



Rural  
Development  
Forestry  
Network

network paper 25h  
July 2001

**DFID**



# Rural Development Forestry Network

## **Community Forestry and Poverty Alleviation in Cameroon**

Timothée Fomété and Jaap Vermaat

## **A Conservation Partnership: Community Forestry at Kilum-Ijim, Cameroon**

Anne A. Gardner, John DeMarco and Christian A. Asanga

## **The 4Rs: a Valuable Tool for Management and Benefit Sharing Decisions for the Bimbia Bonadikombo Forest, Cameroon**

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**ISBN 0 85003 5392**

# COMMUNITY FORESTRY AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN CAMEROON

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## SUMMARY

This paper is concerned with the potential impacts of community forestry on rural poverty. Whilst development of community forests is still at an early stage in Cameroon, the limited information available does indicate a clear trend. The communities with the first community forests tended to distribute the benefits on an individual basis, leading to rapid consumptive behaviour. More recent experiences, however, show communities looking for more complex organisational and decision-making arrangements which may benefit the community as a whole and may have a significant multiplier effect. Drawing on four case studies, the paper concludes that community forestry does have the potential to contribute positively to the improvement of rural livelihoods and poverty alleviation. But for this to occur, a number of key conditions have to be met. These include enforced legal protection from outside ‘incursions’, community ownership of the organisation and planning process, available technical and management skills, and access to finance.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the underlying aims of community forestry is to provide economic benefits for local communities. When community

forestry was introduced in Cameroon, there was very little experience as to how this could be achieved in practice. In this paper we look at what has been learnt in the past year about the ways in which community forestry can contribute to poverty alleviation. The impact of community forestry on poverty alleviation can be examined in several ways. One is the more or less classic economic approach, which identifies reinvested benefits and calculates growth rates for recognizable economic value. A second, more recent approach attempts to define poverty and well-being as perceived by the populations concerned, and seeks to detect changes over time using locally relevant indicators. Both approaches combined provide significant understanding of changes in (rural) livelihoods. For each approach, however, considerable data collection is required. In the Cameroon case, sufficient data are not yet available as it has been less than a year since communities officially began to exploit the value of their forest resources. Yet these early and varied experiences are now beginning to provide significant information about the conditions required if community forestry is to be genuinely instrumental in poverty alleviation.

Drawing on several case-studies, this paper identifies the positive and negative effects of community forestry activities on poverty and livelihoods, as well as outlining some of the opportunities and threats that are becoming evident. It begins with a short background

on community forestry policy in Cameroon, followed by an examination of four different attempts to develop community forests. The paper concludes with a discussion of the challenges and priority intervention areas for community forestry to be successful.

## COMMUNITY FORESTRY POLICY IN CAMEROON

Community Forestry is one of the major innovations offered by the 1994 Forestry Law. It aims at explicitly involving rural populations in the sustainable management of their own forests, providing them with income-generating mechanisms for equitable socio-economic development of their communities. This empowerment through community forests and community hunting zones has proven to be a complicated and slow process.

A Manual of Procedures (MoP), developed with the support of the DFID-funded Community Forestry Development Project (CFDP), Phase I, and outlining the steps necessary to establish a community forest, has proven to be a first and very instrumental step in starting the community forestry process in Cameroon and providing it with a more or less secure legal and administrative basis. However, experiences in turning newly established community forests into potential community development tools vary widely. Generally, communities which have received help from projects or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) tend to have a better starting position for converting benefits into community development activities, though this is not consistently the case.

CFDP Phase II has seen several adjustments to the legal framework which are improving the context of procedures and regulations in which community forests operate. Examples of these recent developments include:

- the pre-emption right decree (awaiting the Prime Minister's signature)<sup>1</sup>;
- the ministerial decision delegating to communities the right to exploit their forests themselves without the need to involve licensed forest operators;
- the ministerial circular letter ordering local officials of the Ministry of the Environment and Forests (MINEF) to suspend contracts between forest communities and industrial loggers;
- the draft text on the modalities of how to implement the Simple Management Plan required for each community forest, which provides additional securities and guarantees to communities; these include the requirement that commercial loggers stay out of community forests, leaving communities to carry out the logging themselves (although partnerships between commercial operators and communities are encouraged in the domain of training, provision of equipment and marketing), as well as regulations pertaining to the certification of origin of logs and planks.

