

**FOREST MANAGEMENT DECENTRALIZATION AND SOCIAL CONFLICTS IN CAMEROON  
*RETHINKING INTERGENERATIONAL ACCESS TO FORESTS AND ITS RESOURCES IN  
SOUTHEASTERN CAMEROON***

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**Abstract**

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Decentralization has longer been perceived as an appropriate approach for the limitation of social conflicts in the forest management process in Cameroon. In regard to the current processes and experiences of forest management decentralization, this assumption needs to be re-questioned. The paper aims to demonstrate that the forest management decentralization has not yet contributed to reducing social conflicts and establishing democracy in the management of forest resources ; but to their displacement and diversification. For example, current practices reveal some iniquity and insecurity as concerns access to forest resources and the benefits accruing from their exploitation by young people, women and old persons. There is a considerable imbalance among these social categories in the allocation and use of forests and the financial resources accruing from their exploitation. Current practices exclude young people whose needs and expectations in terms of local

development are different from the preoccupations of women and old persons. Young people and to a certain extent women militate for investments in sustainable socio-economic infrastructures whereas old persons advocate a circumstantial and immediate management of resources accruing from forest exploitation. The political and social conflicts arising from such contradictions are, among others, one of the reasons for the poor impact of the management of forests and forest resources on local development activities. The decentralization process is leading to a displacement of social conflicts in the management of forest resources, from the centre to the periphery, and to a diversity of conflicts of interests and power among local actors, merely, between the local populations and the municipalities and among the local populations themselves (between social generations, between village families and between villages in the same region). It is necessary to resort to pluralism as a political approach for the conciliation of multifarious, contradictory and different interests in the management of forests and the benefits accruing from their exploitation in the rural areas of Cameroon, so as to go beyond the norms governing the management of forests and integrate it in a socially equitable and democratic process.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Even within the context of experiencing of the forest management decentralization, the intergenerational access to forests and to the benefits accruing from their exploitation is not equitable in Cameroon. Young and old people do not have powers and attributions in the management of forest resources and financial income accruing from forest exploitation. Such a situation was hardly perceivable in the past. At the customary and state levels, authoritarian logics for forest management were preminent and the various windings of this issue could not be made evident.. A dynamic democratization in forest management coupled with the decentralization process have contributed to causing it to emerge and be considered as a crucial problem of forest management in Cameroon. On the one hand, customary methods of forest management drawn up by social elders as appropriate referential framework for forest management in rural areas, hardly displayed disparities and differences in perception and profit which may exist between them and young people in this regard. On the other hand, former policies by states in matters of forest management did not almost foresee a sharing of resources accruing from forest exploitation between the State, local councils and local populations. Such a disequilibrium was challenged, in a more or less relative way, by the 1994 forestry reform. The latter enshrines a sharing process of financial resources accruing from forest exploitation between the State, local councils and the populations living adjacent to forests. It is in the context of implementing this reform in rural areas that emerged the problem of equitable management of forest resources and financial advantages accruing from their exploitation to become a fundamental problem of sustainable and profitable management. They reduce and limit their rights and powers as concerns having access to forest resources and the benefits accruing from their exploitation (I), create various

conflicts and reduce the impact of forest management on development initiatives in the rural areas of Cameroon (II).

**I – The customary and State regulation of access by to forest resources and the benefits accruing from their exploitation in rural areas: access to resources without access to benefits.**

Customary and State approaches for having access to forest resources and the benefits accruing from their exploitation provide for the access of young people to forest resources and reduce their access to the benefits accruing from their exploitation. Customary and State practices guarantee free access by young people to forest resources. However, such freedom is regulated by community and legal prescriptions which lay down its scope of expression and enjoyment. The established regulation processes take into account collective and individual logics for the appropriation of forests and forestry resources. In rural areas, young people are facing a dilemma: that of being able to have access to forests and forestry resources (A) without having substantial access to the benefits accruing from forest exploitation (B).

**A – Dynamic access by young people to forests and forestry resources: customary trends and state logics**

Free access by young people to forests and forestry resources is guaranteed by customary systems (1) and State logics for forest management (2). Such free access is fundamentally reduced to enjoying common rights.

