

## The Bengbis community forest: a true community forest and entirely a village initiative

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### SUMMARY

In July 1997 the Cameroon Government allotted a community forest in Cameroon for the very first time. The beneficiaries are a legalized village association known as the Community of Families of Ando'o-Yetsang (Communauté des familles Ando'o-Yetsang [COFAYET]). The peculiar features of this forest are that so far it is the country's only community forest (it covers an area of 5 000 ha), and that it is an entirely local initiative. Only three community forests have been allotted in Cameroon, and all the envisaged community forest projects are carried out through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or as research projects. COFAYET is the brainchild of a son of the soil who succeeded, against all odds, in bringing together five chiefdoms in a part of the country that is generally known as being acephalous. The establishment costs of at least 7 million CFA francs (CFAF), a heavy financial burden for the communities to bear, were covered by a scheme that provoked lengthy discussions within the local scientific community.

The follow-up to this forest project has also shown the ambiguous role played by the village élite in village development processes. The forest, which comprises more than 6 700 lumbering-ready trees, is today the focus of attention of the community's 4 500 inhabitants. Our study, which spanned three months and which is still being carried out, is aimed at examining the setting-up strategies, the economic and political implications, the establishment-related conflicts, and the functioning of the community forest.



## An overview of community forests in Cameroon

The establishment of community forests in Cameroon is a complex issue. Since the Forest Law was published in 1994 and its decree of implementation was published in 1995, only two community forests have been allotted officially.<sup>1</sup> Those responsible for establishing these forests can be divided into two groups: external stakeholders (NGOs and development and research programmes), and local stakeholders (local community élite and village development associations). This multiplicity of stakeholders is out of proportion to the number of community forests already in existence. The reasons for this disparity are many, and they vary from one case to another. In addition to presenting the Bengbis community forest, we shall also give an overview of the general state of the community forest regime in Cameroon, examining initiatives creating existing and envisaged forests, as well as cases in which envisaged community forests ended in failure. Difficulties encountered by the various stakeholders will also be considered in an attempt to explain why development of the community forest concept in Cameroon is slow.

The present study focuses on three themes.

- The first theme is the legislation relating to the decentralization of communal forest management in favour of village communities.<sup>2</sup>
- The second theme is the apparent reluctance of the government to promote community forests.<sup>3</sup> (And this is something that raises a question. In fact, according to Cameroon's forest map, the distribution of surface areas by allotment in the area reserved for this type of distribution can be effected only in regard to 1.96 percent of the national land, that is, 275 213 ha, an area in which privately-owned farms and tree-felling activities abound. This surface area permits the creation of only 55 community forests nationwide. Further, 64.12 percent of the forest is within the fixed

national forest, which consequently brings it under the exclusive management of the State.) The Community Forest Development Unit (CFDU) of the Ministry of the Environment and Forestry (MINEF) reports that it has received 54 applications to manage a community forest).<sup>4</sup>

- The third theme focuses on the fact that a village community is beset by numerous internal conflicts connected with the management of, and access to, a collective resource. The conflicts faced by the community serve to justify the reticence on the part of the administration. The types of internal conflicts make it clear that they are favoured by the local élite, who are aware of the project's political and economic impact. The desire to gain popularity within the local communities is common among politicians, especially since the ruling party instituted primary elections within party sections. This system presupposes that anyone who wants to win votes should always be a major benefactor of the community. Besides these political stakes, the eagerness to manage several million CFAF must also be taken into consideration.

Our study focuses on the establishment of this forest, and the typology and dynamics of existing conflicts. The conclusion contains proposals for the resolution and prevention of conflicts connected with the redistribution of the resources resulting from the exploitation of forest products of the community forest.

In July 1997 the Cameroon Government allotted the first community forest in Cameroon. This new concept in the country's legislation is also the first that formally provides for the participation of the owners of forest-adjacent property in the exploitation of forest resources. The 1992 Rio Conference's recommendations on the environment also contributed to this development. The provisions of Law No. 94/01 of 20 January 1999 constitute a milestone in sustained and participatory management.