All of these texts tend to limit the influence of (potentially) excessive and non-

<sup>1</sup> The '*droit de pré-emption*' will allow communities to pre-empt the allocation of logging permits in nearby forests by indicating their intention to establish a community forest.

sustainable industrial logging (which leaves communities in a basically passive and consumptive position regarding their forests), while profoundly stimulating communities to become (pro-) actively involved in the management and exploitation of their forests. This should further enhance ownership of the community forestry process and empowerment of the community. In turn, this should benefit internal community cohesion, which is a fundamental precondition for community (forestry) development.

## SOME EXPERIENCES WITH COMMUNITY FORESTRY

The cases in this section are presented more or less chronologically, beginning with developments in the earliest community forests and moving on to more recent experiences. The analysis of the varied experiences will try to identify the strong and positive elements, which provide opportunities, as well as highlighting the risks and threats to community development.

### Community A<sup>2</sup>

Community A was one of the first to obtain a community forest, doing so in 1997 before the MoP became operational. In order to exploit the value of the timber resources standing in its forest, the community contracted a commercial logging company to fell the trees under a 'Sales of Standing Volume' (*ventes de coupe*) arrangement.

<sup>2</sup> The names of communities in this paper have been 'de-personalised'.

This resulted in exhaustive high-speed felling with low reimbursement to the community (only 1 à 2000 FCFA per m<sup>3</sup> logged). The community had initially hoped to use these benefits to distribute corrugated iron roofing sheets to each household. Unfortunately, none of the proceeds ever reached the village. In the end violent and disruptive conflicts arose in the village which led to two opposing presidents being incarcerated in jail. The community derived no benefits at all from the community forest, the exploitation of which has been suspended.

In this case, the community's role in the exploitation and management of its forest was intended to remain passive. From the beginning, the focus was on consumption and individual distribution. Income was generated, but the village was unable to put the benefits to use. Underlying socio-political tensions and conflicts in the community emerged into the open and completely paralysed the community. An important factor seems to have been the influence of industrial loggers and of key players in the Divisional capital, as well as the absence of outside assistance to the community.

### Community B

Community B has benefited from substantial support from an internationally financed project. For over a year prior to the formal establishment of their community forest in August 2000, the community was able to obtain valuable exploitation experience, based on a temporary experimental permit from the Divisional Delegate of MINEF. The community learned to process abandoned

logs into sawn planks with a twin engine chainsaw equipped with a ‘precision guiding frame’. Intensive technical training was provided by the project, as well as the cost of a chainsaw. This high tech ‘artisanal’ approach initially led to very fine results. The average selling price was between 100,000 and 120,000 FCFA per m<sup>3</sup>, and about 25% of the output provided prime export quality sawn planks of Sapelli (*Entandrophragma cylindrica*), which were sold on the road side for 200,000 FCFA per m<sup>3</sup>. The project’s assistance in finding buyers proved to be important. Although production charges were considered relatively high, because of the operating cost of the chainsaw, the community probably received a net benefit of 40 à 60,000 FCFA per m<sup>3</sup> of sawn timber. A further 30 à 40,000 FCFA per m<sup>3</sup> were paid in salaries to local personnel and remained in the village.

In the beginning, awareness of the high potential value of the community forest led community elders and key power-brokers to obtain the main management positions in a rather traditional way, allowing for a more directive (rather than process-oriented) guidance by their project partner. Bickering between elites and attempts by industrial loggers to get access to the timber resources through strategic alliances with these elites proved to be very disruptive. Fast reimbursement of the financial support provided by the project led to a lower-than-expected cash flow. Deception has set in, both within the power elite and among the community members, giving rise to conflicts within the community. This ultimately led to the formation of a new management committee.

The case of community B shows quite a few successes:

- training in production of sawn timber and timber grading with the help of an internationally recognised organisation (SGS);
- high level of technical and financial efficiency;
- contracts for logging have increased from 2,000 FCFA per m<sup>3</sup> to 12,000 FCFA per m<sup>3</sup> logged, as the result of the sensitisation of community members by the project as to the true value of the resource.

However, it also experienced some failures:

- the influence of elites living in the Provincial Capital disturbed internal organisation in the village;
- underestimation of the disruptive influence of industrial loggers;
- underestimation of the high community discount rate (the village prefers short-term lower benefits over long-term higher benefits);
- lack of confidence between the community and the project (though the latter is a non-profit organisation, it was viewed as a competitor to commercial loggers);
- at key points in time, the project acted and thought on behalf of the community;
- the costs of operating the chainsaw, and of local staff, were pre-financed by the project, which sought immediate reimbursement once the timber was sold. A more gradual process would have been more appropriate.