1. **Customary trends for the access of young people to forests and forestry resources: from free access to forests to free management of benefits accruing from forest exploitation.**

Customs express the representation of the laws imposed on their members by social groups. It is a repeated use (*diurtunus usus*) considered compulsory (*opinio necessitatis*) of social practices. As a general rule, customs comprise a series of similar deeds, which lead to the emergence of a pattern of social behaviour which is called habituation, habit or tradition (Le Roy and Wane, 1985, 359). In matters of forest management, customary law comprises all the customary rules relating to forest appropriation and management. Globally speaking, forests and their resources are the property of a group. This principle of customary forestry law is based on the notion of community. At the beginning, communities and not individual persons were holders of rights on forests. Forests are a collective heritage, considering what they represent for human beings, namely a source of living and wealth. Originally, they belonged to nobody. They are a collective property; which must be enjoyed by all the members of the community. In harmony with the community spirit, forests are a group property, the rights which are exercised by members individually are essentially the rights of users. They have recourse to the community upon the death of their holders. This is the principle of non-transmissibility, better of usufruct: forests do not in any case stop being the property of the community upon which each member exercises a right of appropriation and exploitation. Forests are the property of the communities which are installed on them and no member of the community would give it up. The community grants rights for using them without giving them up. Forests rights are granted and never given up.

In the context of collective appropriation of forests, the management and usage method is that of utilitarian exploitation. Here, customs acknowledge that the members of the community among whom young people, have the right to exploit forests and their resources without the latter ceasing to belong to the group so as to become the property of the exploiter. The forestry heritage is inalienable and the right for exploitation is a temporary right which exists only through development and ceases with evidence of use by human beings. The benefits of such customary use are freely managed by young people who have developed the forests.

Today, customs acknowledge both the collective and private property of forests and their resources. Forests are certainly a common good for the group; but their development confers the right of property. For example, clearing off a space of primary forest is a means for acquiring that portion of forest. That entails a neat progress to acquire the right of property. Such an evolution has made it possible to gradually set up a method for managing the forest space which establishes the system of

sharing. Within every community, there are machineries which determine the sharing of forests, especially with the Bantu peoples. The elder or the most aged person of the lineage decides of sharing and occupying the forest among the members of the large family. Young adults are entitled to a share in the process of partitioning the forests. The fundamental principle for acquiring the forest space is the requirement of developing it. Exploiting a portion of forest entitles to ownership. Furthermore, the right of ownership is guaranteed for a forest space when agricultural works or perennial crops have been carried out or cultivated on it. Transforming a primary forest is an evidence of occupation of space. In every village, every adult person or family owns a portion of forest which forms part of his heritage and which cannot be exploited by a third party except he is expressly authorized to do so. Whether they are primary or secondary forests or fallows, the ownership system rests on the principle of prior development. Here, development gives right to ownership. Young people enjoy the same rights and benefits. The customary forestry law acknowledges their rights on forests and their resources. The same holds for the positive forestry law.

## **2. State logics for the access of young people to forests and forestry resources: benefiting from the rights for use enshrined in the positive law.**

The present Cameroonian laws on forests equally guarantee access by young people to forests, within the frame work of the rights for using. Article 8 of the law of 20 January 1994 states that "the right for using or customary law shall be (...) that which is recognised to the populations living adjacent to forests to exploit all forestry, wildlife and fishery products, except protected species, for personal use" *they are self-consumption rights*: they are strictly intended for satisfying the family and domestic needs of their users. They must in no way give rise to commercial transactions on woody products. *They are gratuitous rights*: recognised users have free access to forestry products and may carry out all activities falling within the context of these rights without having to pay a financial contribution. *They are limited and restricted rights*: they are exercised by "the population living adjacent to forests falling under the State property and consist in "carrying out inside such forests traditional activities of harvesting secondary forestry products such as raphia, palm tree, bamboo, rattan or food products" (rights for harvesting, tapping, cutting, hunting, fishing, cultivating, running etc...)

