



## 4.3 Chainsaw milling in community forests in Cameroon

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Community forests in Cameroon are intended to involve local people in forest management and provide them with benefits (Brown and Schreckenberg 2001; Burnham 2000). Studies have documented, however, that these forest managers have often encountered problems and conflict (Djeumo 2001; Nguiffo 1998).

### The regulatory framework

Community forests are a category of forest created through the 1994 *Cameroon Forestry Law*, which divided forests into permanent and non-permanent zones. The permanent forest zone includes parks and nature reserves and large, industrial concessions, which are allocated to private logging companies.

The non-permanent zone allows the use of industrial logging and road building. Community forests up to 5,000 hectares (ha) in size are restricted to this zone. It consists of fragmented forest areas; as a consequence, communities often gain access to small areas of relatively degraded forests with low timber-production potential. However, these forests are usually more easily accessible as they are often located close to existing road networks. Smaller, short-term industrial logging areas, based on a specific volume of wood, are also allowed in the non-permanent forest zone.



WITHOUT THE CAPACITY TO PRODUCE SAWNWOOD AND TO SELL IT TO THE MARKET, THE BENEFITS OF THE FORESTS — AT LEAST FROM TIMBER PRODUCTS — WILL REMAIN LIMITED.

Regulations require communities to invest substantial amounts of time and money before they are able to acquire rights to the forest, its products and any benefits. Members of a community must first form a community forest association (CFA) and apply to the Ministry of Forests for the right to manage and use a given forest area.<sup>1</sup> According to some ministry officials, the process — which includes filing an application, development of a simple management plan and signing of an agreement — can take up to two years. Under the agreement the government entrusts a part of the national forest estate to a community to be “managed, conserved and used in the interests of the community.”<sup>2</sup> The process is expensive and time-consuming. Ministry officials report that the process could cost from US\$4,000–10,000.<sup>3</sup>

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The 1994 *Forestry Law* specified that only certain types of harvesting rights apply to community forests: sales of standing volume and smaller-scale permits for local people. Widespread concerns about the use of community forests as an easy source of timber led the government to make changes in 2001 that prohibited road construction and the use of industrial logging machinery.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, community forests are supposed to be logged via footpaths, using chainsaws and portable sawmills.

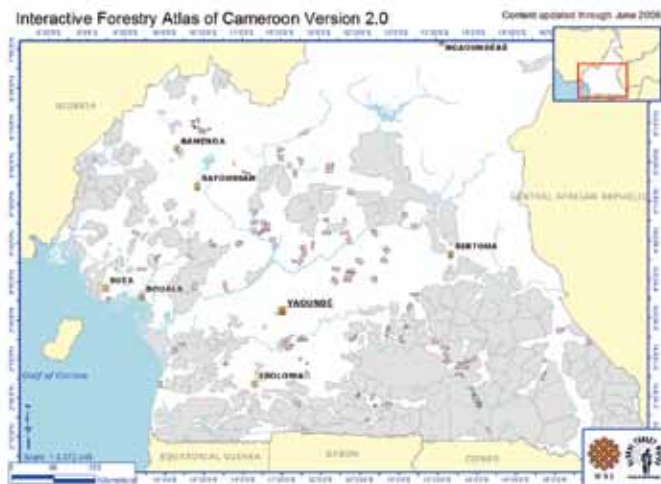
These regulatory restrictions have contributed to a situation where communities require considerable start-up capital, which they usually do not have, to obtain permits. In addition, they usually lack the capacity — in technical skills and market knowledge — that logging requires. As a result, communities often work closely with small-scale operators to obtain a community forest authorization and/or log the forest area (Smith 2008).

### Logging in community forests

As of late 2004, there were 67 community forests in Cameroon (Mertens et al. 2007) (Figure 1). Most were working with small timber companies; three out of four community forests near Lomié were working with a small-scale company from Douala, the port city of Cameroon.<sup>5</sup> They usually consisted of operators working with chainsaws and a portable sawmill. Operators reached the forests via a footpath, felled trees with a chainsaw and used a portable sawmill to produce lumber. A similar situation existed in a community forest in Southwest Province and in two community forests in South Province.

Figure 1.  
Map of Cameroon

Source: Mertens et al. 2007



An alternative model of chainsaw milling exists in the CODEVIR community forest in East Province. The forestry association, which involves four local communities, had the technical support of the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV) to obtain a community forest authorization and pursue logging activities. They used external funding to purchase a few chainsaws, safety equipment and a gruminette (a small steel frame that is used with a chainsaw to turn a log into rough planks). This allowed them to produce timber by themselves.

In one community forest in South Province, the community forestry association (CFA) had entered into a relationship with a company from Douala. The company was illegally building roads and using heavy equipment, both of which were prohibited. It was also transporting logs to Douala for processing, which was also illegal.



### Uneasy and unequal relationships

Relationships between communities and companies are complex and variable. In some cases, communities establish a relationship with a company when they initiate a community forestry application. In others, local elites who were involved in establishing the community forest set up contacts with logging companies to carry out the actual logging. Sometimes companies approach community forest associations after a community forest is in place to propose logging operations. This situation was common in the community forests in East Province, where communities had assistance from international agencies to establish their forests and did not already have a relationship with a company.

### Costs and benefits

Communities and companies see both benefits and costs from their relationship. In cases where relationships are established at the outset, the company often funds the entire endeavour, from the application process through to the logging and processing activities, as well as the sale of the sawnwood for export to the region (and occasionally even Europe). If the relationship is established later, the company is usually responsible for supplying the logging equipment (such as chainsaws and milling equipment) and covering the costs of logging operations (including labour) and transportation. Communities usually receive no lasting benefit in terms of capacity or equipment for future logging activities once the company leaves.

