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#20 — Mobilizing Communities to Conserve Forest Resources Cameroon Case Study

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Key Concepts

- New community forestry legislation in Cameroon is, in theory, creating opportunities for greater community level of management responsibilities and authority.
- Actual community level mobilization is limited, as new legislation has not yet translated into incentives or sounder resource management.
- Decentralization (devolved power and responsibility to local jurisdictions) also remains theoretical but could eventually create conditions and incentives for more effective

community level management.

- Community mobilization may be necessary for sustainable management, yet it may be insufficient to achieve conservation in the absence of policies and operational mechanisms that catalyze and sustain activities.
- Participatory mapping can help communities mobilize to negotiate resource access and management reforms with the private sector.
- Community mobilization will be most effective when communities themselves take the lead; well designed projects can promote mobilization and equitable partnerships.
- Community mobilization is possible, as there is a sufficient nucleus of local management capacity derived from traditional systems and modern practices.
- Methods for successfully mobilizing communities across landscapes and embedded jurisdictions are in early development, requiring action- research to test and evaluate organizational innovations with conservation results.

What Is a Community in the Context of Forest Conservation?

Community is a word that encompasses many different types of social groups, organizations, and/or institutions. These may include locations such as villages or groups of villages, community councils, church groups, youth groups, women's groups, community banks, or kinship groups. Communities can be non-territorial, as the importance of urban-based people in local community decision making in Africa is considerable. For purposes of forest conservation in the Congo Basin, communities must be defined by geographic, spatial, ethnic and economic criteria, with networks linking community members across landscapes, and even continents, increasingly factored into conservation planning.

What Is Mobilization and Why Hasn't It Happened Yet?

Mobilization refers to a process in which people join together to take action oriented to accomplish one or more objectives. Mobilization bears political connotations. In the development lexicon, it is allied with empowerment and participation, both of which refer to processes whose ends are improved social welfare. It might be argued that externally driven community level mobilization in the forest conservation context is required when status quo management arrangements prove insufficient. When local institutions are weak and many barriers to involving communities exist, mobilization will be required. That said, attempting mobilization does not automatically lead to success, as constraints abound.

Centralized, paternalistic and patronage based political systems, inherited from colonial powers characterize current government-citizen relationships throughout Central Africa. When combined with limited access to education, absence of legal and fiscal mechanisms to force public and private sector accountability, and government controlled media and communications, civil society efforts to reform government to be more democratic, transparent and honest are, at best, weak. This is particularly true for rural communities that have also experienced erosion of traditional authority structures, and are both politically and economically marginalized.

Mobilization may nonetheless be able to provoke some degree of devolution of management authority to local administrative jurisdictions and, in particular, communities within jurisdictions. This can lead to more realistic planning and more effective local action. Conversely, mobilization may only be feasible once a degree of devolution has already occurred. The Innovative Resources Management/CARPE experience in local forest resource management systems shows that communities are capable of mobilizing under a minimum set of incentives, though we cannot yet demonstrate that this promotes sustainable conservation action.

Approaches to Community Mobilization

Throughout the Congo Basin, eight million rural households within communities decide how to use the forest in their immediate vicinity. This use is almost always outside of conservation project contexts. Rural peoples value and manage the forest as a source for agriculture, construction materials, wildlife and non-timber forest products. Communities also employ local institutions embedded within Congo Basin sociocultural systems to proactively promote forest management. The impact that communities have, even in lightly populated forest zones, can thus be substantial.

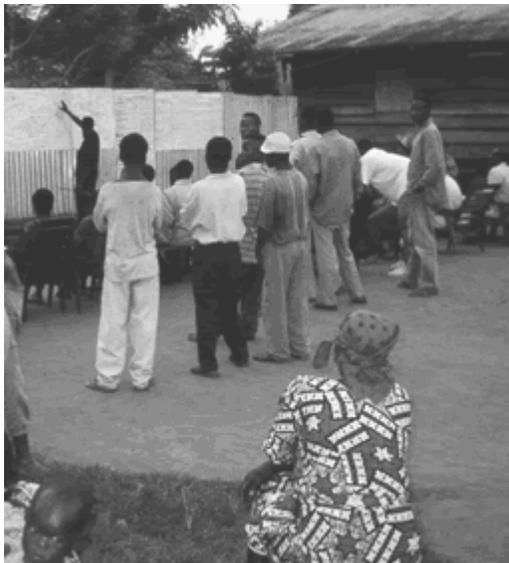
In the past, extended families, clans and tribes managed forest resources by traditional means, often restricting access to certain areas and to specific resources. Production of cash crops, increasing literacy, labor mobility and the superimposition of European laws and governance institutions have altered these traditional management systems, but have not totally destroyed them. The Nguì cult among the Fang of Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, and the Quifor among the Bafut of Northwestern Province in Cameroon, all possess resilient management systems that have persisted in the face of changing government policies. They are an indication of the contribution community-level initiatives can make to forest conservation though not all local systems are as resilient as these are.

