

Forest management by community forest enterprises

For conservation to be synonymous with development, local populations need to be involved in forest management. Traditional community-based forest management is, however, not without its drawbacks. The community forest enterprise approach promotes direct management of forests as assets that require protection. The future of this approach depends in particular on a change in attitudes both at a political level and within the local communities.

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According to the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC), nearly 40 million people are directly dependent on forests for their food, medicines, construction materials and energy requirements. Since the Rio Summit of 1992 and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007, the vital role played by indigenous peoples and local communities in managing the environment and developing forest resources has been widely recognised.

The participation of local communities in forest management raises the question of the relationship between forest conservation and development. The governments respond to this issue by imposing obligations on logging companies to pay for infrastructure, in the form of social investment (schools and clinics) or roads. However, these benefits are not sufficient to raise local communities out of poverty. In fact, they suffer from practices that minimise their economic impact (poor gov-

ernance, the strategy of certain logging companies, etc.) and from the conflicts characteristic of these arrangements (revenue sharing, leadership problems, etc.). These internal and external factors combined do not lead to prosperity or forest biodiversity.

In addition, the divergent interests of governments, NGOs and development organisations prevent them from coming to an agreement that really benefits local communities. These different perspectives are reflected today in a tendency to see development and the conservation of forest resources as opposing forces¹. Because of this complex situation, WWF has focused on promoting community enterprise initiatives, particularly in Cameroon – a pioneer when it comes to including local communities in forestry policies. This approach seeks to bypass the traditional divide that pits conservation against development and aims to turn conservation into a development factor.

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TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY-BASED FORESTRY: PROGRESS WITH VARIABLE BENEFITS

Forestry legislation in most Central African countries contains provisions for a percentage of forestry fees or taxes to be allocated to local authorities and local communities. Cameroon became a pioneer in this area in 1994 when it integrated decentralised governance into its forestry policy in order to “increase the involvement of local populations in the conservation and management of forests”. The new forestry legislation represented remarkable advances in the fight against rural poverty. Decentralised forest management in Cameroon is based on community forestry, defined ▶▶▶

¹ Development organisations, governments and the private sector have focused largely on improving the economic value of forest resources. For their part, conservation NGOs have focused on conserving resources rather than on industrial exploitation, which, because of a lack of transparent redistribution mechanisms, does not benefit local communities.

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Utilising, developing and preserving forests: finding the balance.

▶▶▶ as the entire range of dynamic processes involved in giving rural communities responsibility for the management of forest resources (Bigombé, 2001). A community forest is therefore governed by a management agreement between a village community and the administrative body responsible for forests. A community forest is allocated first and foremost to the closest local populations and covers a maximum area of 5000 hectares. The populations are required to form a legal entity (a development association, a common initiative group, or a cooperative) to acquire and manage the forest area. By 2000 there were around 457 initiatives of this type at different stages of development.

Nevertheless, the benefits of community forestry for local populations vary. In some cases, the social projects set up for the communities have visible impacts (increase in school enrolment rates, improved road infrastructure, etc.). In other places, however, the funding has not improved the living conditions or income

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of the forest communities. In many cases, it is external economic operators who operate the forests to supply the international market, while the village communities end up being de facto employees of the logging companies. They have great difficulty monitoring and controlling the volumes of wood declared and felled (Cuny, 2011). Most of the illegal wood – which is much more competitive than the wood from community forests – supplies the domestic market (Nzoyem Maffo et al., 2010), but this kind of logging creates more limited benefits for the local populations.

It should be pointed out that 78.2% of people in rural areas have not received any education at all or have not progressed beyond primary school. This figure is as high as 92.3% in rural populations in the savannah (Nembot Ndeffo, 2009). As a result, local populations do not always have the capacity to seize the opportunities that could improve their living conditions. The decision to create a community forest does not always come from the local populations: other agents (logging companies, NGOs, donor organisations, elites, external operators, etc.) are often the real decision-makers. The low level of involvement and ownership by local communities gives rise to a series of anomalies that manifest themselves in, for example, the sale of illegal wood, in logging companies failing to respect agreements, etc. In this sense, the community does not carry out the monitoring and control functions that are vital for any social, responsible forestry initiative. WWF’s approach attempts to respond to

this situation by promoting community forest enterprises.

COMMUNITY FOREST ENTERPRISES:

AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH

There have been plenty of failures among the technical assistance projects designed to benefit community forests, despite the financial resources invested in them (Dourojeanni, M.J., 2008). In view of this, WWF decided to support communities by specifically focusing its assistance on community forest enterprise initiatives. This approach has been successful in Panama, Bolivia and Papua New Guinea. The aim is to ensure the autonomy and effectiveness of communities in their sustainable forest management activities by building their entrepreneurial capacity. Unlike traditional community forest management, the enterprise approach makes it possible to promote project ownership by local populations – a key factor for success. This means that the forest, which is now a business asset, becomes a resource to be conserved.