As a result of this legislation, under certain conditions people can henceforth manage a parcel of the national forest that is not exclusively owned by the State. Initially,

1. The Ando'o-Yetsang community forest and the Bimboué community forest near Abong-Mbang.

2. Law No. 94/01 of 20 January 1994 relating to the forest, wildlife and fishery regime.

3. Observers believe that the 1992 Rio Conference contributed greatly towards the institution of community forests in Cameroon.

4. This figure was recorded in September 1998.

the debate on the community forest concept centred on the definition of the term 'community', since it was not defined by the relevant law. It was not clear what the law meant by such terms as 'pertinent sociological unit', 'village', 'clan' or 'ethnic group'. Not having found a general meaning for this term, analysts progressively admitted that it would be dangerous to give a narrow definition of it, in the context of land appropriation based on ethnic custom. The only determining criteria under the law are the applicant's proximity to the forest and evidence that the person habitually carries out activities in that forest.

These two essential requirements are, of course, based on two preconditions. The first is the formation of an entity endowed with legal personality. The second is the provision that no one should already be carrying out activities on the surface area applied for, under any title of occupancy whatsoever. The formation of such legal entities poses a real problem today as regards community forest development in Cameroon.

Although not exhaustive, Table 1 gives an indication of the existing situation.

**TABLE 1 • Community forest development in Cameroon**

	QUANTITY	LOCATION	INITIATIVES	PROBLEMS
<b>Existing community forests</b>	2	Bimboué, Bengbis (Minla'a)	Local	Start of activities Redistribution of forest resources
<b>Envisaged community forests</b>	3	Lomié Dimpam, Kribi	Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV)/Soutien au développement durable de Lomié (SDDL) PFC (Fusagx) PJDFC (Canada)	Formation of village management committees
<b>Envisaged community forest that did not materialize</b>	1	Akonolinga	World Wide Fund for Nature SOLIDAM	Formation of village pilot committee
<b>Applications for community forests received at MINEF (CFDU)</b>	54 applications in September 1998	Centre, south and east provinces	Local	Status of applicants, legitimacy of project among the people concerned

## Strategies for instituting community forest projects

The different stakeholders (local and external) adopted various approaches to the institution of community forest projects in Cameroon. The projects and NGOs adopted a more scientific approach. This approach consisted in holding meetings to sensitize the village population concerned. This was followed by feasibility studies. It was only after this, and with the consent of the authorities, that efforts to set up pilot communities were initiated. The local population used a more informal method that took into account the sociological and political realities of the locality.

### Strategies used by the locally-initiated projects

In the two existing community forests (Ando'o-Yetsang and Bimboué) both the initiative and the entire establishment process were undertaken by the local population. In this context, the term 'population' refers to the natives of villages in which the forests are situated. Though studies were carried out only on the Bengbis forest, the case of the Bimboué community forest is very similar to that of Bengbis (MINEF, 1998).

### Formation of a legal entity prior to presenting the actual objectives to the population

The initiator of the Bengbis community forest project started by bringing together volunteers to discuss the global development of the village. The choice of the volunteers was very selective. The initial group was composed of people who had a certain following in various levels of the population. They included a retired teacher, an official of the major political party in the area, the chief of a village whose inhabitants are referred to as 'rebels', and the son of the president of the farmers' union, with the initiator himself as the technocrat. Although this approach was not quite democratic, it nevertheless enabled the initiator to avoid wasting time in finding 'the most worthy representative of each village'. It is important to specify here that the association that was formed comprised five villages. The Bengbis area is located in

the heart of southern Cameroon, an area where the villages are known as acephalous, because the power structure there is weak and is not at all concentrated in the hands of the chief (Daou and Tchikangwa, 1994). Villages in this area are not pertinent development units as it is very difficult to bring them together for community activity. The association is the first of its kind in the area. COFAYET provides a good community-type model that can fill the vacuum deliberately left by the legislator regarding the definition of the term 'community'. The term 'functional community' appears to be quite appropriate to this structure.

