of Environment and Forests. Moangé-Le-Bosquet is a unique case of power transfer to Pygmies in Cameroon, and its community forest stands out as a positive social outcome.

Attention paid to some rural councils covered by the overall study shows that from 1998 to 2001, these fees were, at least on paper, distributed as follows: (a) the Lomié Rural Council, in the east province: U.S. \$396,000 for the council and U.S. \$99,200 for village communities; (b) the Mbang Rural Council, in the east province: U.S. \$206,120 for the council and U.S. \$51,530 for village communities; and (c) the Kribi Rural Council, in the south province: U.S. \$42,000 for the council and U.S. \$16,000 for village communities. These financial revenues will be reproduced in the following lines, to characterize local-level economic outcomes. In some

villages of Southern Cameroon, social infrastructures have been built up with forestry fees,⁴ including community houses, classrooms, health centers, water wells, churches, financial support to some poor or old persons, and payment of temporary teachers' salaries. These operations are characterized locally as positive social outcomes.

An analysis of the state of mind, or what Scott (1985) calls "moral economy" (pp. 53-58), of young people in rural Southern Cameroon reveals that before the allocation of fees to villages, many young people were complaining about insecurity and the lack of equity in intergenerational access to benefits accruing from forest exploitation (see also Etoungou, 2003; Oyono et al., 2005). They were arguing that it was time for them, with decentralized management, to have direct access to these benefits. Karsenty (1999) reported that a group of young people told the older generation in a village in the east province what follows: "You've already eaten too much. Now it's our turn" (p. 10). The principle of community management of forestry fees and of revenues from community forests could therefore be a space of social negotiation between the two generations.

For a long time, the urban model of well-being was attractive in Cameroon, many young people in rural Southern Cameroon abandoned their villages to go and look for livelihoods in town. The declining economic situation of the 1990s induced a constantly growing urban poverty (Roubaud, 1994), and these young people, added to retired civil servants, returned to their respective villages (Oyono, 1998). As such, the creation and the development of community forests have curtailed the exodus of youth to the cities. The prospect of accessing their own share of the abundant forestry resources has encouraged them to stay in the village, where their innovative ideas and their capital of instruction is appreciated (Fongang, 2004) and could contribute to the implementation of social and economic innovations.

NEGATIVE SOCIAL OUTCOMES

On the negative side, decentralized forest management has generated numerous negative local-level social outcomes. First, the creation of management committees has led to a sort of "institutional schism." In these societies, despite the weakness of sociopolitical central authorities, the issue of forest management falls under the responsibility of traditional authorities such as elders, lineage leaders, and village chiefs. The latter have recognized powers and legitimacies over forests and other common property resources. By replacing these figures with committee members who are supposedly literate and by giving powers over nature

4. This happens when these forestry fees are effectively transferred to village communities that are considered.

and related benefits to those who have no internally recognized powers, the decentralization process has created a conflict of precedence. As a result, those who have internally and constitutionally (in the sense of customary law) recognized powers over nature are rejecting powers given to committee members by the decentralized management and are talking of an institutional *coup d'état*. In many villages, misunderstandings are deep between committee members and traditional authorities. Efoua (2002) reported some cases of witchcraft practices between the two conflicting groups in the east province.

Second, the decentralized management of community forests and forestry fees has led to the emergence of a new form of local elite, a forestry elite. As stressed above, this new elite does not have a traditional mandate to talk of forest management in the name of the rest of the community (see also Etoungou, 2003). In addition, this elite is challenging traditional authorities, by claiming that their powers are coming from the top (central government). By creating new organizations for the local management of forest resources and benefits, rather than using indigenous institutions, the architects of decentralization have disabled the existing instruments of social regulation and cleared the way for damageable social distortions and conflicts. In addition, the actions of this forestry elite are not monitored by both the local communities and central ministries.