A community forest enterprise (CFE) is a small for-profit entity managed by local communities responsible for the production, processing and sale of timber and non-wood forest products. The village communities are no longer paid employees of an external logging company and become instead operators themselves. Since 2007, WWF has restructured 30 projects in Cameroon, turning them into CFEs, most of them in two major forest regions: in the south-east of the country (Jengi project) and in the south-west in Campo-Maan. The jobs linked to traditional conservation projects (forest inventory officers, environmental monitors and eco-tourism guides) have evolved into enterprise management jobs linked to forestry conservation. Job creation determines the success of community projects and, ultimately, is a deciding factor in the protection and conservation of forest resources.

WWF supports local communities in the process of acquiring community forests, helps them develop the technical, managerial and organisational capacity required to set up and run an enterprise and provides access to com-

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WWF works with all stakeholders to find technical, economic and social solutions that promote sustainable development. As the world’s leading conservation organisation, with 5 million members, WWF has permanent offices in around 100 countries. Since it was first set up in 1973, WWF France has been working with international institutions, governments and businesses to bring about real change.

petitive markets². Finally, the programme also provides micro-credit arrangements and revolving loan funds for subsistence activity initiatives (crop farming, animal husbandry etc.). Technical assistance certainly plays the biggest role when it comes to turning conservation into a development factor, particularly during the early phases in the life of a CFE. This is because setting up and developing a CFE involves major socio-economic change: a move from a subsistence-based economy to the integration of rural (and very traditional) communities into local, and even international, market economies. WWF therefore takes particular care to build the capacity of those involved through training programmes. In addition, WWF promotes multi-stakeholder dialogue, which is very useful in many situations, and particularly when it comes to integrated resource management. Finally, WWF helps improve the legal and institutional framework relating to community forests.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Designed to provide more effective means of combating poverty within communities, a CFE generates an average income estimated at between CFA 18,000 and CFA 48,200 (€27 to €73) per cubic metre³ – whereas income from state-controlled community forests varies between CFA 6,000 and CFA 22,000 (€9 to €34) per cubic metre (Hoyle, D. Sonne, N., 2011). Other factors to be taken into account include non-market household income and other environmental services – carbon sequestration, the impact on soil fertility and biodiversity conservation – for which valuation is currently under discussion.

The community forest enterprise approach has several obstacles to overcome, including some that are clearly cultural in nature. All too often, policy-makers and leaders of NGOs still see conservation and development as opposing forces. Viewed from this perspective, any commercial exploitation must be detrimental to the forest. For their part, a large number of commercial players believe that forest conservation reduces the availability of resources for commercial exploitation. At the same time, an inclusive approach relies on the capacity of rural and indigenous societies to develop an entrepreneurial spirit. A great deal of effort needs to be invested in developing dialogue between the local communities and public authorities. The authorities have

an educational role to play, since the technical assistance provided by WWF is not intended to be permanent. Priority should be given to the acquisition of new skills. Strengthening the capacity of local communities will help empower them as part of this process. It is the contrary of an assistance approach. And this implies a real culture change to achieve long-lasting results.

Overcoming these obstacles therefore involves a new approach and mindset, both at a political level and within the local communities. The future of CFEs also depends on the institutional and legal situation: the stability of institutions, the quality and predictability of the legal framework, etc. The general climate needs to be conducive to the community forest enterprises' commercial and economic development, and must be accompanied by specific interventions (technical assistance and business environment). Finally, nothing can be achieved without the participation of the local populations in discussion platforms and without their involvement in improving the way in which enterprises are managed.

The approach developed by WWF, based on the community forest enterprise, takes a long-term view and attempts to combine sustainable forest management with economic management. It makes it possible to combine the economic efficiency of community forest enterprises, improved social welfare within communities and forest conservation. The enterprise approach focuses on the motivation of the stakeholders to satisfy their needs by becoming involved in value-creation activities. These aspirations at the community level have been ignored for a long time. They do exist, however, and explain in part the support that programmes proposed by WWF enjoy within local communities. Finally, poverty reduction in local communities depends on wealth creation. Enterprises in general, and CFEs in particular, are wealth-creation environments. If communities see the forest as a valuable asset, they will play an active part in its conservation. ●

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² In particular by organising business meetings like Racewood, an international forum for organisations involved in the timber industry.

³ These sums should also increase as the trade in illegal wood disappears, since this trade creates unfair competition on the domestic market.