A functional community can be defined as a circumstantial grouping of people formed for the purpose of solving a particular problem. Such a grouping is basically strategic, and lasts as long as the problem to be solved persists. There can be as many functional communities as the number of problems to solve. For example, people may form a group to share an elephant that has been found dead. Antagonistic neighbours may join together to drive away monkeys that have invaded their corn fields. In the same way, citizens of a country who set aside their political squabbles to jointly defend their country from a military attack by a neighbouring country form a functional community. The same person or group of people may be a member of several functional communities. The criteria used for defining a functional community are not standardized. They vary with the problem at hand. It is difficult, therefore, to apply the same criteria to every situation. Nevertheless, it would appear that a criterion based on relationship by blood does not always determine membership in the functional community. What matters is how much a person is affected by the problem;



that is, whether the person is, or will be, a victim, or whether the consequences will or will not affect them. This definition, which is inspired by the writings of sociologists on the subject, seems to have influenced the composition of COFAYET, which instituted a management body in which each village is represented by a member of its community.

The Ando'o-Yetsang community is quite heterogeneous and is made up of people who do not share a common lineage. The case of Minla'a illustrates this situation most clearly. Bulu by origin, the villagers mixed with immigrants of the Maka ethnic group, who, according to information given by the villagers, had been enslaved by their ancestors a long time ago. The integration of these immigrants is such that at present they can no longer intermarry with their hosts, who have become their brothers. The Yeze, who came from Akonolinga, are another group of immigrants who also settled in the Minla'a chiefdom long ago and have always been associated with the social evolution of that chiefdom. But, unlike the Maka people, they have maintained the possibility of intermarrying with their hosts.<sup>5</sup> These two immigrant groups are members of COFAYET. On the contrary, the neighbouring chiefdoms, which are made up of native Bulus (Eboleboun, Ngobissong and Meba), cannot be associated with this group simply because "they do not live on the side of the forest that has been chosen for community forest development."<sup>6</sup> The exclusion of groups that do not occupy and own neighbouring land but are of the Yetsang clan gives us the impression that COFAYET is a community structure based on communal residence, proximity to the forest and activities carried out in the forest. This is, therefore, a scheme that is characteristic of the functional community, which is formed, on the one hand, to meet the legal requirement of involving all the users of the forest in the entity responsible for representing them and, on the other hand, to circumvent the problem of tiny territorial surface areas in respect of which the parcels of land occupied and owned by each chiefdom were not profitable enough and so did not have the resources to achieve the development objectives of each of the five chiefdoms.

5. They settled only recently.

6. Information gathered during a field trip by officials of COFAYET.

As a means of financing the cost of the entire operation, the manager concluded a tree-felling contract with the forest logger who made the highest offer and who undertook, under the contract, to provide all the financial assistance necessary to carry out the operation. Moreover, studies on the exploitation that the logger himself had carried out had assured him of the profitability of the operation. The participation of this logger permitted the officials of the structure to cover operation costs. However, this participation has caused the population to turn their attention away from the other aspects of the community forest. It is worthy of note that the law in force in Cameroon does not provide a definition of the term 'community forest', but only makes allusion to it.

### **Conflict resolution upon the grant of approval**

Things moved very fast. Only six months elapsed from the time the forest operator met the population up to the time when the application for the management agreement was filed and granted by the authorities. How was that possible? Nothing is known about it officially, but the truth is that it was possible. The project promoter knows how it happened. However, many conflicts sprang up after the approval was granted by the authorities. All the conflicts were resolved progressively through regular meetings of the disputes council, which brought together various participants.

## **Types and dynamics of conflicts**

### **Types of conflicts**

The creation of COFAYET gave rise to two types of conflicts: political conflicts and conflicts of hierarchy. Some, which already existed in latent form, sprang up simply as a result of the economic stakes brought about by forest exploitation. Such conflicts include land-related disputes and interclan rivalry. We shall examine these conflicts according to their dynamics, that is, by tracing their origin from the time the approval for the community forest project was granted.