Rights for using are strictly restricted to self consumption from the forest both woody and non-woody products, without having to apply for an authorization from the Administration. Such a deduction is free of charge. Notwithstanding, products deducted as such must be exclusively meant for non-lucrative ends and personal use. They must in no way be sold. The profits drawn from exercising the rights for using are freely managed by the members of the community, including young people, without specially requiring accounts to be rendered to the entire community. The same does not hold for the benefits accruing from the commercial exploitation of forests where young people find it difficult to influence decisions concerning the management of forest resources allocated to the village communities that live adjacent to forests under exploitation.

## **B – Marginalising young people in taking decisions concerning the management of forestry resources allocated to village communities living adjacent to forests.**

The 1994 forestry reform established the process for decentralizing the forestry fiscal system. The latter provides for the sharing of forestry resources between the State, Rural councils and forest side village communities. The decentralized forestry fiscal system is built around a lawful fiscal system, namely the annual forestry due (RFA) comprising the share of 40% paid to the rural councils from areas under commercial forest exploitation and 10% paid to the village communities living adjacent to forests ; and unlawful forestry fiscal system, otherwise called para fiscal system or village tax which corresponds to the tax of 1000F/cubic meter" of wood exploited out of the sales of wood cut from the non-permanent forestry zone.

Indeed, the provisions relating to decentralised forestry fiscal system state that "*for purposes of ensuring the development of village communities living adjacent to some forests falling under the public property and under exploitation, part of income drawn from the sale of forest products must be channeled to the benefit of the said communities (...) The contribution for social intervention is paid in totality to the councils concerned. It must not be allocated for any other purpose*" (1) Article

*eleven (11) of the finance law states that "annual forestry dues are constituted of the bottom price and the financial supply. The bottom price shall be fixed as follows: the sales of wood cut stand at 2500 CFA francs per hectare and concessions stand at 1000 CFA per cubic meter of exploited wood. The annual forestry dues are paid in totality as soon as the exploitation permit is awarded".* Para-fiscal taxes represent all taxes that are not provided for in the finance law, but which are determined by regulations and which must be frequently paid by foresters. These are the contribution of foresters to the achievement of socio-economic infrastructures laid down in the specifications of foresters and the 1000 CFA francs per cubic meter of exploited wood for the sales of cut wood as instituted by circular letter N° 370/LC/MINEF/CAB of 22 February 1996 to the benefit of village communities living adjacent to forests. The effective payment of such taxes and dues started at the end of the 1996/1997 fiscal year and continued in the 1997/1998 fiscal year. Since then, they are frequently paid in the public treasury responsible for sharing them to the various beneficiaries. Village communities have developed practices for managing these financial resources (1) which marginalise young people from rural areas (2)

### **1. Practices for managing forest resources meant for village communities living adjacent to forests.**

From 1994 to 2001, the process of implementing a decentralised forestry fiscal system in Cameroon generated three types of practices of local management of forest resources: direct handing over funds meant for village communities living adjacent to forests and for local councils themselves, setting-up committees for the management of forestry dues and finally the project of creating an equalization fund.

As a matter of fact, in the absence of a formal framework for organising the management of financial resources accruing from the commercial exploitation of forests and meant for village communities living adjacent to forests, local administrative authorities namely senior Divisional officers and Divisional officers have developed practices for distributing and paying in funds based on the direct payment in cash and in kind to village communities or, in some cases, the payment of part of these funds to the council and the contribution in kind to the local populations. Money meant for village communities living adjacent to forests is solemnly handed over to the village Head or chairman of the Management Board in the presence of the forester, the local administrative officers, the locally elected representatives, the elites and local partners in development, at a general meeting of the whole village. Money or goods in kind are offered in the presence of the entire community which is informed on the spot of the amounts received, the quality and quantity of goods received. Such an approach was changed by the joint order of the Minister of Territorial Administration and the Minister of the Economy and Finance of 29 April 1998 which sets up committees for the management of forestry dues presided over by Mayors of Rural Councils and under the supervision of Divisional Officers.

Today, an equalization fund is to be set up which will be responsible for ensuring a transparent, effective and equitable management of forestry resources at all levels. In one case or the other, young rural people are not essentially associated to decision-taking as concerns the management of resources meant for village communities living adjacent to forests.