"Community mobilization may be necessary for sustainable management, yet it may be insufficient to achieve conservation in the absence of policies and operational mechanisms that catalyze and sustain activities."

Several different project-based approaches are being tested to help rural communities demand and gain greater authority over forest management within their traditional territories. The Mount Cameroon Project in southwestern Cameroon has helped hunters to form user-groups bearing the legal authority to regulate who hunts within their forests, and to enforce hunting regulations

developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment and Forests. These user-groups have successfully excluded outsiders from poaching their wildlife, and have sanctioned members for infringing on the group's hunting regulations.

The Banyang-Mbo Wildlife Sanctuary project, managed by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), is combining participatory rural appraisal techniques, awareness raising eco-plays and children's activities, and systematic biological and socioeconomic surveys to develop forest resource management agreements with rural communities. Banyang-Mbo is unique in Central Africa, as it is the first protected area within which local communities have legal authority to use and manage forest resources. Creation of this new type of protected area was considered a prerequisite for effective community-based natural resource management. In both Mt. Cameroon and Banyang-Mbo, effective collaboration between government and externally financed conservation agencies has been key to facilitate community mobilization.



Methods for successfully mobilizing communities for forest conservation are still in early stages of development, requiring an action-research approach.

Innovative Resources Management (IRM) has developed a decentralized approach for mobilizing communities across landscapes in the Congo Basin under CARPE. It is based on six levels of activities, and builds on lessons learned from rapid and participatory rural appraisal, co-management, community forestry and other participatory methodologies (www.irm.gt.com). One key element of the approach is landscape-level community mapping, based on a methodology developed by the Center for Support of Native Lands. Participatory mapping teams communities with government cadastral experts, enabling production of geo-referenced maps that reflect local resource use and ownership realities, allowing communities to represent resources and resource use as they see them. Not only does the inclusion of government employees in the mapping process help communities and governments reach new understanding of forest management issues, the fact that the finished maps have the government imprimatur is de facto

acknowledgement by government of local resource use realities. All this is key to the negotiation of more effective management agreements.

The participatory mapping process represents an appropriate technology. Its use has, in three different Cameroonian contexts, initiated the first stage of community mobilization in forest conservation. The new understandings generated through participatory mapping will be necessary for achieving any change in formal rights pertaining to communities on a legislative or judicial level. Following mapping in Djoum, for example, the communities went as far as officially writing the Préfecture of Dja and Lobo with a gently worded message of opposition to a particular forest attribution. This type of community-level action has, hitherto, been very uncommon in the Congo Basin.

Once Mobilized, What Can Communities Contribute to Achieving?

It is difficult to generalize what communities can and cannot contribute to achieving in conservation. Potential and capacities vary. There are many different forms of community management. These range from total community control, to temporary, experimental efforts in joint management between government agencies and local people.

Will conservation benefits ever, broadly speaking, be substantial enough to catalyze community mobilization? In the East African context, some reports suggest that a range of support activities is needed to make community-based management work. These include policy reforms, developing enabling legislation, capacity building at local levels, and refined planning processes to support community based decision making. Above all, it is argued, adaptive institutions at the local level are needed. The following table adapted from Chi illustrates the range of factors that provide incentives to communities, and governments in forest management, and are thus central to any mobilization strategy.

Incentives of Government and Community in Managing Forest in Cameroon		
Incentives	Government	Community
Ecological	Forest will be protected and wildlife conserved	Forest land will be fertile for shifting cultivation activities
Socio-cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foreign support will be attracted and forest ownership will be monopolized Modern and formal forest management techniques will be introduced Villagers access to forest will be limited to basic needs only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tangible and intangible resources supply will meet demand for subsistence Spiritual and religious value of forest will be maintained Government will not take over or reclassify forest as

		state property (reserve)
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Income will be generated from exploitation/export of timber and some commoditized minor forest products, e.g., bark of <i>Prunus africana</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Income and employment opportunities will be increased Forest can be used as an economic resource to bargain for social services from logging companies and government
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forest will become state Existing public institutions such as Ministère des Eaux et Forêts (MINEF) and Office National des Eaux et Forêts (ONADEF) will effectively regulate and control use of forest resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forest will serve as natural capital to consolidate ailing power of traditional ruler/leader (Chief or Fon) Common property will be defended or outsiders will be excluded

Source: Co-management of forests in Cameroon: The compatibility of government policies with indigenous practices. 1999 (Chi).

