

Beyond the Decade of Policy and Community Euphoria: The State of Livelihoods Under New Local Rights to Forest in Rural Cameroon

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the state of livelihoods under the exercise of new community rights to forest in rural Cameroon. The assessment makes use of a set of livelihoods indicators. The granting and exercise of new community rights, namely, management rights and market rights, are not synonymous with improved livelihoods, despite initial predictions and expectations. The resource base has not changed; it is more and more threatened by poor local level institutional arrangements and social and bio-physical management strategies, in addition to the weak central level regulation and monitoring actions. Similarly, the rights-based reform and community forestry are not improving basic assets and means at the household level. Nevertheless, this paper suggests that this experiment should not be judged hastily, since fifteen years are not enough to judge social and institutional processes like those in progress in Cameroon. The authors draw policy options likely to improve the livelihoods dimension of the reform and launch a debate on the real contribution of community income derived from community forests towards poverty alleviation at the household level.

Keywords: rural Cameroon, rights-based reforms, community forestry, livelihoods, local institutional conditions, hypotheses, mixed outcomes, household level, common property, poverty alleviation

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the concept of livelihoods is increasingly in fashion in the lexicon of professionals, policy makers, and researchers. To that end, many development agencies and professional bodies have defined and framed livelihoods approaches over the past ten years. Despite some differential idioms, there is a unifying link behind all the existing approaches. This common

ground is the definition through which various approaches are constructed. The most commonly used definition is borrowed from Chambers and Conway (1992). According to these authors, a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims, and assets), and activities required for a means of living. According to Ashley and Carney (1999), livelihoods approaches are nourished by three underlying orientations, i.e., livelihoods promotion, livelihoods protection, and livelihoods provisioning. Some livelihoods approaches are linked to basic needs, while some others are rights-based; ideally, sustainable approaches should incorporate both basic needs and rights.

This paper is derived from a strategic study conducted by the Center for International Forestry Research in Cameroon in 2007 and 2008 (see Larson and Dahal This issue). It seeks to assess the effects of the allocation of new community rights to local forests, forest resources, and benefits associated with

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their commercial exploitation. The launching of Cameroon’s rights-based reforms in the 1990s—synonymous with community forestry—was accompanied by the rise of a great policy euphoria and popular optimism. Fifteen years after the launch of related reforms and ten years after the launch of the management of the first community forests, this paper, through the combination of hypotheses and data, interrogates the link between this change and improved livelihoods. In order to do this, four livelihoods indicators or categories are assessed—resource base, income, well-being facilities, and forest sustainability. In the final section, we discuss the results of the assessment, explore challenges relating to the reconfiguration of the bundle of community rights to forest in Cameroon, and draw some policy options that can help improve some aspects of the rights-based and community forestry reforms. This paper is aligned with empirical findings of current studies on ongoing rights-based reforms in Africa, Ghana, and Kenya (see Marfo et al. This issue; Mogoi et al. This issue).

THE RECONFIGURATION OF COMMUNITY RIGHTS

A contemporary exploration of resource ownership theories (Ciriacy and Bishop 1975; Mc Kean and Ostrom 1995; White and Martin 2002; Bruce 2003, etc.) highlights three types of ownership: public (official) ownership, common (collective) ownership, and private (individual) ownership. A series—or bundle—of rights, namely, access rights, withdrawal rights, management rights, exclusion rights, and alienation rights form the basis of these three types of ownership (see also Cronkleton et al. This issue). In this taxonomy, withdrawal rights comprise use rights. Ownership rights—the peak of the rights (White and Martin 2002)—are represented by exclusion rights and alienation rights. The Cameroon case study adds market rights (Mbile et al. 2009; Oyono 2009a), which correlate with withdrawal rights and management rights (Barume 2004).

Cameroon’s rainforest—about 20 million ha—significantly interrelates with cultural identities, local livelihoods, national economic interests, and global ecological stability. At the local level, the rainforest provides about eight million rural poor (30 per cent of the whole population) with various assets, including financial benefits. According to the Cameroon Government’s 2003 Poverty Reduction Strategy (RoC 2003), the incidence of poverty is paradoxically higher in the forested Cameroon than in other zones of the country. The distinctive characters of the forested zone of Cameroon are poverty, low living standards, and lack of financial/social transfers and infrastructure. While exploring this ‘paradox of abundance’ (‘rich forest, poor people’), domestic analysts like Bigombé Logo (1996), Diaw

(2005), and Oyono (2005a) show that since the colonial period, the management of Cameroon’s forest is widely confronted with the ‘rights issue’, organised around the question “who owns the forests?”, publicised by White and Martin (2002).

