Community forestry as a green economy pathway: two decades of learning in Cameroon

Summary
Community Forestry (CF) was introduced in Cameroon through an extensive forestry reform process in the early 1990s. The objectives at the time were three-fold: to grant communities rights to surrounding forests, enable them improve their livelihoods, and to promote sustainable forest management. In this brief, we review the CF initiative progress through a detailed analysis of about 100 publications and explore ways in which community forestry can serve as an engine for a viable sustainable green economy pathway in Cameroon. Twenty years on, about 450 CFs exist in the country, 285 of which have final management agreements. This suggests relatively good success in the first objective of granting community rights to forests. Results on the livelihood and sustainable forest management objectives have been mixed.

Key Messages
- Tremendous progress has been made in terms of policy processes and frameworks allowing about 1.8M ha of forests to come under community forestry;
- A few good cases of community social and livelihood benefits have been recorded, while evidence of real economic and environmental benefits has been scarce. Meanwhile overall governance within CFs remain poor;
- Very little innovation has been recorded in the area of community forest management practice, especially in terms of enterprise development, with most of the timber operations being sub-contracted;
- Benefit generation, partnerships, monitoring progress, policy and technical support emerge among the top 5 factors that determine success or failure of community forestry at community level with strong interdependence between the factors.

Policy Recommendations
- Defining and allowing simplified, yet compatible corporate institutional frameworks for CF could potentially reduce transaction costs, enable establishment of enterprises and guarantee active participation of community members;
- Engaging Ministry of Small and Medium-size Enterprises, Social Economy and Handicrafts (MINPMESSA) and Ministry of Finance (MINFI) on the terms for enabling a social enterprise status for CFs with favourable tax regimes, targeted institutional capacity, technical enterprise and governance support could be helpful in eliciting social, economic and environmental benefits;
- Consider increasing the size of community forests beyond 5000 ha and/or find other creative management approaches, given that current community forests are secondary and therefore poor in resources;
- Enable co-investments from climate and ecosystem services initiatives such as REDD+, Green Climate Fund (GCF) and eco-certification with multiple sustainable benefits;
- Instituting incentives that will target a number of salient governance challenges including: catalyzing progress beyond provisional management agreement; encouraging gender equity and participation, timely processing and issuance of annual exploitation permits and others.

INTRODUCTION

According to the 1994 Cameroonian Forest Law, community forests refers to “…part of non-permanent forest estate (not more than 5000ha) that is the object of an agreement between government and a community in which communities undertake sustainable forest management for a period of 25 years renewable” (MINEF 1998). In order for a community forest to be granted communities have to fulfill the following obligations:

- Constitute a legal entity (a Common Initiative Group (CIG), an Economic Interest Group, an Association or a Cooperative) and appoint a community forest manager who shall represent them in negotiations with government in matters of community forestry;
- Delineate and map the intended community forest area prior to approval;
- Present a management plan as part of the conditions for approval. The simple management plan has to be reviewed every 5 years;
- A manual of procedures details out rules and procedures for community forestry from creation through to management, including conditions for annual exploitation in the case of timber.

Since the inception of community forestry a number of major reviews have been done: one in 2003 by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MINEF, 2003); another by Tropenbos International in 2006 (Cuny et al., 2006), and recently by the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife (MINFOF) in 2012 (CARFAD, 2012). This brief takes a systems perspective and lays emphasis on the role of community forestry in a viable green economy, one in which community forest enterprise is the primary vehicle for taking rural poor people out of poverty while enhancing ecosystem service benefits from community forests. It carries out a review of more than 100 publications both peer reviewed (55%) and grey literature in the form of reports, monographs etc (45%). Methods such as content analysis, systematic reviews and historical timelines are employed in the analysis.

HOW FAR HAVE WE COME?

Tremendous progress has been made on policy processes and frameworks allowing about 1.8M ha of forests to come under community forestry.

Significant progress has been recorded in the legal and institutional landscape for community forestry in Cameroon since the early 1990s. Table 1 summarises key milestones in the regulatory and policy reform processes in the last 20 years. Figure 1 below shows a timeline of key events.