Is Decentralization a Prerequisite for Mobilizing Communities to Conserve Congo Basin Forests?

Decentralization refers to a process by which power is more widely allocated among actors and across societal levels, occurring through a shift in authority and responsibilities from central government to more local levels, or to civil society institutions outside government itself. While conventional wisdom would suggest that decentralization play a role in community mobilization, much still needs to be learned. Current knowledge suggests that:

1. While decentralization is not a sufficient condition for community mobilization, it clearly provides communities with opportunities for action. An example from Djoum illustrates the point. Due in part to the lack of clearly defined and widely recognized land borders, the elites of Djoum have long been able to easily usurp agricultural land from local farmers. Using locally produced participatory maps, communities have clarified property limits, and have been able to largely stop this practice. For these communities, the maps are proving to be valuable tool that can be used to address a wide variety of situations related to land tenure and land use.

2. A study (in press) by the Biodiversity Support Program shows that there is no necessary correlation between decentralization and biodiversity conservation, although it is not clear if this is a failure of decentralization to achieve conservation goals, or because the decentralization effort itself was not implemented effectively. Part of the problem may be that transfer of accountability to lower levels has proven elusive, as has power sharing between the state and civil society.
 3. Many Congo Basin countries have de-concentrated authority to local administrative levels or jurisdictions. That said, actual forest management within jurisdictions often occurs among smaller, sub-village level hamlets. Administrative villages are often arbitrary groupings of many smaller settlements. In other words, formal, de-concentrated authority stops at the start of the road where operational forest management begins.
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When Legislation and Policy Are Unfavorable, Can and Should Communities Be Mobilized?

Conventional wisdom would have it that resources need not be wasted in mobilizing communities in places where local management is constrained through ineffective policies. IRM's CARPE experience shows that even in southern Cameroon, where decentralized community forest management is problematic given the structure of the forest sector nationwide, mobilization can advance local management options. This can benefit forest conservation, provided incentives are sustained.

Communities suffering from the absence of development programming through either states or international agencies, may have pent up demands, and mobilize in the absence of effective decentralization. Mobilization that is blocked politically may take place through traditional religious, ethnic or kinship institutions. In brief, mobilization, if strategically undertaken, can instigate demands for changes in policies and legislation. If well linked to programming, this can benefit forest conservation.



Participatory mapping appears to be an appropriate technology for communities to mobilize themselves and negotiate resources access and management reforms.

What Can You Do About It?

One lesson from the past twenty years of conservation is clear: without local community buy-in, sustainability in conservation is dubious. Barring military-style management of forests in Central African nation states, communities will have to play a more active role in conservation. Next steps must focus on further action-research to determine the range of roles and responsibilities that communities can assume in Congo Basin conservation given evolving political, economic and cultural realities, along with methods to promote effective coordinated action.

A focus on multi-stakeholder coalition building for forest conservation must increasingly become an objective. Resource poor, isolated communities with few incentives will never be able to play a major role. When common points of interest emerge, the situation changes. Mobilizing communities to act jointly with other stakeholders where interests converge, through negotiated processes (versus top-down agendas), must increasingly become the norm for conservation to be achieved. In this context, external agents within CARPE and partner organizations have a crucial role to play.

Donors and governments should continue to facilitate action-research to help determine the range of forest resource management roles and responsibilities that communities can assume under greater collaborative formats. The premise must be that if communities gain a more equitable

share of forest benefits, this will relieve pressure on government to regulate resource use across the whole forest estate. This in turn will lead to more effective conservation again when roles are complementary and well defined. Helping rural households build and participate in civil society groups and coalitions concerned with leveraging more transparent, representative and accountable systems for allocating and regulating forest resource use is therefore a necessary first step to more sustainable management of the forest estate in Central Africa.



Methods for successfully mobilizing communities for forest conservation are still in early stages of development, requiring an action-research approach.

For More Information

Technical Reports

Hitchcock, R. K. 2001. *Decentralization, development, and natural resource management in the Northwestern Kalahari Desert, Botswana*. Publication 65. Washington, D.C.: Biodiversity Support Program.

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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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