The provisional Zoning Plan of the forested Cameroon, developed in 1993, and the Forestry Legislation of 1994 are the founding legal instruments for the reorganisation of the structure of the bundle of community rights to forests and resources. The Zoning Plan creates new land and forest classification. The Forestry Legislation in effect—from the perspective of this paper—institutionalises community forestry, i.e., the creation and management of community forests by village communities. The Zoning Plan defines a permanent forest estate and a non-permanent forest estate. The permanent forest estate comprises state forests strictly belonging to the state and registered in the state’s name, and council forests are the forests allocated to councils (or local governments) and registered as the councils’ private property. National parks, faunal reserves, game ranches, botanical gardens, zoological gardens, production forests, protection forests, research forests, etc., are part of state forests or state property. The non-permanent forest estate is made up of portions of forests likely to be assigned to uses other than real forests and wildlife valorisation; community forests are part of this estate.

Before the Forestry Legislation of 1994, and later the development of the Zoning Plan, the state had exclusive rights to forests and resources. The local communities could only exercise access rights and use rights. The rights-based reform resulted in a spatial and legal redistribution of rights to forests and resources (Table 1). The modification of the structure of the bundle of rights prior to these institutional evolutions generated an extension of the surface of rights. Thereafter, with the advent of community forestry, the local communities could—in addition to customary access rights and use rights—enjoy management rights and market rights (Table 1). They could also exercise exclusion rights, hereby applied to neighbouring village communities.

The first remark on the new structure of rights to forests and resources shown in Table 1 is that the state preserved all the rights it held before the reforms. As in the former legal framework, in the new classification of forests into two basic domains (the permanent forest estate and the non-permanent forest estate), the new statutory regime allocates tangible, substantive, and permanent rights to the state. As already mentioned earlier, the basic innovation in the new legal status of rights to forests and resources relates to the allocation—to the local communities—of the management rights and market rights to forests located in the non-permanent forest estate, i.e., the community forests.

Table 1
The new structure of community rights in the new forest classification

Nature of rights	Access rights	Withdrawal rights	Management/ market rights	Exclusion rights	Alienation rights
Permanent forest domain	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Non-permanent forest domain	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

The creation, establishment, and management of community forests—including the marketing of forest products—are the results of these new rights. It is thanks to these new rights that the local communities are managing and exploiting hundreds of hectares of forest in the forested Cameroon, on the one hand, and marketing wood from their community forests, on the other. This effort throughout the forested areas of Cameroon is indicative of the social, economic, and political importance of forests for the local communities. The Forestry Legislation stipulates that the surface area of a community forest should not exceed 5,000 ha. In addition, a community forest should be demarcated only on forest land over which a village community has customary rights. On the whole, 147 community forests have been attributed so far all over the country. They are managed and exploited under the new bundle of rights. According to the Zoning Plan of the forested Cameroon, the surface area of the permanent forest estate is 18,024,536 ha (7,574,280 ha of which is production forests). One of the non-permanent forest estate is 4,475,437 ha; already attributed community forests represent about 637,000 ha.

HYPOTHESES AND METHODS

Four research sites located in the forested Cameroon were selected for this research (Figure 1), namely, Lomié/Dja area (east region), Ocean area (south region), Mount Cameroon area (southwest region) and Mount Oku area (northwest region). Wholly, fifteen villages and 750 households were covered. In

bio-geographical terms, the four research sites are distributed in distinct facieses. The Mount-Cameroon site belongs to the mangrove dominated coastal ecosystem. The Ocean area is the home of the Atlantic forest with *Lophira alata* and *Saccoglottis gabonensis*, and the Biafrean forest with *Cesalpinia*, and the semi deciduous forest. The Mount Oku area belongs to the mountain forest, dominated by *Prunus africana*, *Xylopiya africana*, and *Leplaea mayombensis*. The Lomié/Dja area is part of the evergreen Cameroon/Congolese forest. The environmental richness of the forested Cameroon has generated two ambivalent situations. On the one hand, there is a sort of an ‘ecological unconcern’ at the local level, due precisely to the abundance of resources, while on the other hand, there is community concern about the lack of justice and equity in access to benefits from natural wealth in general and forests in particular. These conditions have led to a complex ‘political ecology’ illustrated by community frustrations and the rejection of concessionaries.