Very little innovation has been recorded in the area of community forest management practice, especially in terms of enterprise development.

Key areas of inertia in community forestry include community forest enterprise practice and collaboration between multiple CFs. Evidence suggests that the majority of community forests have been without activity. A good number of CFs have been involved in sub-contracting logging to partners on terms that have been deemed largely disadvantageous (De Blas, 2009). No evidence has been seen of non-timber forest products (NTFP) exploitation at scale or with reasonable value addition within CFs.

Figure 1: Timeline of key events in the legal and institutional landscape for community forestry in Cameroon since the early 1990s
A unique case of ecosystem services enterprise development was seen through a Centre for Environment and Development (CED) led project recently, but there has been no marketing, nor certification of any services (i.e. REDD+ Credits) as intended.

There were encouraging signs of collaboration between more than one community forest especially in the East Region with the creation of community forestry cooperatives, e.g. Cooperative Agroforêtier de la Trinational (CAFT), but we have seen little documented evidence of actual collaboration. The community forestry network contributed tremendously to legal and institutional reforms, but has little to show in terms of joint actions.

Several factors have been cited for the inertia in enterprise development namely:

- Limited size of CFs, with 5000 ha proving to be too small for viable enterprises on a number of products;
- Institutional formats that are ill-adapted for enterprise, given lack of clarity on tax and other issues under Common Initiative Groups and Association formats within which more than 90% of all CFs currently operate;
- Lack of finance (especially start-up capital)
- Lack of knowledge and business development and management skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Progress Domain</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Enhancement</td>
<td>Manual of the Procedures and Norms for the management of community forestry (MINEF, 1998)</td>
<td>Perhaps the most influential piece of legislation on community forestry, given that its promulgation saw a quick spike in the number of community forests in the country</td>
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<td>Community Forestry Management Unit created in 1997</td>
<td>The creation of this unit confirmed the commitment from the government that the community forestry agenda is taken seriously</td>
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<td>Creation of Sub-Directorate of community forestry in the Ministry in Charge of Forestry</td>
<td>This sub-directorate has played a significant role in anchoring the community forest agenda into the bigger forestry strategy of Cameroon. The sub-directorate also played a crucial role in facilitating the process of institutionalisation of community forestry</td>
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<td>Enhancement of Rights</td>
<td>Introduction of pre-emption rights for communities in which communities were prioritized in the attribution of potential community forest areas in the face of competition from sales-of-standing volumes and other classic forest licensing options in the same non-permanent forest areas</td>
<td>In effect the introduction of this right was a giant leap in giving communities the confidence and opportunities in the face of competition from commercial logging companies</td>
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<td>Introduction of the provisional management plan alternative for communities further allowed communities without the necessary resources to proceed with exploitation of forests within a period of 2 years, for the purposes of raising the necessary funds to develop a simple management plan required for the final management agreement</td>
<td>While this was seen as remarkable progress, it led to a slowdown in the drive towards full management agreements. Less than 10% of CFs created after the pre-emption rights have moved beyond the provisional management agreement compared to almost 100% compliance prior to its introduction (See Graph 1)</td>
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<td>Enhancement of Sustainable Forest Management</td>
<td>The ban on industrial logging and modalities and conditions for artisanal logging in community forests by ministerial circular in February 2001 and the Ministerial Decision No. 1985/D/MINEF/SG/FC respectively</td>
<td>These measures have been contested as illegal on grounds that a simple ministerial letter cannot overwrite a law passed in parliament</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Introduction of Environmental Impact Notice (EIN) in lieu of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as an exploitation requirement for community forestry was a cost saving measure for CFs. Reducing costs from a maximum of about 16 Million CFA to a maximum of 2,500,000 CFA (more than six times)</td>
<td>The EIN is the main tool to ensure activities proposed in the CFs do not result in negative environmental outcomes. Its introduction therefore is welcome if properly implemented.</td>
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Table 1: Summary of key progress domains/areas in community forestry in the last two decades
A few good cases of community social and livelihoods benefits have been recorded, while evidence of real economic and environmental benefits has been scarce. Meanwhile overall governance within CFs remain poor.

