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#17 — Community Management of Forest Resources Moving from "Keep Out!" to "Let's Collaborate!"

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Key Concepts

- Community level property rights to the forest have never been legally recognized by Congo Basin States, marginalizing community rights and potential community management contributions.
- Despite lack of tenure recognition, many communities expect a more equitable stake in

forest benefits and decision making than comes from "traditional" user rights recognized by states.

- Local perceptions and behaviors regarding external stakeholders are in great flux due to changing incentive structures including fiscal and judicial reforms, decentralization trends, and opportunistic rent-seeking activities.
- The "keep out!" message is in response to the marginal status forest communities have endured since colonial times; immigrants and elites have come to take over land belonging to communities with traditional rights.
- Those espousing "come into my forests" to logging concessionaires may be acting out of desperation or absence of perceived development options.
- Elites and chiefs often sell land belonging to families and clans, capitalizing on short-term opportunities and undermining the community.
- Frameworks linking communities to other stakeholders could change the "keep out" message to "let's collaborate," if accompanied by legislative changes buttressing traditional rights.
- To manage forest resources, communities must negotiate with groups with competing claims to resources.
- Multi-stakeholder coalitions promoting collaborative formats may help secure communities' role in forest management.

The Status of Local Forest Tenure Rights in the Congo Basin

From the colonial period to the present, Congo Basin states have enjoyed full ownership of forest resources, and remain the sole authority, with rights to alienate resources for conservation and/or development purposes. Local communities retain different traditional claims, but these do not confer legal property rights.

While communities have only use rights, they often perceive that they bear ownership rights based on historical use, supported by oral histories of origin and occupancy. And while state rhetoric often appears supportive of community claims to tenure for restricted use purposes, in practice, Congo Basin communities remain as marginalized by forest estate zoning as they were during the colonial era.

Communities often find their subsistence and traditional forest use lifestyles are in direct opposition to the official state zoning of the forest estate. This has been documented through CARPE's work with participatory mapping where several communities clearly documented their use of the forest conflicted with its official zoning.

Equity and Reality — Just What Can Communities Expect?

In Cameroon, according to Decree 95/678/PM, the state is the principal legal owner of the forest estate. New community forest legislation has created a legal precedent for increasing community control over forest resource use and promoting greater equity in forest based revenue sharing. However, even so-called community forests are still owned by the state, with communities simply assuring the management of the forest based on an agreement with the State. The State has the right to break the agreement if it feels the agreement it is not being respected. The status of the community forest is therefore reduced to a kind of contractual rental arrangement.



Communities expect a more equitable stake in forest benefits that comes from traditional user rights.

There are two current tendencies on the part of communities regarding capitalizing on community forest legislation. The strongest tendency is to be expedient and collaborate with logging interests, thereby producing short-term rents for communities. This invites external agents into community forests. The second tendency (to date much weaker in Cameroon) is to formalize community forest agreements. This takes lots of work, and communities are often unaware of how exactly to go about the process, or find the process too overwhelming and abandon the effort. The table below illustrates the current situation.

Box 1: Impediments to Community Forestry in Cameroon	
Impediments Identified	Origin
Tendency 1 (strong): Abandonment or lack of interest on the part of the populations to	Village populations believe short-term gains of the "1000F tax" as a rent are most profitable

create community forests, despite sensitization efforts by development agents.	given their perceptions that the current forest estate zoning seen in the APEC map is non-negotiable.
Tendency 2 (weak): In contrast, the search for technical assistance to develop a formal request to MINEF for community forest attribution.	Adaptive strategy to secure tenure in light of the <i>Unité Forestière d'Aménagement</i> (UFA) "threat" that current zoning poses to communities

Thus, while the intent of 1,000 CFA tax was to contribute to decentralized benefit sharing, to date local elites in power at the commune and village level have primarily benefited. Logging interests have also benefited, as illegal logging has expanded through support of corruptible local interests. Furthermore, the reason why local populations have become keenly interested in the rent produced by this tax is because they perceive that the government's *Plan de Zonage* reflects a definitive delimitation of forest use zones, rather than a basis for negotiation of new agreements.

Management Realities — Are Communities Better Potential Allies to Biodiversity Conservation than Logging Companies?