The type of change addressed in this paper rests on a given number of principles—including popular participation in decision-making, inclusion, discretionary powers, equity, democratic accountability, efficiency, transparency, collective well-being, and ecological sustainability—defined by theorists of resource governance and devolution processes (e.g., Smoke 2003; Ribot 2004). The Cameroon research upon which this paper is based was guided by the following hypotheses: ‘securing community rights to forests ensures the security of the resource base’; ‘the transfer of community tenure

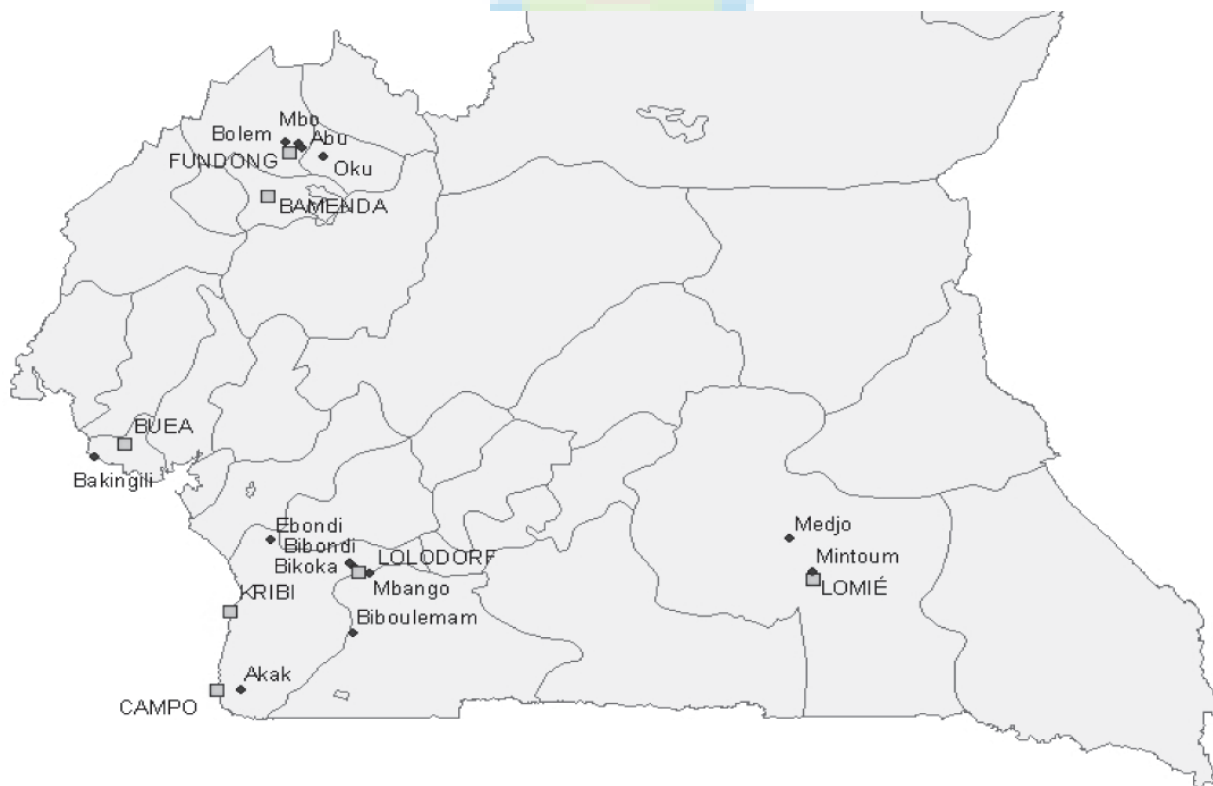


Figure 1
The distribution of the research areas in southern Cameroon

rights is synonymous with improved livelihoods'; 'securing and improving livelihoods increases monetary income and contributes to poverty reduction'; and 'securing community tenure rights leads to forest sustainability'.

The process of data collection was supported by the following methods and techniques: scoping exercises, aimed at identifying priority questions on each research area; local context analysis, for the capture of various characteristics of each area; qualitative research, with structured and open-ended interviews through key informants, in order to gather data on relevant topics such as community organisation, land tenure, forest tenure, conflict, forest conditions, etc.; quantitative research, based on market surveys, household surveys, and ecological surveys; and mapping exercises comprising Venn diagrams, wealth ranking, historical transects of landscapes, agro-ecological transects, etc.