Third, these innovations (community forests and forestry fees) have allowed emerging social groups, young people in particular, to enter noisily onto the scene, claiming a share in the disbursement of forestry income. Now the tendency at the local level is that young people want to marginalize other groups. This was the case in the Koungoulou village, in the Lomié district (east province), where, in 2002, a group of young people overthrew the existing management committee, which was accused of misappropriation of funds. According to the former generation, though it was not exempt from reproach, this management committee would have been replaced through elections, as prescribed by the status of the committee. Accordingly, the rest of the village committee, the old persons notably, went against this violent and undemocratic procedure. The conflict became intergenerational. As a result, traditional authorities led the whole village community to reject this coup d'Etat and to put the new management committee in isolation. After a long period of confrontation and disorder, the former committee was reinstalled. Even among the Pygmies, whose society is more markedly governed by egalitarian and cooperative principles (Guillaume, 1989), these tendencies are beginning to become entrenched, as noted by Dkamela and Oyono (2003), while analyzing powers, money, and social change among the Pygmies of the Lomié district.

Fourth, the decentralized management of forestry fees and community forests is generating cases of open confrontation between some local

individuals and village chiefs over the interference of the latter in the composition of committees (against popular opinion). In some cases, this confrontation is resulting in the ejection of committee members. These conflicts are part of a wider reaction to the advent of local democracy, in general, which has created a climate of free expression; a much greater array of options; and an increase in self-interested strategies for accessing to benefits in every area of initiative, not just forest management (Etoungou, 2003). The resulting conflicts have rendered villages in the East, Center, and South Cameroon provinces ungovernable. This situation is bringing about a state of near anarchy, or a "panarchy," in which every social agent or group agents become the authority or chief.

Fifth, management committees are characterized by diversion of funds. In the absence of strong rules of control and sanctions, members of management committees take advantage of their positions by capturing part of the revenue and fees intended for community development. For example, from 1998 to 2000, the village community in Kongo was supposed to receive U.S. \$25,580 as forestry fees. The Lomié Rural Council gave only half of the amount (U.S. \$12,250). Of this amount, the management committee used only U.S. \$3,840 for two wells, uncompleted until now; supplies for some students; and financial aid to three students and some widows. The other portion (U.S. \$12,230) was misappropriated by committee members. In the Toungrelo village (Dimako district), the chairman of the management committee diverted U.S. \$19,000 from forestry fees in 2000 and was not prosecuted. Cases of financial misappropriation, in complicity with regional administrative authorities and rural council authorities, are widespread.⁵ These are illustrations that committee members have disconnected themselves from the rest of village communities, in their ambition to become part of the *nouveaux riches*.

Sixth, the moral economy of committee members is resting on the conviction that they must account only to central state agents (regional administrative authorities and regional representatives of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, primarily) and rural council authorities, but not at all to local communities they represent. Even if there are some marginal counterexamples, our investigations put forward the fact that community forests and, furthermore, forestry fees management committees do not account downwardly, do not publish reports, and do not inform village communities about their activities. Instead of promoting local democracy through free debate, public discussion, civic responsibility, transparency, and downward accountability on a community issue such as this one, the decentralized management of community for-

5. Though it is difficult to get the exact amounts, forestry revenues have been diverted by management committees in about 23 villages out of the 30 covered by our research.