We scrutinized 36 community forest cases for positive and negative outcomes on a number of good governance principles. Positive outcomes were recorded for livelihood and social benefits, participation and sustainable management, with livelihoods and social benefits recording the highest number of positive outcomes. Box 1, presents an example of how communities are benefiting from CF. There is also evidence that CF management has contributed to forest cover increase e.g in the Kilum-Ijim Mountain area in the NW region- from 10500ha in 1983 to 20000ha in 2015 (Sunjo, 2015). This is one of the few documented positive environmental outcomes of CF in Cameroon.

More negative outcomes were recorded indicating that governance remains a huge challenge. Accountability and equity emerge as the least respected good governance principles. Elite capture and power tussles between CF managers and traditional authorities were among key poor governance drivers.

The areas with positive outcomes need to be encouraged, while challenges need to be tackled urgently.

Benefit generation, partnerships, monitoring progress, policy support and technical support emerge among the top 5 factors that determine success or failure of CF at community level with strong interdependence between them and the remaining factors.

Content analysis was applied to 41 papers focusing on community forestry in Cameroon with the specific aim of identifying reference to factors responsible for success and/or failure.

Benefit generation, partnership, monitoring, policy support and technical support came up as the top five variables, followed by financial support, practices, institutional factors and governance (see figure 2). It is important to note that strong associations and dependencies were observed between these factors.

These results have some implications for how we catalyse CF development going forward. Resources to support community forestry could be focused on the most important variables in order to obtain the best results. However, due to interdependencies observed among the variables, a holistic approach especially at policy level is necessary.

Box 1: The Ngoume Example

The Ngoume community in Ngambe-Tikar Sub-Division in the Mbam and Kim Division, Centre Region, hosts two community forests: ADNG (The Association pour le Developpement de Ngoume) community forest created in 2009 with 4690 ha and the AFCOMN (GIC Agroforestiere de la communaute mgbasseng de Ngoume) community forest created in 2012 with an area of 2219 ha. The village has a clear division of social and development responsibilities for each community forest. ADNG is responsible for education and health, while AFCOMN is responsible for urbanizing the village- i.e. development of roads, improved quality of housing and house facilities etc.

Through Timber exploitation with Partner EFMK (Exploitation Forestiére Miguel Khoury), the community has achieved 6 social and development projects:

1. The installation of four functional boreholes in the community since 2013 largely reducing burden of fetching water for women and children;
2. Completed a kindergarten building that will potentially look after children in the village and allow women attend to other duties. It is hoped that proceeds from CF enterprise activities through the Dryad project will help get the facility running;
3. Constructed a football field for the community;
4. Provided some medical assistance in form of medication and care (worth FCFA 700000 (USD 1400) in 2016/17) through the services of a paid nurse at the local health centre;
5. Recruited and paid the salary of 03 parent-teachers association (PTA) teachers for the local primary school;
6. Provided roofing sheets to members of the community who attempt to improve or build new houses.

One of four functional boreholes in Ngoume community

A complete kindergarten building in Ngoume community
A number of policy reforms might help catalyse innovations in CF enterprise and potentially generate envisaged economic, livelihood and environmental benefits such as jobs, revenues etc. These include:

**Defining and allowing simplified, yet compatible corporate institutional frameworks for CF could potentially reduce transaction costs and enable formation of enterprises.**

Associations and Common Initiative Groups under which most CFs operate have been alleged to be non-compliant with taxation requirements of the Ministry of Finance (MINFI) and therefore not very suitable for business. On the other hand current cooperatives and economic interest group procedures might be complex for community forests.

Simplified cooperatives have been suggested in the past as potentially viable option amongst many. This and others need to be considered seriously.

**Engaging MINPMESSA and MINFi on the terms for enabling a social enterprise status for CFs with favourable tax regimes, and targeted institutional capacity, technical enterprise and governance support could be helpful in eliciting social, economic and environmental benefits.**

Even if current institutional deficits are sorted, a dialogue between MINFOF, MINPMESSA, MINFI and other relevant ministries is needed to clarify taxation issues on CFs with the aim of defining a favourable tax regime for CF.