RESULTS

The effects of change in the structure of community rights to forest are assessed through four categories, including the 'resource base', 'well-being facilities', 'monetary income', and 'forest conditions'. These categories are also supported by four hypotheses, tested through qualitative and quantitative data gathered in the research areas. The assessment is conducted over a period of 10 years—i.e., from the end of the 1990s to the end of the 2000s—and is oriented towards the 'basic needs approach' of livelihoods.

The resource base

In the four research areas and 15 community forests covered, qualitative data resulting from observation and group discussions show that the resource base has remained the same before and after the reforms. However, legal spaces called 'community forests' were officially allocated to the local communities, which was not the case before. The transfer of new rights to forests equals to the consolidation of the resource base. In the four research areas, about 43,000 ha of forest are managed and exploited today by the local communities concerned. Thus, these village communities have been officially granted hectares of forest, even if in the meantime, tree species, e.g., have not recorded any quantitative improvement. Forest regeneration operations were planned in the Mount Oku and in the Lomié/Dja community forests; however, they have not yet been launched.

In addition, available data indicate that the restructuring of the bundle of community rights to forests did not bring about the expected positive change in forest conditions. For instance, new tree species have not been introduced. However, exploitation procedures have changed slightly. In the Mount Oku and Mount Cameroon areas—accommodating highlands forests—the exploitation of timber products such as firewood and charcoal is largely replaced by the exploitation of non-timber forest products, e.g., medicinal plants (BBNRMC 2007). In the Lomié/Dja area—with lowlands forests—small scale logging using mobile saws (technically described by

Auzel et al. 2001) is practiced more and more along with traditional methods of extraction of forest products.

Changes generated by the rights-based tenure reform have led to new access and management practices. A new statutory regulatory framework is enforced locally. The Ministry of Forests has developed a manual for community forests establishment and management. This technical tool lays down all the procedures and standard matters to be followed by the village communities managing community forests according to the Forestry Legislation in effect. In addition, new local institutional arrangements—like management and control committees—have been built at the village level. The new regulatory and institutional frameworks seek, in theory, to consolidate and protect the resource base.

Nevertheless, from an interactionist perspective—between the new rights on the one hand, and qualitative and quantitative change (positive or negative) on the other—there is a fundamental element of appreciation in the local representations of forests. In the community logics and in the mental universe relating to forest as a space, the reform treated in this paper has rather reduced the resource base (Oyono 2005a). According to villagers, before the advent of this policy innovation, notably the Zoning Plan and community forestry, the surface area of the customary forest did not have limits (see also Karsenty et al. 1997; Diaw and Oyono 1998). However, in the establishment of community forests, the key legal prescription during the delimitation phase is that a community forest should not exceed 5,000 ha. Under these conditions, village communities conclude that the reforms gave them rights, but reduced their forest and the resource base. This outcome is well illustrated by the Mbih and Abuh villages in the Mount Oku area, where farmers feel that their customary forest, whose surface area was about 17,000 ha before the reform, has officially been reduced to 2,800 ha under community forestry today. The granting of new community rights in the mid-1990s has resulted in the same situation in many villages across the forested Cameroon.

Well-being facilities

Indicators like 'access to school', 'community capacity', 'health services', and 'NGO presence' before and after the reforms has also been assessed by the study as livelihood assets. Overall, though the reconfiguration of community rights to forests and resources has led to the redefinition of the resource base and to new regulatory and institutional arrangements, there are very few positive effects of the reform (and community forestry) on well-being facilities across the four research sites. Previous studies have drawn similar conclusions (Abe'ele et al. 2004; Oyono 2005b; Assembe 2006; Bigombé Logo 2008).

The results of surveys conducted in 2008 and 2009 are mapped in Table 2. The arrows, according to their spatial orientation, indicate the stability/stagnation of the situation, or improvement, or regression. Based on data gathered on the pre-reform period, this table shows that the post-reform and

implementation period has registered an increase in NGO presence in the four research areas. But this factor is not accompanied by improved health facilities and a quantitative improvement in access to school. In fact, in the four research areas, benefits from the exploitation of community forests are not meaningfully invested in health and education. Pre-existing health centers and schools have rather seen disuse year after year. Community forestry—while favoring the arrival of NGOs—has strengthened local capacity in terms of access to information and, in some villages, community action (Oyono and Temple 2003), although they have not resulted in improvement in health and education.