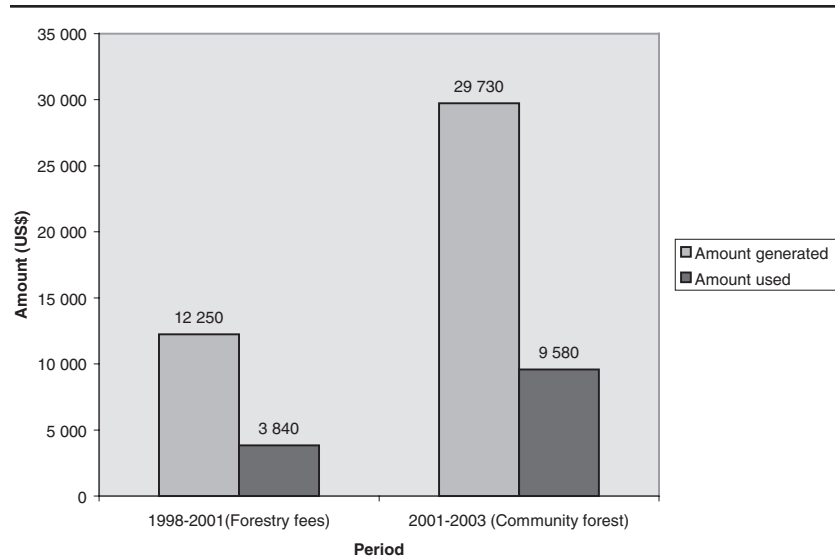


Figure 2: Distortions in the Management of Forestry Revenues in the Kongo Village (Lomié, East Cameroon)

ests revenue and forestry fees have led to a tragedy of environmental representation, through what one may call *representative dictatorship*. In such conditions, representatives—committee members—confiscate decision making in the process of revenue management, thereby excluding the other component of the village communities.

WEAK ECONOMIC IMPACT

At the beginning of this section on outcomes of the decentralized management of community forests and forestry fees, we have reproduced revenue allocated to village communities through rural councils of Mbang (east province), Lomié (east province), and Kribi (south province). The amount of money intended for local communities (10%) is never transferred to them in full. Two examples illustrate this: (a) In the Kongo village, as mentioned above, only half of the U.S. \$25,580 intended for local communities from 1998 to 2000 for forestry fees reached them (the other form of fees, the annual forestry fees, has never been given to this village; Assembe, 2003), and (b) in Mbang rural council, of the 10% of the total fees that were allocated to local communities in 2000 and 2001, less than 20% was spent on village social projects (the remaining 80% was stolen by committee members and council authorities). It emerges from this information that rural councils in Southern

Cameroon mismanage and/or divert the portion of forestry fees to be allocated to village communities.⁶

Similarly, revenues generated by the sale of sawings and logs from community forests are not entirely used for economic or social purposes. The revenue is equally stolen by management committees (see Figure 2). In the Kongo village, of the U.S. \$29,730 generated by the community forest from December 2001 to December 2003, only U.S. \$9,580 was spent for economic or social purposes (see Figure 2). In the village Mboké (south province), only 12% of the U.S. \$7,920 produced by the community forestry was used for economic or social purposes (construction of a classroom). The rest of the money was given to some supporters of the chairman of the management committee.

This being said and shown, it should be recognized that in spite of mismanagement and diversion practices by committees, given amounts of money remain available at the local level. Unfortunately, nothing is invested in productive activities, such as a community credit union, a village stewardship system, or small-scale agricultural projects. In the village of Kongo, as a result of a community consensus, the income from the community forest was used to roof about 30 houses with sheet metal in 2002, nothing more. In some villages in the east province, money from forestry fees was shared among individuals and/or families, who generally spent it on food and beverage (Bigombé Logo, 2003; Oyono, 2004b). This is an unproductive and inappropriate use of the forestry fees allocated to village communities. On the whole, there is no real economic change in villages or even lasting positive social outcome. Of course, there have been financial benefits, but the latter are not often used in an appropriate way.

ECOLOGICAL RISKS

In the Lomié district and later on in other districts, when the exploitation of community forests began, there was a serious debate over the choice between small-scale methods of exploiting community forests and large-scale methods of exploiting community forests (Abe'ele et al., 2004; Klein, Salla, & Kok, 2001). The defenders of small-scale logging based their arguments on the concerns for ecological sustainability and the fear of negative environmental impacts from large-scale commercial exploitation (Auzel, Nguenang, Fetéké, & Delvingt, 2001). They included the Ministry of Environment and Forests and a Dutch

6. In some cases, such as in Mboké, Ma'anemezam and Ndoua (south province), and Kongo (east province), despite the availability of fees at the rural council level, nothing has been transferred to village communities since 2 years ago. Equally, in the Ebolowa rural council, the mayor is not allocating forestry fees to villages located near the exploited forest concession (Assembe, 2003; Efoou, 2002).

nongovernmental organization, SNV, which was assisting in the establishment of community forests in the district. Being an organization that promotes sustainable development, SNV advocated small-scale exploitation carried out by villagers themselves, using a special saw called the *gruminette*. Timber is transformed into planks in situ and sold in the village or in neighboring towns. However, most of the village communities wanted to sign contracts with timber companies harvesting timber for processing or for export, because this would result in faster and more financially rewarding exploitation.