There are some lessons to be learned from the Community B case study:

- the community was very much at the

mercy of external influences;

- short term benefits were considered more important than long term interests;
- the project concept has to be owned by the community, which implies that the concept has to be negotiated and agreed on with the community, and transferred to the community as early as possible.

This was a wasted opportunity. Many conditions had been fulfilled to initiate a community development process based on sustainable forest exploitation. High-tech training and hardware, as well as project interventions provided the necessary skills and the all-important first experiences to show “how things can be done”, as far as timber processing is concerned. Yet there was insufficient support to village organisation, to medium and long-term financial management arrangements, as well as to planning of community development. These soft sector failures and lack of ownership and empowerment brought the community into a situation from which it is very difficult to emerge unscathed.

### Community C

As in the previous case, Community C also exploited its forest under an exceptional experimental permit. Organisational and technical support was provided through internationally funded project assistance and a Cameroonian non governmental organisation (NGO). The community produced sawn timber, but of inferior quality to that in Community B, because of the lower level of technological input. The input by the partner organisation was less intensive and more process oriented. The low-profile intervention did not lead to ‘exaggerated’

expectations concerning financial benefits, social and political status. As a consequence the traditional village elites were less interested in taking control of key positions, leaving the way open for the establishment of a more business-like management committee, composed mainly of young people. Sawn timber has been sold for 40 à 50,000 FCFA per m<sup>3</sup>. Production costs are estimated at about 10,000 FCFA, leaving the community 30 à 40,000 FCFA per m<sup>3</sup>. The community has used this income to construct its own school and church benches as well as a community meeting hall. An ‘*economat*’, a community-owned village grocery store, has been set up, with the proceeds flowing into the community coffers.

The Community C case has a few interesting characteristics:

- assistance was provided by an outside organisation, in a rather low-key way, leaving sufficient opportunity for the community to maintain ownership of the entire process;
- there was no major involvement from (outside) elites, but they were not explicitly thwarted either;
- there was no involvement from industrial loggers (though not for lack of trying);
- the community organisation has defined its own development goals and had the freedom and support to gear up its own internal organisation to achieve these goals.

### Community D

Community D consists of about 600 households dispersed over 19 hamlets. Three Common Initiative Groups (CIGs) from the community have acquired three

**Table 1** Costs and benefits (FCFA) from two types of processing in Community D

Activity	Value per m <sup>3</sup>	
	Processing Iroko with a Lucas mobile sawmill	Sawing Ayous with a chainsaw
Rent and operation of the Lucas Mill/chainsaw <sup>a</sup>	20000	2500
Fuel and lubricants	2000	2000
Transport to the village and loading of the truck	21200	11800
Transport to Yaoundé	18750	8000
Felling tax	8000	875
<b>Total costs</b>	<b>69950</b>	<b>25175</b>
<b>Return from sale in Yaoundé</b>	<b>81000</b>	<b>32000</b>
<b>Net benefit</b>	<b>11050</b>	<b>6825</b>

<sup>a</sup> The equipment (Lucas Mill and chainsaw) is rented from local entrepreneurs.

community forests, covering a total of 15,000 ha. The three CIGs have combined their efforts through a village federation. Linked to this organisation is an agricultural cooperative as well as a village savings organisation, which hopes to become part of a Rural Banking project. The village has received no help from projects or other support structures. During the first quarter of 2001, management conventions based on approved Simple Management Plans were signed for the community forests and the villages started exploiting their timber resources. Data are available for two kinds of exploitation (see Table 1).

The first concerns sawing of Iroko (*Chlorophora excelsa*) with a Lucas Mill. Transport of the timber to the village and loading of the truck is carried out by villagers. If their wages are taken into account each m<sup>3</sup> provides the village with 32,250 FCFA. Better quality could be

obtained by using a twin engine chainsaw with a 'gruminette'<sup>3</sup>, which allows for larger and better planks. The other activity concerns sawing of Ayous (*Triplochiton scleroxylon*) with a simple chainsaw, producing rough planks of 500x30x4cm. If the local labour costs are taken into account, the village receives 18,625 FCFA per m<sup>3</sup>. Training and better equipment could lead to a considerable improvement. In both cases, a greater marketing effort could lead to increased revenue.