### **2. Marginalising young rural people in the management of financial benefits accruing from the commercial exploitation of forests: logics of inequitable sharing the fallouts from forest exploitation.**

Young people are marginalised in matters of managing the financial resources accruing from the commercial exploitation of forests and meant for village communities living adjacent to forests. The leading organs of community forest associations and committees for the management of forestry dues do not adequately associate young people to the decision-taking process concerning the allocation of such funds, the distribution percentages and the priorities to meet. The choice of community achievements to be carried out is determined by social elders (village Heads, king makers, Family Heads) and by administrative authorities, in priority for their specific interests. Even socio-economic achievements are selected by social elders. This is for example the case with the renovation of

classrooms, the purchase of benches and school furniture, playing yards, cultural Halls and acquiring sporting equipment. People think that decisions relating to the achievement of social projects which are meant for them are imposed on them and do not always meet a locally sustainable development prospect.

Such a situation generates conflicts which reduce the impact of the management of forestry resources on the improvement of living conditions in village communities living adjacent to forests under exploitation.

## **II – Multiplication of social conflicts in the management of forest resources: disruption of social order and crisis of logics of development in rural areas.**

The marginalization of young people in the management of forestry resources meant for village communities living adjacent to forests generates a series of conflicts (A) whose effects are considerable on local development initiatives based on the management of forest incomes (B).

### **A- Plurality and diversity of conflicts of generations in the management of forest resources in rural areas.**

Conflicts of generations concerning the management of forestry resources are known as situations of antagonism, discord, misunderstanding and contestation. They are related to systems of representations and values that young and old people develop with regard to the management of financial resources accruing from the commercial exploitation of forests (1); and the logics of power and struggles of interest for controlling the revenues and the choice of achievements which need to be carried out (2).

#### **1. Conflicts related to systems of representations and values concerning the management of forest resources**

Representations and values are different for young and old people as far as nature and socio-community destination of resources accruing from the commercial exploitation of forests are concerned. They do not have the same vision as to the destination and management of funds. As far as young people are concerned, such funds must be invested in sustainable socio-economic community achievements that are profitable to the entire community. Which is not the case for old persons. Current management experiences of financial resources accruing from the LOMIE Community forests in East-Cameroon show that apart from investments carried out in the fields of school-attendance and community health, achievements carried out with forest incomes are individually geared community achievements: issuing national identity cards, building individual houses, purchasing clothes for old persons, paying health expenses for sick villagers etc. On the contrary, young people require the achievement of micro-projects generating financial revenues and creating jobs, such as agricultural farmlands, support to the marketing of food crops, house-gardens etc...young and old people do not have the same representation for achievements and give neither the same importance nor the same value to investments carried out in villages. Conflicts of power and interest are added to conflicts of representation and value.

#### **2- Conflicts of power and interest between young and old people in the management of forest resources**

Conflicts of power and interest relate to contradictions and rivalries in the process of taking decisions as to what purpose the funds should be allocated, their accounting management and control mechanisms. Young and old people do not agree on the principles and mechanisms for an equitable distribution of funds. Owing to their age, old persons consider themselves as the depository of titles and powers with regard to the management of forest revenues, to justify their claim. The objectives pursued are different depending on the needs of the groups. Some latent logics of competition are developed between the former elites and the new ones which sometimes engender personal hatred.

Globally speaking, aspirations are considered unrealistic and put off indefinitely as soon as they are not involved in the classical schemes to which young people are reduced in rural societies. Conflicts so developed disrupt social order and peace, and shake the stability of relationships between generations. Young people consider themselves as resigned victims and old persons as assaulted and mean partners. Despite some efforts for negotiation and dialogue made by one another, such conflicts reduce the impact of forest resources on local development.

## **B – Poor impact of the management of forest resources on the development process of village communities: precarious achievements carried out and crisis of development patterns.**

The impact of financial resources accruing from the exploitation of forests is still poor in the rural areas of Cameroon. Activities carried out with a view to alleviating poverty and improving the general living conditions in village communities are low and limited (1).