After several months of discussions and misunderstandings between the village populations and SNV over this issue, many villages chose an intermediate mode of exploitation, based on the use of a portable saw called a Lucas Mill, which can fell 3 to 5 cubic meters of wood a day. On the whole, local communities prefer Lucas Mill, and it is evident that the decision to adopt the *gruminette* was made under duress, even among the Pygmies. In connection with that, Efoua (2002) reported that one Baka Pygmy of Moangé-Le-Bosquet stated,

It was our partner, SNV, that promoted the *gruminette*. They brought in the *gruminette*. I would have preferred the Lucas mill, because that would give me at least three cubic meters of wood a day instead of the one per day that I get with the *gruminette*. (p. 4)

The choice of Lucas Mill, which is more productive than the *gruminette*, by the inhabitants of Moangé-Le-Bosquet is meaningful at two levels. First, it is an illustration that the local community wants to produce more planks and therefore sell more. Second, if not controlled, and this is generally the case in Cameroon (Abe'ele et al., 2004), the exploitation of community forests with Lucas Mill is more ecologically risky than the one with the *gruminette*.

There are many cases of exploitation of community forests through large-scale methods (industrial logging), generally found in the exploitation of forest concessions. Industrial logging here means trees are collected under the form of logs and carried to transformation units or directly exported to Europe. In addition, paths are opened in the forest, thereby destroying other components of the flora not targeted by exploitation operations. Large-scale logging is acknowledged as a threat for community forests in Cameroon (Abe'ele et al., 2004; Bisséné, 2002), given their size (not more than 5,000 hectares). Like many other villages in Southern Cameroon, the village of Ngola signed a contract in 2001 with a timber company using large-scale operations (Gérard L. & Co). The Ngola community estimated, through a multiresource inventory, that their forest had 38,693 trees, of which 27,563 had a diameter large enough to exploit, resulting in a yield of 220,500 cubic meters of wood.

The people said that they wanted to be able to live off their forest, in the same way that the timber companies, the state, and its representatives had been doing. They had identified about 15 projects to be implemented with the money from the logging.

Although we do not have precise data on the rate of exploitation from the Gérard L. & Co, a future scenario drawn up with a group of rural inhabitants indicated that this forest will be devastated more quickly than if it had been exploited with small-scale logging (i.e., with the gruminette). Data from the Kongo community forest show that between December 2001 and August 2002, a total of 88,921 cubic meters of high commercial value trees was extracted from the forest including 31,683 cubic meters in Sapelli (*Entandrophragma cylindrum Sprague*), 54,729 cubic meters in Iroko (*Chlorophora excelsa Benth*), 2,500 cubic meters in White Doussié (*Afzelia pachyloba Harms*), and 9 cubic meters in Sipo (*Entandrophragma utile Sprague*). Many other trees were felled and abandoned in the forest.

It has been observed in the Mboké community forest that the logging company contracted has destroyed the flora by opening a lot of paths (Assembe, 2003). This form of exploitation is observed in many other community forests of the south and the east province. Abe'ele et al. (2004) note that though illegal in the exploitation of community forests, large-scale logging is conducted in 44% of those forests. In addition, simple management plans of community forests are not respected, in the absence of control activities by regional agents of the Ministry of Environment and Forests. Talking of "green delinquency," Ambara (2003) reports that some community forests have produced 7,000 cubic meters within 2 months instead of 2,000 cubic meters within 25 years as prescribed by the Ministry of Environment and Forests. He also notes that many community forests are devastated with the complicity of agents of the Ministry of Environment and Forests and of local elite (Bisséné, 2002).