CIRAD-Forêt has recently evaluated the [in]effectiveness of current fiscal measures to promote sustainable forest management in Cameroon. They conclude that dysfunctionality in forest management is leading to comprehensive abuse at all levels. Given current evidence, the argument cannot persuasively be made that forest conservation is better promoted through a private sector approach encouraging widespread timber extraction versus a community-based approach. Conversely, comprehensive data do not exist to prove that communities can manage forests sustainably. Most practitioners agree, however, based on experience and limited empirical data, that a significant degree of community participation is fundamental to good management. The nature and intensity of community participation in achieving conservation results under specific circumstances is the subject of much research. Ultimately, multi-stakeholder coalitions in which communities have an enhanced role in collaborative forest management may become the norm.

Community level forest management is also influenced by multipurpose use objectives of the forest resource. Community level management is influenced by social networks, occurrence of sacred sites, functional area location within walking distance to villages, risk minimization behaviors, patrimonial common property systems that go largely unrecognized by state entities, as well as land claiming strategies through *mise en valeur* land improvement/development strategies.

Many factors affect how communities participate. Results from the Biodiversity Support Program's study on decentralization and biodiversity conservation established that the clarity of goals, equity of participation and creation of alliances, incentives, policies, awareness and capacity all are crucial to shaping the impact of decentralized management arrangements. Thus, decentralized management alone will not bare results if incentives, alliances and capacities are not appropriately developed.

Box 2: Is "Keep Out" the Message for Eternity?

- "Keep out" is not a universal message. Some Congo Basin communities wish to keep external agents out of their forests, while others, trying to maximize forest rent collection, are letting them in to speed up locally negotiated rent-seeking through ventes de coupe.
- If negotiation for management and use of forest resources between states and communities becomes the norm, sustainable use options will be created, and communities will be less likely to maintain inflexible "keep out" messages to other stakeholders, as short-term opportunities forest harvesting through ventes de coupe manipulation will become less of an incentive.
- For communities to capitalize on sustainable use options, technical assistance and capacity building from foresters, conservation agents, and marketing agents will be required. Multi-stakeholder coalitions may prove the organizational format for planning, service delivery and implementation.

How Much Responsibility Can Communities Actually Assume Given Existing Capacities?

- Communities have significant long-term incentives for forest conservation that external agencies do not have, potentially lowering certain categories of transaction costs over the long-term. However, this potential will remain largely theoretical as long as "perverse incentives" to unsustainable forest management practices remain the rule.
- Realizing community management potential will require capacity building in strategic planning, administration, participatory forest resource monitoring and evaluation, participatory mapping, and negotiation.
- The overall political and macroeconomic situation in the Congo Basin limits communities' abilities to generate the social and economic capital to achieve sustainable management of forest resources. That said, capacity comes with power if communities had legal powers, social and financial capital would flow to them.
- External change agents with forest conservation and participatory development agendas can help expand communities' role in management to create win-win scenarios for conservation and development. CARPE through IRM's work has this objective. WCS's Banyang-Mbo project is premised on the integral role communities play in forest management.

2. Adopt an iterative, adaptive approach to determining how local alliances for forest conservation can be built and strengthened by bringing in other key stakeholders, and by broadening the scale.
3. Accept that forest management is a highly political and contentious process; but that communities have legitimate rights, and may in the long run be the Congo Basin forest's best friends and most effective stewards.
4. Advocate that legal frameworks be put in place to assure that local people benefit from long-term conservation.
5. Act to empower communities to use new forestry laws as a starting point for negotiating greater transparency, democracy and accountability in the management of the forest estate, which they depend on and have rights to.

For More Information

Technical Reports

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CARPE...What Is It?

Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE)

Launched in 1995, the *Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE)* engages African NGOs, research and educational organizations, private-sector consultants, and government agencies in evaluating threats to forest integrity in the Congo Basin and in identifying opportunities to sustainably manage the region's vast forests for the benefit of Africans and the world. CARPE's members are helping to provide African decision makers with the information they will need to make well-informed choices about forest use in the future. BSP has assumed the role of "air traffic controller" for CARPE's African partners. Participating countries include Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and São Tomé e Príncipe.

Web site:

<http://carpe.umd.edu>

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