The village intends to reinvest the net benefits in agricultural and livestock-rearing activities in the savanna zone, which makes up some 25% of the community forest area.

<sup>3</sup> This is described in greater detail in Paper 25f by Klein *et al.* in this mailing.

A recent problem is the issuing by MINEF of a 'Sale of Standing Volume' logging permit in the area between, and overlapping with, the two southernmost community forests. There are several indications that the logging company is taking out timber at a record pace in the disputed area. It also seems that the logging company has exceeded the official boundaries of its permit, encroaching upon undisputed community forest territory. Although complaints have been made, no support from MINEF has yet been obtained.

The case of Community D shows the following characteristics:

- the community has not received any outside support;
- a member of the village elite, trained as a forester, has provided important guidance and support to the community;
- the quality of the sawn timber, and the resulting benefits, could improve considerably with technical training and access to good equipment, as well as better market information and connections;
- support for community development planning may help the village organise reinvestment of the benefits in a sustainable way;
- the fact that the village has no outside patron (like Communities B and C) leaves the village entirely at the mercy of industrial loggers who operate in their neighbourhood.

## CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY

The cases presented in this paper are very varied but do indicate a positive trend over time. The first community involved in the management of its own forests simply wanted to cash in on what the industrial logger was prepared to pay. The proceeds were distributed among individual households, or were spent during a multi-day festive celebration. Community A intended to use the benefits on house improvement, but did not succeed. Community C invested in community infrastructure and in a community grocery store. Community D plans to invest in agricultural improvement, animal husbandry and in village electrification. The trend goes from individual consumption to more complex community-based decision-making for investing in community development.

### Key conditions for poverty alleviation

Community forestry clearly has potential for contributing to poverty alleviation and the improvement of rural livelihoods. However, for community forestry to be genuinely successful in sustainable poverty alleviation, communities need to be assured of some key conditions:

1. Full and enforced legal protection;
2. Sufficient leverage to obtain and maintain ownership over their own organisation and planning processes;
3. Adequate training in organisational, administrative and technical skills;
4. Access to finance.

Ensuring that these conditions are met is at the very heart of the challenge facing community forestry development and is an integral part of the objectives and activities of the Community Forestry Unit within MINEF, together with its project partner, the CFDP. Achieving these objectives implies:

- perfecting the legal framework pertaining to community-based forest management to clearly provide communities with sufficient safeguards not only against abuse from the outside, be it from industrial loggers or village elites with only their own interests in mind, but also pertaining to benefit sharing and community development planning. Transparency and monitoring, of both community forests and government procedures, are a basic part of this;
- development of community organisation and management guidelines allowing communities to organise themselves and their administrative systems coherently and to maintain full ownership of planning and implementation of activities.
- establishing guidelines for the use of appropriate management, exploitation and processing techniques, allowing communities to reach and maintain a high level of product quality. In this respect quality control mechanisms can play an important role;
- promotion of the availability of market information about the timber trade channels and mechanisms which can be made available to forest communities;
- identification of financing mechanisms, including use of forest royalties and redistribution of forest tax income, for basic community forestry needs, such as the preparation of Simple Management

Plans and the initial investment for starting forestry operations;

- taking into account non-timber forest products as they can provide a considerable source of income (or indeed the only source in the case of community forests in the Northwest Province);
- involving and empowering women, as well as minorities such as the Baka ‘pygmies’, who consider community forests an opportunity for empowerment, emancipation and improving their livelihoods.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank Samuel Nguiffo and Patrice Bigombe Logo for their valuable inputs to this text.

#### ACRONYMS

CFDP	Community Forestry Development Project
CIG	Common Initiative Group ( <i>Groupe d’initiative commune</i> )
FCFA	Currency in French-speaking West and Central Africa. Exchange rate: 100 CFCA = 1 FRF 750 CFCA = 1 USD
MINEF	Ministry of the Environment and Forests
MoP	Manual of Procedures
NGO	non-governmental organisation
SGS	Société générale de surveillance

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**CREDITS**

<b>Editors of this paper:</b>	David Brown and Kate Schreckenber
<b>Layout:</b>	Caroline Wood
<b>Administrative Editor:</b>	Vicky Pett
<b>Printed by:</b>	Russell Press Ltd, Nottingham on recycled paper
<b>RDFN logo by Redesign</b>	

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This mailing of the Rural Development Forestry Network is funded by  
The UK Department for International Development