### ***Interclan rivalry***

Two clans are involved in the COFAYET project: the Yetsang clan and the Yewok clan. The Yetsangs are in the majority, and can be found around the entire community forest, in Ongolezok, Messe II, Minla'a and Ndoundou.

The Yewoks, their neighbours, live in Ando'o village. According to the chiefs of Minla'a, Ndoundou and Ando'o, the two clans coexist peacefully but manage their property independently. However, the Yetsangs consider themselves superior to the Yewoks.

The Yetsang people were very angry when the promoter of the community forest, who had set up a management committee that was called a 'provisional' committee, appointed a Yewok to head it.

The entire composition of the committee was contested, but the Yetsangs especially did not want the structure to be headed by a Yewok, as was the case. They also threatened not to participate in the project and not to allow their forest to be exploited. This conflict introduces another one that would inevitably arise.

### ***Allocation of the resources from exploitation***

The current interclan rivalry over representation of the various chiefdoms within the management bodies will continue when the time comes to choose in which chiefdoms the various projects should be carried out.

### ***Political rivalry***

The economic stakes connected with the forest and the race for electoral leadership have weighed heavily on the process to set up the Bengbis community forest project. Protagonists of the project (administrative and council authorities, and village élite) demanded, on the one hand, that all initiatives must receive their consent, and, on the other hand, that they should be more involved in the various stages in carrying out the project. The promoter and manager of the entire Ando'o-Yetsang Community Forest Project, who is also the assistant

mayor of the Bengbis rural council, is accused by the other politicians of using the success of the project to boost his popularity. They argue that all the funds used to set up the project came from the pre-funding granted by forest loggers and that, as a result, he has no right to take advantage of any achievements. The declared cost of carrying out the entire project totals more than 8 million CFAF. The administrative authorities have reproached the promoter of the project for having carried out the whole procedure in the dark, and especially for having had the senior divisional officer sign the minutes of a consultative meeting (one of the essential elements of an application file for a management convention) after the subdivisional officer had refused to sign them on the grounds that he did not take part in the meeting. The promoter, for his part, thinks that his "enemies are jealous" of the important status he would have in the eyes of the people if the project should succeed, that is, if it should respect all the commitments enumerated in the nine integrated development projects to be financed with resources from forest exploitation.

### ***Land-related conflicts***

When the first bureau of the managing committee was set up, the Messe II village was not represented in the structure. However, a considerable part of their forest was included in the project area. The chief and people of this small village (about 15 families) protested by issuing a warning to anyone who came to examine their area for any reason related to the community forest project. Their threats were taken into consideration, and the chief of the village has, henceforth, been the vice-president of the COFAYET Executive Committee.

### ***Conflicts of hierarchy and interests***

Conflicts involving hierarchy and interests pit the traditional chiefs against the members of the Executive Committee. The former think that initiatives should not be brought and explained to them at the same time as they are brought to the rest of the villagers. They want to be informed of the various stages of the negotiations. The members of the Executive Committee (especially the manager) justify their attitude by emphasizing the fact that the expertise necessary for the conception of funding and development initiatives is found outside the village, and that the technical issues involved in those





problems cannot be discussed in an assembly of the 'uninitiated'. Instead, they propose to make regular reports to the chiefs on the latest developments. The chiefs refute these claims, arguing that if this is the principle, then it differs from reality. The fact that important negotiations relating to the project take place in the city seems to impinge on their sovereignty. They wonder whether the "youth who are managing the forest exploitation" are not thereby usurping their positions during their own lifetimes. The chiefs demand that all potential stakeholders be presented to the village before any convention is signed.<sup>7</sup> They suspect the promoter of having "sold" the project with the complicity of a group of friends. The difference in the approaches pointed out here is not intended to indicate that one is more important than the other. It shows, however, that the local approach has an advantage: it reduces the scope of conflict. Whereas the external participants start facing difficulties from the moment feasibility studies end, the local population starts experiencing difficulties only after obtaining the approval of the authorities. The reason for this delayed reaction is that the local population benefits from an initial indifference to challenge. Its projects are taken seriously only after authorizations are obtained; this is not the case for projects and NGOs that, very often, co-opt expatriates into their staff. In rural areas, the presence of a 'white man' is still very strongly linked to the availability of substantial funds.

