
Cameroon: Unequal equality between community forests and logging companies

According to Cameroonian law, both local communities and industrial logging companies have the right to obtain and manage a portion of a forest. However, this apparent "equality" is extremely unequal regarding the extension of forest lands and the legal obligations associated with tenure rights.

Regarding management obligations for instance, in the case of community forests the management plan has to be submitted before any activity starts. This constitutes a major constraint because communities face great difficulties to raise the funds to elaborate their management plans, and should therefore be authorised to at least cut a limited number of trees to finance the preparation of the plan.

For industrial logging companies the situation is totally different, as can be identified in the two existing concession models: "ventes de coupe" and UFAs (unité forestière d'aménagement). The former, defined as a logging area of a maximum size of 2500 hectares to be logged within three years maximum, requires no management plan at all. The latter are 15-year renewable concessions covering a surface area of up to 200,000 hectares, and in this case a management plan has to be submitted within the first three years. However, during this period the company has the right to already start logging --without any management plan at all-- in order to secure financing for preparing the management plan! To make things worse, not a single management plan has to date been approved by the administration, although the first concession allocations under the 1994 forest law date back to 1996.

Penalties for illegal activities show a similar pattern of inequality. For instance, illegal activities by logging companies can lead to different types of sanctions, such as fines, exclusion from future biddings, or suspension of operation. However, it has so far never happened that a valid logging title has been withdrawn from a company as a result of illegal activities. For the communities, the penalties are much more far-reaching, and any mistake or infraction committed will lead to the cancellation of the community forest.

The law thus appears to benefit industrial logging, in spite of the fact that community forests have a higher potential for sustainability than commercial logging. The promotion of community forests should hence be supported as a means to ensure social and ecological sustainability. The so-called "pre-emption right" could have helped to achieve this objective, because it would have given the communities priority in their access to forests against commercial logging. Yet the draft regulation which would have established this right to the benefit of the communities has not yet been signed.

In its study on the Cameroonian forest sector (October 1999), the World Bank's Operations Evaluation Department points at the same direction when it states that "the international logging companies that dominate the sector continue to have a free hand in the development and use of the forest resources of Cameroon. Local communities were left out of the reform process despite the declared objective to include them in forest resource management."

Article based on information from: "Community Forests and Industrial Logging: Equal Rights?", InsideCameroon 3, June/July 2001. Essama-Nssah and James J. Gockowski, "Forest Sector Development in a Difficult Political Economy: An Evaluation of Cameroon's Forest Development and World Bank Assistance". World Bank, OED, October 1999