CFAs can also earn revenue from working with a company. The company and those responsible for the community forest negotiate a volume-based fee for the amount of wood felled and processed. The amount to be paid is usually calculated based on the volume of sawnwood that the company actually transports. The revenue that communities obtain from their partners varies considerably. The highest payment per cubic meter (m<sup>3</sup>) was US\$80 in East Province; the lowest were in South and Southwest Provinces, where a number of village chiefs reported that the community received only US\$2 per m<sup>3</sup>.

Another benefit for CFAs is access to buyers and timber markets. The CODEVIR community forest had difficulties in finding a profitable market for its sawnwood; while it was possible to sell locally, members were not able to make a profit based on local prices. They did not have the contacts to find buyers in either the domestic or international markets, where the prices are higher.

Another benefit of logging operations is employment. Local people, particularly youth, often find temporary employment as labourers to assist with felling and sawing operations. Local people can also earn money by carrying sawn planks to the road. In the CODEVIR forest, local youths were trained and hired as chainsaw operators and millers.

Community forests are an important source of timber for small-scale timber businesses. Logging rights are limited to small-scale operators. Large forest management contracts are restricted to companies with significant capital; even the small volume-based licences tend to go to bigger companies. Community forests provide a commodity that companies can sell to the domestic or international timber markets, usually for much higher prices than they get locally. Some high-value timber species had export prices of well over US\$200 per m<sup>3</sup> in 2004, compared to the US\$1–80 the company may have paid the CFA. At least two of the companies operating in community forests during 2004 were selling wood to the international market in 2004 (Smith 2008).

### *Conflicts*

Despite these benefits, relationships between the communities and the companies are rarely without conflict. In many cases, companies have failed to fulfill their promises with regard to social obligations, payments, and even salaries for labourers. Most of the community forests in East Province reported these types of problems.

By mid-2004, the communities associated with one forest area in East Province had “chased away” the logging company that had been operating in their forest, according to one elder. The company had allegedly not paid all of the money owed to the communities for the volume of timber felled and processed. Young men who had worked as labourers in late 2003 for the company complained that more than six months after the end of logging operations they had not been paid. However, it was not clear if the company had not paid or whether there were problems with the CFA, which appeared to be in disarray.

Community members feel resentment when a company do not make good on their promises, whether these involve a road, clinic or pipe-borne water. Some residents of a community in Southwest Province felt misled by the company operating in their forest, which had not fulfilled its promise to build local facilities, including a clinic. In this case, where the company was using industrial equipment to build a road, local people were pleased with the work and explained that the promise of a road was one of the main reasons they had supported working with this particular company. Other community members, however, expressed anger that the company was destroying farms and crops along the road route and not compensating the affected farmers. Interestingly, none of villagers interviewed seemed aware that the roadwork was prohibited by community forest regulations and could endanger the legal status of their forest if the authorities chose to intervene.

Imbalances in power within communities can also lead to conflict. Local village elites may use their position of respect and knowledge to gain control over forest activities. The president of a CFA can negotiate a deal that is not transparent and not necessarily the most beneficial for the community. Local CFA members are in a position to abscond with money that was intended for the entire community or for the members of the association.

## Conclusion

In Cameroon, community forests were established to provide benefits from forest resources. However, CFAs have experienced problems in gaining access to the forest, timber, benefits and external markets. Communities have often worked with small-scale chainsaw and portable sawmill operators and these relationships are often unequal and fraught with conflict.

Support and capacity-building for communities engaged in establishing community forests are important. The level of support and education communities receive helps determine whether they will succeed. The most successful community forests are those near Lomié, a pilot community forest area, where international donors provided intensive assistance and capacity-building during the early years of the community forest. As a result, the CFA



members in this area seemed most aware of regulations, and had the best knowledge to negotiate labour and payment contracts. Support to these communities also allowed one forest group to choose an alternative model based on self-reliance and capacity building, although they faced challenges in selling their product. Some communities in South Province also had some international help but it was less focused on education and training.

The biggest challenge for the CFAs is to be able to fell and produce timber and find a market for it. Without the capacity to produce sawnwood and to sell it to the market,

the benefits of the forests — at least from timber products — will remain limited. Many large companies operating in Cameroon expressed an interest in buying timber from community forests but were reluctant to pursue relationships because of the lack of community capacity and uncertainty about what it would be like to work with the communities.

Several changes would help improve the Cameroon model of community forestry and provide more benefits for local residents:

- The Government of Cameroon should simplify regulations and procedures to make it easier and less expensive for communities to form a CFA.
- Civil society and donors should focus on education and capacity building so that communities are prepared to undertake activities themselves or to enter into more equitable relationships with operators.
- Donors and companies should place more emphasis on analyzing the timber value chains and market possibilities to assist CFAs in obtaining access to timber markets and revenue from selling their timber.
- Purchasers of timber — both domestic and international — should engage with CFAs to ensure that any timber entering the market from these forests meets appropriate standards and benefits the residents of the forests.

## Endnotes

1. The government developed a Manual of Procedures with support from the Community Forestry Development Project, funded by the UK Department for International Development.
2. See Cameroon government, 1995 decree, Article 3 (16).
3. Other researchers have estimated the process can cost from US\$3,000–5,000 (1.5 to 2.5 million FCFA) to US\$28,000– 58,000 (Klein, Salla and Kok 2001). The lower estimates reflect cases where there is local capacity to undertake significant portions of the work required.
4. Ministry of Environment and Forests (MINEF) circular of 23 February 2001.
5. The author visited ten community forests.

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