A close look at Table 2 points to the fact that the most notable and shared positive change is the multiplication of NGOs and forest management projects. Considering that the process of the creation and exploitation of a community forest is long, complex, and expensive, only NGOs and projects could provide technical and methodological support to the local communities. However, the presence of NGOs has not been enhanced in all the sites. One of the members of the local forest management institution from the Mount Oku area, J.B. Tatah (pers. comm. December 18, 2007), says about the new community rights and NGO presence in the Mount Oku area:

In reality, income derived from community forests have led a timid equipping of health centers in our villages. We also wanted to promote regeneration in community forests. Initiatives to improve housing are also envisaged. However, it should be admitted that there is not yet a perceptible change in our well-being; and then, generally, when there is change, it should not be attributed to the advent of community forests. NGOs have been ceasing their activities here. Only BirdLife International has remained. However, we do not exactly know what they do. The situation here is therefore that we did not have projects and NGOs before 1995; these institutions came, stayed for some time and left again.

Thus, the end of the 1990s saw a blossoming of projects and NGOs working in support of the establishment and management of community forests in most of the research sites (see also Oyono and Temple 2003). This institutional inflation is one of the benefits of the rights-based reforms and community forestry in the forested Cameroon.

Income

In the methodological framework of this study, the key unit of observation and analysis was the village community. But ideally, the measurement of variables such as income and material poverty at the micro-level should include households

as units. The legal framework in effect prescribes that financial benefits associated with the management and exploitation of community forests should be community revenue. Consequently, the said revenue must be invested in community projects. The exploitation and sale of timber in this case is methodologically governed by the manual of the procedures for the attribution of, and norms for the management of, community forests. It should be noted that the exploitation of the community forests studied began in the Mount Cameroon area (2001), followed by the Mount Oku area (2003), the Lomié/Dja area (2004), and then the Ocean area (2005).

In light of the records available locally, the average annual income from community forests in 2008 was estimated at USD 6,040 in the Ocean area, USD 3,750 in the Mount Oku area, USD 10,000 in the Lomié/Dja area and USD 4,138 in the Mount Cameroon area. Before the advent of community forests, i.e., towards the end of the 1990s, villages of the four research areas were receiving internally arranged royalties from commercial logging (Lomié/Dja and Ocean areas), and from ecotourism (Mount Oku and Mount Cameroon areas). On that score, community income has experienced a staggering increase from 1997/1998 to 2007/2008: 370 per cent in the Lomié/Dja area; 725 per cent in the Ocean area; 3,200 per cent in the Mount Oku area; 5,300 per cent in the Mount Cameroon area.

This distribution shows that change in the bundle of community rights and the establishment and management of community forests have positive effects on community income (see also Abe'ele et al. 2004). But according to villagers, financial income resulting directly from the institutionalisation of a new structure of the bundle of community rights to forests and resources have not yet produced any noticeable improvement in living conditions and primary assets (see Table 2). The implementation of community projects, when it is the case, is not solving the problem of poverty at the household level. Community forestry and the way community financial benefits are managed by village committees set up to that end are, at this juncture, not likely to induce positive change in community and individual vulnerability conditions and the quality of life in rural areas. Financial reports presented by chairpersons of community forest management committees show that a large proportion (60–70 per cent) of income derived from the sale of timber is channeled into administrative activities or is mismanaged, and the remaining amounts intended for community projects are generally trivial.

In rural Cameroon, basic assets indicative of well-being at the household level include education (access to school), family health conditions, the quality of houses (corrugated iron roofs, with doors and windows), food security (at least 2 meals per day), entertainment and culture (e.g., a radio or television set), small household furniture (a table and chairs), quality of beds (a wooden bed in each room), drinking water, oil lamps or electricity, a means of transportation (a motor bike or a bicycle), and decent latrines. By and large, the allocation of new community rights to forests is not leading to the presence/improvement of these basic assets at the household level in all the research areas.

Table 2
Evolution of some well-being facilities

Sites	Ocean	Mount Cameroun	Lomié/Dja	Mount Oku
Access to schools	→	→	→	→
Local capacities	→	→	→	→
Health services	→	→	→	→
NGO presence	→	→	→	→

Forest conditions

The Lomié/Dja and Ocean areas are socio-politically marked by weak traditional authorities, as a result of colonial administration strategies. In the absence of robust traditional regulatory frameworks, villages are governed by chiefs installed and controlled by central administration bodies; very often, these local authorities have very little internal recognition (Biyong et al. 2008). With the transformation of the bundle of community rights to forests and resources, management powers were transferred instead to management committees, not to these village chiefs. Management committees, as already shown by Etoungou (2003), have evolved to a sort of forestry elite, self interested and cut of from village communities. This process of elite capture in this zone has generated an anarchical management and exploitation of many community forests (see also Assembe 2006, Mbairamadji 2009). In that regard, Kombo and Oyono (2008) note that management committees in the Lomié/Dja area signed contracts with two operators at the same time in 2006 without accounting to the local population. By doing so, these management committees encourage fraudulent and illegal exploitation of timber purely for personal interests.