As a result, the struggle for positioning begins much earlier. The stranglehold of the élite on the area is not without relation to the difficulties faced by external stakeholders. The credibility of the élite is threatened by any development initiatives that tend to overshadow their status and hence do not enhance their image as benefactors of the community.

While this report is being written, the Bengbis community forest project is in a state of stagnation. Forest exploitation has not yet begun. It is feared that it may be carried out only to repay the forest logger, given that carrying out integrated development projects is not a priority for the people. There is, thus, a great need for sensitization and support.

## Conclusions

From the foregoing, it can be seen that community forests constitute the difficult initiation of a policy to decentralize forest management in favour of local populations (which generally are disorganized) without transferring ownership of both the forest and the land to the beneficiaries.

But the initial steps contrast strangely both with the forestry policy defined by the State and with the expectations of the local population, who prefer community forests. The caution shown by the State in promoting community forests, together with the methods of managing them, is justified by the economic stakes (timber) involved and its monopoly over land ownership (refusal to give up sole ownership of land and forest) or by a concern to carry out progressively the reforms necessitated by decentralization. In any case, the wide gap between the number of community forests applied for (73) and the number of forests allotted (two) raises questions about the reasons for such disparity.

The State appears to be concerned with maintaining sole ownership of land on grounds of national unity. This supralegal right of ownership seems to guarantee the protection of the principle of free movement of citizens across the national territory within a system of traditional ethnic ownership of land, or simply to restrict the opportunity that community forests offer people to invest on national lands that, under the law, should be a permanent preserve of the State. This is probably the case, given that today timber has become Cameroon's second most important export after hydrocarbons (oil).

In the case that we are examining, the people proved their ability to rally around a common ideal by agreeing to the formation of an association of five chiefdoms. The time has come to ponder what happens next. Because of the cost of the operation, which is completely beyond their means, they have to resort to external funding. This is justified by the current difficult financial context; further, the fact of associating funding with exploitation by a logger does not necessarily mean faster deforestation. It is, rather, a way to meet the very high investment cost.

7. Remarks made by the chiefs of the villages concerned during a meeting on 14 February 1998 at Bengbis. Village chiefs, external 'élites', forest loggers and administrative and council authorities attended the meeting.

Besides, development objectives with respect to the institution of community forests will hardly be achieved unless a real framework for the rational management of timber earnings is set up.

Numerous conflicts may arise and seriously hamper the entire process. Furthermore, the five-year duration of the management convention appears to be too short for assessing the results of nine integrated development projects. At the time this report is being written, exploitation proper has not started, but two-thirds of the convention's duration has already elapsed. The remaining investments depend on the earnings from timber. This experience also shows the very decisive role to be played by the élite who were previously banned, sometimes with valid reasons, from becoming partners in setting up development projects. Yet it is obvious that these people are more familiar than anyone else with the power balance in the rural communities and are also in a better position to find the ways of setting up projects.

More than ever before, it is necessary to lay down follow-up and assessment structures responsible for settling conflicts related to the distribution of resources within the community. It is especially necessary to ensure allegiance to all conventions under the supervision of an auxiliary officer of the law, in close collaboration with people of good will who are natives of the villages. Preferably, these people should include politicians whose status can be exploited, even though their good faith is in doubt. Are projects set up for philanthropic reasons? I think the answer is "no". The élite are like us; they want to gain an advantage from development activities. The current political context produces partners who, for once, are obliged to produce good results for the community. Their political survival depends on this. The debate on the setting-up of community forest management in Cameroon is only beginning.

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