Given the poor rural nature of the communities and vis-à-vis multiple social, economic and environmental objective envisaged, considering a social enterprise status for CFs is worth considering. This will allow for wider MINPMESSA actions and other social investments in the form of capacity building, training, institutional support as well as grants that can potentially stimulate enterprise development.

**Consider increasing the size of community forests beyond 5000 ha and/or allow species-based exploitation beyond compartments.**

In order to render community forestry more productive, it might be useful for policy to consider increasing the maximum area of CF beyond 5000ha.

A 5000ha CF exploited over 25 years for timber in compartments implies about 200ha per year, which would be grossly insufficient in most cases to meet minimum financial viability. This is further complicated by the fact that many CFs are found in secondary or previously logged forests and therefore degraded and resource poor.

Another option could be for policy to allow exploitation by species across entire CF areas (instead of multiple species in small compartments as currently practiced). This might allow species rich forests a better chance of meeting scale requirements for financial viability.

This option might also be suitable for community forests that have no possibility to expand the area of the CF under any future increased maximum area of CF, though this might come with increased risks of “illegal logging”.

**Enable co-investments from climate and ecosystem services initiatives such as REDD+, GCF and eco-certification with multiple sustainable benefits.**

In an era of scarce financing, enabling CFs access to diverse funding would be helpful. REDD+, BioCarbon Funds, Green Climate Fund (GCF) as well as premium prices for CF commodities through certification could provide much needed finance.

Accessing any of these funds would require ramping up the monitoring and reporting capacity of CFs. In case of certification, the demands for better quality products will increase significantly also needing overall capacity enhancement to enable delivery of required quality.

Finally, with more than 450 CFs and millions of potential beneficiaries in rural communities, a soft financing programme in partnership with banks might be worth considering.

ICRAF and TMP Systems are trying out a performance-based financing approach through the DFID funded Dryad project (Financing sustainable community forest enterprises in Cameroon) currently reaching more than 10 Community forests in the country with a target of 25/30 projected over the five-year life span of the project. Results from the project will help provide required evidence for decision-making in the CF finance sphere.

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**Figure 2: Factors responsible for success and/or failure of community forestry in Cameroon**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benefit generation</td>
<td>15.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>19.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership</td>
<td>13.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>5.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>5.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>9.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy support</td>
<td>8.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical support</td>
<td>7.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial support</td>
<td>7.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>6.79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Instituting incentives that will target a number of salient governance challenges including: catalysing progress beyond provisional management agreement, encouraging gender equity and participation, timely processing and issuance of annual exploitation permits and others.

The introduction of pre-emption rights rules, allowing issuance of provisional management agreements have enabled communities hold on to forest areas and generate resources for completion of dossier required for final management agreement. However, more than 90% of CFs post pre-emption rights have not moved beyond provisional management agreement stage.

This stalemate needs to be addressed if any of these community forests would be sustainably managed for the benefit of communities. Options could include (i) considering a special project that would help these community forests move forward; (ii) simplifying CF management plan requirements so more community forests can access it; and (iii) to consider increasing the length of exploitation under provisional management agreement. All options should be duly considered and supported by evidence in order to make sure that they bring on the desired impact.

Conditional finance, institutional support, and capacity building type incentives could be deployed to encourage communities address accountability, equity, gender and other challenges. Meanwhile some specific disincentives alongside “sermon” type incentives- e.g. education and awareness raising to minimize elite capture should be developed.

References


MINOF (Ministry of Forests and Fauna) and CARFAD (Centre Afican de Recherches Forestières Appliquées et de Développement) 2006 Bilan des acquis de la foresterie communautaire au Cameroun et definition de nouvelles orientations. Yaounde Cameroun


About ASB

The ASB Partnership for the Tropical Forest Margins is working to raise productivity and income of rural households in the humid tropics without increasing deforestation or undermining essential environmental services.

ASB is a consortium of over 90 international and national-level partners with an ecoregional focus on the forest-agriculture margins in the humid tropics. The partners have established 12 benchmark sites in the tropical forest biome of Brazil, Cameroon, Indonesia, Peru, Philippines and Vietnam.

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About DRYAD

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