Under such institutional conditions, the perception of community forests is changing completely. For many villagers in the forested Cameroon, “the community forest belongs to everyone and nobody in particular, everyone and nobody in particular is responsible for its management” (Kombo and Oyono 2008: 23). This perception has led increasingly to high ecological risks and to the informalisation of management processes, as “everyone wants to also become rich by introducing a fraudulent exploiter and receive money like management committee officials do.” (Kombo and Oyono 2008: 24). Damages caused by this almost chaotic exploitation are such that community forests in many areas have come into a phase of social deregulation—in the absence of community regulation (Assembe 2006; Mbairamadji 2009)—and advanced stage of ecological degradation. For instance, Biyong et al. (2008) report that the anarchical exploitation of community forests in the Ocean area has decreased the local bio-energy potential, since collateral damages on secondary species caused by the exploitation of commercial tree species has an impact on the availability of firewood.

Effects of the uncontrolled exploitation of community forests in the two are negative from the quantitative viewpoint as well as the qualitative viewpoint. Between 2006 and 2007, declared volumes of timber extracted from the Mintoum village community forest, one of the community forests in the Lomié/Dja area, were 93.32 cu. m. Kombo and Oyono (2008), referring to parallel sources of information (neutral key informants), reported that this figure represents half of actual volumes. Such distortions have also been reported in the Ocean area (Biyong et al. 2008). Effects on flora and biodiversity are also illustrated by the disappearance of tree species with a high social and cultural value, like *Baillonella toxisperma*, are disappearing. On the whole, the transfer of new rights to the local communities is, for the time being, leading

to observable and advanced overexploitation in the Lomié/Dja and Ocean areas.

The Mount Cameroon area, like the Mount Oku area, is located in the English-speaking part of Cameroon (Figure 1). Existing administrative and political culture, local development practices, and resource management planning strategies sometimes differ from those of the French-speaking part of Cameroon (Oyono 2009a). The Bimbia-Bonadikombo community forest (grouping five villages) is the only community forest in the Mount Cameroon area with a management plan and a management convention so far. Since the colonial period, agro-industrial plantations are the main land use system in this area. Though official reports note that the management plan of this community forest is implemented as planned (BBNRMC 2007), villagers say that there is a wave of illegal forest exploitation since the mid-2000s. Small-scale sawing and simple felling of trees for domestic energy has increased over the last five years.

The Bimbia-Bonadikombo community forest is highly threatened. According to Kombo et al. (2008), each village counts not less than 10 illegal exploiters of wood for domestic energy purposes. In addition, one of the most representative tree species of the highlands forest, *Prunus africana*, which has a high medicinal value, is widely targeted. PLANTECAM, a pharmaceutical company specialised in the export of *Prunus africana*, signed a contract with the management council of this community forest in 2003 to purchase the bark of this species. However, monetary poverty has led villagers to also establish ‘personal’ links with the company PLANTECAM, in order to market *Prunus africana* secretly. Some illegal exploiters have been taken to court in 2007 and 2008 (Kombo et al. 2008).

Unlike other research areas, where customary authorities have been weakened by the colonial administration, the Mount Oku area, in the northwest region, is governed by a very hierarchical traditional socio-political organisation. The customary chief, the *fon*, and the assembly of counselors, the *kwifoyn*, exercise a strong, extensive, and institutionally recognised social control over forests and resources (Fisiy 1994; Box 1). In fact, the *fon* and *kwifoyn* are the guardians and guarantors of a secular ecological order. For the management of the community forests of the area, patrols have been set

Box 1

Traditional socio-political organisation and forest management in the Mount Oku area

All the forests of the Mount Oku area also accommodate ‘sacred forests’. Many traditional mechanisms are implemented in villages, in order to regulate, manage, and control common resources. On the whole, powers exerted by traditional authorities over natural resources are still strong and operational in the Mount Oku region. For centuries, the *fon* and the *kwifoyn* have always been the basic regulatory frameworks of traditional community conservation. Refusing to comply with the decisions of the *fon* and the *kwifoyn* is deemed as reprehensible. Before the setting up and management of community forests, villages in the Oku area already had systems of community conservation and collective action organised around sustainable resource management and control. These are the pillars of a process which, although hampered by some deviant acts, is well controlled.