As a result, there is a crisis of development prospects envisaged for Rural areas in Cameroon (2).

### **1 – Poor and precarious achievements carried out in rural areas**

The use of forest resources in villages does not meet the preoccupations of sustainable socio-economic development of village communities living adjacent to forests (providing pipe-borne water, electricity, building and maintenance of roads and bridges, building, maintenance and equipping schools and health units, acquiring drugs, drawing up and implementing micro-projects of development etc) Most socio-community achievements launched are uncompleted and precarious (case of classrooms, health centres, cultural Halls etc). The concrete fallouts on the change of living conditions of villagers are reduced. At times, the populations who are paid directly by foresters share the money among the larger families in the village and spend it for pleasure sake (food, drinks etc). They pretend to be taking at last their revenge on the State which, for a long time, has benefited alone from forestry revenues. In cases where such revenues are paid in the council treasuries responsible for managing them, a major part of these funds is misappropriated and diverted for achieving fictitious projects and activities having no bearing on the life of the village populations concerned.



The dysfunctioning of committees for the management of forestry dues and of council accounting services give room for practices of overvaluation of works achieved in the villages on behalf of village communities. Misappropriations of funds are not outdone. The money that is earmarked for carrying out the selected projects is diverted for unknown purposes and is invested nowhere on behalf of village communities. Reason why the social achievements said to have been carried out do not exist on the indicated sites (fictitious achievements etc). This is the case for the so-called electrification of the TOUNGRELO village in the Dimako sub-division in East-Cameroon that remains fictitious. Achievements are still low and marginal as compared to the amounts of funds received and invested. The prospects of sustainable development of village communities are fundamentally challenged.

## **2 – Crisis of development patterns in rural areas**

Development processes implemented in rural areas do not take into account the profound aspirations of the younger generations. They are based on the objectives and priorities defined by the older generations who place emphasis on the satisfaction of their circumstantial needs, without any major projection on the future. As the essential goal is to take maximum advantage from the available resources to meet the food or attractive needs of old persons who consider that they should benefit from the fallouts of forest exploitation as long as they are living. The development patterns worked out in this context do not take into consideration the duration factor. They are worked out to meet the present needs without any major preoccupation for the future requirements. The importance given to the development approach of old persons put off indefinitely the development prospects and dynamism envisaged for the Youths. In order to come out of such a logic, it is necessary to rethink the process of intergenerational access to forest resources and the benefits accruing from their commercial exploitation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The systems presently used for providing easy access to forest resources and the benefits accruing from their commercial exploitation are unfavourable for young people. Current practices reveal a considerable disequilibrium in the allocation and use of financial resources accruing from the exploitation of forest resources, differences and varied conflicts in the selection of policies and strategies for improving the living conditions of rural populations from the management of forest resources.

Although it has become effective in the rural areas of Cameroon that are under exploitation, the management of forest resources is not yet socially equitable and rational. It still excludes young people whose needs and expectations in terms of local development are different from the preoccupations of old persons. Young people militate for investment in long-lasting socio-economic infrastructures whereas old persons require circumstantial and immediate management of resources accruing from forest exploitation.

Current practices do not take into account their interests and development aspirations. On the one hand because young people are always considered as social juniors who must abide to the decisions taken on their behalf by old persons. On the other hand, because elders consider that decisions concerning the management and allocation of funds accruing from forest exploitation cannot be taken by young persons. They are more or less imposed on them. They must obey and keep silent. These systems must be rethought with a view to ensuring an equitable and democratic management of forestry resources and the benefits accruing from their commercial exploitation, so as to take into account the aspirations of young people in the development projects carried out with forest resources. To achieve this, it is necessary to integrate the pluralistic approach in the management of dynamic initiatives of access to forests and the management of financial revenues accruing from the commercial exploitation of forests. Pluralism compels to go beyond the normative consideration of forest management and to question such strategies by the various categories of operators and representations which justify them and the logics devised for their implementation. Resorting to pluralism will make it possible to reconcile multifarious, contradictory and different interests in the management of forest resources and the benefits accruing drawn from forest exploitation.

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