A related issue is that of ad hoc logging in ventes de coupe (small concessions of no more than 2,500 hectares). Karsenty (1999) notes that most local communities ultimately prefer the establishment of logging activities in ventes de coupe to long-term concessions in permanent forest estates. This is explained by the fact that in the former case, the logging companies pay a tax of U.S. \$1.5 per cubic meter directly to the local communities; whereas in the latter, they pay annual forest fees to the state, and 10% of the amount are supposed to be transferred to the local communities through rural councils. This is also likely to have a negative impact on sustainability, because the state can more easily allocate ventes de coupe to timber companies and because there is less control over logging in the ventes de coupe.

Conclusion

The decentralization of the management of Cameroonian forests has not, to this point, had expected positive outcomes. We may talk of positive infraoutcomes, given the fact that expected results remain on the whole insignificant. One of the reasons is that the innovations were fully designed from the top. For example, by encouraging village communities to establish externally designed management organizations, the external initiators of the committees have ended up creating interface organizations that are neither socially legitimate nor effective. This superimposition of an organization on a society has already been analyzed in Cameroon (Djeumo, 2001; Oyono, 2004c) and elsewhere (Morrow & Watts Hull, 1996; Wang, 1997). These authors doubt the effectiveness of transplanted organizations (e.g., donor institutions or nongovernmental institutions) in rural development and community-based natural resource management. In addition, it comes out of this article that community forests and forestry fees management committees are ineffective. The role of middle-level elected authorities (the mayors), middle-level administrative authorities, and nongovernmental organizations in this process is particularly significant.

The connection between these officials and the local committees is due partly to the legal and administrative instruments of forest management decentralization, which give the officials substantial authority. The other explanatory variable is the pursuit of personal interests by the one and the other, in that the financial benefits from commercial forest exploitation, to which those involved in its management have access, are of primary significance. Because of the significant financial stakes at play, the acquisitive dispositions of all the actors, and the sharp increase in networks of complicity and of corruption, decentralized management has been used by almost all actors as a political-economic resource and as a means of increasing individual social status. Thus, the village committees, lacking effective power and cut off from local communities, became captive to motivations other than the good of the community. This is an illustration of what Etoungou (2003), Platteau (2004), and Ribot (2004) call *elite capture*, which occurs, for example, like in this case, when local and/or external elite gets one's hands on community initiatives.

Throughout Southern Cameroon, local communities have yet to receive their proceeds from commercial forest logging. Decentralization of local forest management income offers the local communities an opportunity to derive livelihoods from their forests. The majority of local communities is thus in favor of rapid logging of the forests; the concept of sustainable management does not arouse much enthusiasm. There is also a significant segment of the rural population, particularly

the young, who would like to see an “ecoapocalypse” the “end of the forests,” achieved through an accelerated rate of timber logging. Such an approach guarantees the current generation a large financial return within a very short period. To generate positive outcomes within the devolved forests of Cameroon, some adjustments need to be made to the current forest management.

To address the weaknesses of the Cameroonian experiment of devolution and decentralized forest—and benefits—management, decision makers, reformers, local communities, nongovernmental organizations, and researchers should design a framework aimed at monitoring the process from central ministries to the village level and passing through the regional level. The monitoring framework should contain clear indicators and mechanisms, on the basis of its current weaknesses and failures (weak local capacities, opportunistic behaviors of a forestry elite, lack of a strong collective action, corruption, funds diversion, external control, lack of local democracy, and poor results). The design of such a framework requires a series of preconditions, including (a) the redefinition of the role of the central state, (b) the redefinition of the role of regional bodies such as municipal authorities and administrative authorities (state representatives), (c) the transfer of effective decision-making powers to the local communities, and (d) the creation of discretionary democratic spaces at the village level.

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