Source: Kombo et al. (2008: 16).

up in each village and villagers themselves work for forest conservation (Kombo et al. 2008).

Traditional authorities remain strong in the Mont Oku area (Oyono 2009a). Control exercised by these authorities for the health and integrity of resources and the internal regulation of forest management are visible and perceptible (Box 1). In one village of the area, the Emfeveh-Mu village, two family heads were thus expelled from the community in 2006 and 2007, after evidence was given to show that they introduced illegal exploiters into the community forest. In the Mount Oku area, the transfer of new official community rights combined with the role of customary institutions is producing encouraging ecological results.

CHALLENGES

This paper assesses livelihood indicators after the transfer of new rights to the local communities and the launching of community forestry in Cameroon. It also tests hypotheses constructed for field level case studies. This section puts in perspective these hypotheses and data derived from the study and the monitoring of several livelihood indicators, including the resource base, basic services and needs, income and forest sustainability. At the same time, this section also identifies several explanatory factors.

Empirical elements drawn from the four research areas are not leading to the validation of hypothesis 1—‘secure community rights to forest ensures the security of the resource base’—insofar as forests designated today as, spatially, community forests are the same forests ‘owned’ by the communities concerned since centuries. In other words, these forests are their customary forests, located in village territories. The resource base remains the same and sometimes, as shown earlier, has become much narrower in some villages. Similarly, hypothesis 2—‘the transfer of community tenure rights is synonymous with improved livelihoods’—is not validated by the assessment of the outcomes of the process of community rights transfer.

Basically, there is no visible change in service delivery, and access to schools is stagnant. Of course, NGOs presence has increased, but their activities focus more on the support to community forests establishment and to the building of local capacities, in some cases, than on the support to livelihoods improvement. Situation on the ground partly validates hypothesis 3 (‘securing and improving livelihoods increases monetary income and contributes to poverty reduction’). On the one hand, forest-based community financials benefits are generated annually by the proceeds of sale, but on the other hand, these financial benefits are not contributing to poverty reduction at the household level. Hypothesis 4 (‘securing community tenure rights leads to forest sustainability’) is not validated in the community forests of three research areas. Only community forests of the Mount Oku area are managed in a sustainable way, under strong customary institutions and collective action.

In Cameroon, the transfer of community rights to forests, and

the subsequent creation and management of community forests come up against numerous challenges, as shown by the results of the test of the four hypotheses. First is the security of transfer. Rights allocated to the local communities are not secure; a closer look at the new community rights, i.e., management rights and market rights, shows that these are ultimately delegated rights. The 1994 Forestry Legislation states that if a community forest is ‘poorly managed’, the Ministry of Forests will withdraw managerial powers from the village community concerned. The process of power transfer is conditional and the local communities have no ownership rights to forests. They do not, *de jure*, own the forest, from a statutory point of view. Hence, weak access to resources equals weak livelihoods. Second is the issue of poverty reduction through community income. From the perspective of the law, money generated by community forests should be only invested in community projects. Households and individuals cannot directly access these financial benefits for their own needs. In rural areas, the main unit for poverty analysis is the household, but financial benefits derived from community forests management are not invested in basic assets needed by households. As a result, these assets are not improved by community forestry and poverty is not alleviated at the household level.

Third is the weakness of community organisation and collective action. In three of the four research areas, traditional community action (very weak), customary socio-political authorities (with very little legitimacy), and local collective action do not visibly represent enabling factors for sustainable forest management, resource control, and improved local livelihoods. Fourth is accountable representation. The choice of management committees as the local institutions receiving powers and the way in which these local committees are constituted, very often by NGOs, have resulted in mismanagement. Local management of forests and derived benefits is characterised by the emergence, through management committees, of a local ‘environmental elite’—*nouveaux riches* (in French)—cut off from the local populations, and linked to external elites and logging operators committed to the capture of many community forests. Livelihoods cannot be improved through community forestry under such institutional conditions.

DECISION-MAKING OPTIONS

Cameroon’s forestry sector reforms are organised around three key objectives—ensuring sustainable forest management; promoting public participation; and contributing to poverty alleviation. The assessment conducted in this paper shows that, in practice, community forestry is not actually achieving these objectives. Correspondingly, the transfer and exercise of new community rights to forests and resources is not synonymous with improved livelihoods. It would be futile to advocate for a unique therapy aimed at correcting the community forestry and the rights-based reform. It is nevertheless possible to suggest some valuable decision-making options that can be tested through an adaptive action-learning approach.

More secure rights should be allocated to the local communities for community forests establishment and management. New community rights introduced by the reforms are not secure; they can be withdrawn any time by the Ministry of Forests. Full ownership rights to customary forests transformed into community forests might be allocated to the local communities. For the moment, community forests resemble a 'conditional loan' more than property. In addition, the resource base—meaning the surface area of community forests—should be re-standardised and increased where customary forest land is available. The security of tenure rights is essential for the security and availability of the resource base.

Legal and administrative provisions should be established for the use of community forestry income in rural strategies that are likely to improve basic assets and to impact positively on human well-being at the household level. As community forests cannot be converted into household basic assets at the household level, related reform has no positive effects on poverty at the household level. Rural systems of savings and credit should be defined, designed, strategised, implemented, and supported by local capacity building actions and the definition of clear monitoring and evaluation indicators. Such savings and credit systems, designed and monitored by NGOs, would gradually encourage and promote investment and wealth creation at the household level.

Official regulations relating to community management should be established and/or enforced, in order to stimulate the emergence of robust collective action mechanisms for forest and resource control. The majority of community forests are threatened due to the lack of strong local institutions and collective action. If established and/or enforced, official regulations aimed at preventing illegal access and exploitation and internal deviance would generate local governance behaviors and stimulate collective action mechanisms.

To curb widespread embezzlement of forest-based revenue, tangible legal proceedings and administrative/legal sanctions are needed. In addition, local representation should be monitored, and sanctions applied to village management committee members involved in mismanagement and acting in collusion with illegal loggers.

This can be done through the signing of administrative orders defining tangible sanctions against embezzlement in the local management of community forests and financial benefits accruing from their commercial exploitation; the dismissal of local representatives involved in embezzlement; and the full involvement of the courts.

CONCLUSION

The hypotheses defined for the assessment of the Cameroon's rights-based reforms are wholly invalidated by the reality on the ground. Thus, neither the rights-based nor the development-based approaches of livelihoods are significantly consolidated by the implementation process and practices of community forestry. To give another illustration of the weak contribution of forest to rural poverty alleviation, recent analyses show that

though forest resources are the basis of rural households, their factorisation in the Cameroon's Poverty Reduction Strategy is wholly inadequate (Bird and Dickson 2005; Oyono 2009b). Since the mid-2000s, Central Africa, the sub-region comprising Cameroon, has registered a remarkable rise of civil society organisations committed to the fight against poverty (Ribot and Oyono 2005). These organisations and the related 'proto-social movements' are initiating advocacy actions for equity in access to benefits associated with the commercial exploitation of natural resources, including forest resources. The same organisations are also formulating social and institutional demands for the transfer of secure tenure rights to the local communities. Decision makers can reinforce community rights by transforming current 'delegated rights' into ownership rights (Oyono et al. 2009).

It is important to remember that the rights-based reform is not transferring ownership rights to the local community, but conditional management and market rights. Under such statutory tenure conditions, the state and the local communities are engaged in a mutually contested rights conflict. According to the local communities, the structure of rights to forests remains unfair. As shown by numerous analysts (Bigombé Logo 1996; Diaw 2005; Ribot and Oyono 2005; Oyono 2009a), discourses, stakeholder mental representations and empirical evidence attest to the resilience of this rights-based conflict. This rights-based conflict is not solved by the implementation of reform-related mechanisms such as decentralisation, devolution or rights transfer.

A 'win-win' option might be the allocation of full ownership rights to local communities (Oyono et al. 2009), in the non-permanent domain (also called agro-forestry band). Of course, the dilemma behind the role of common pool resources—in poverty reduction in general, and livelihoods support in particular—at the household level will remain unsolved. No doubt, when regulated through robust institutional arrangements (collective action for instance), the management of common pool resources leads to sustainability (Ostrom 1999). The situation in the Mount Oku area is partially a good illustration of the positive effects of local governance and collective action on sustainable management. But strategised as they are in the Cameroon's community forestry mechanism, the concrete contribution of common pool resources to improved livelihoods and poverty alleviation at the household level is poor. How can community income support well-being at the household level? Are commonly managed resources appropriate assets for alleviating poverty? Such questions have already been raised elsewhere (Sim et al. 2004). However, that is another debate.

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