
Cameroon: Forest sector development in a difficult political economy

The OED report considers that even if the Bank influenced the ongoing process of forest policy reform in Cameroon, it "made no provisions for implementation or enforcement of those provisions". The document states that the Bank did not attempt all the right and relevant things prescribed by the 1991 policy, and made several mistakes from a strategic point of view. As a result there is a gap between the stated policies and their implementation.

On the implementation of the Forest Policy on the ground, the OED report concludes that the capital failure in the case of Cameroon has not been the policy in itself or the coherence between the intervention of the Bank inside and outside the forest sector and its forest policy objectives, but the ineffective and inefficient way in which things were done.

The failure in promoting local communities' participation in the process -despite the declared objective- is underscored. The exclusive reliance on technical assistance and the lack of incentives to develop local institutions is underlined as a mistake of the Bank. According to the report, the Bank had good intentions in trying to promote the interest of local communities, but it did little to gather their views and to design mechanisms that would ensure that those views were taken into consideration. This was clear during the process that ended in the 1994 Forest Law. As stated in the report, "ordinary people whose livelihoods directly depend on forest resources were left out of the decision making". Additionally the programme did not include activities to enhance the capacity of the civil society or to promote rural development, and the strategy also lacked a proper information policy.

The report admits that the foreign logging companies that dominate the sector continue to have a free hand in the development and use of the forest resources in Cameroon, and are very influential actors trying that no reforms in the forest sector are applied, which can go against their privileges. According to the report, logging is one of the four dynamic mechanism of forest resource degradation and deforestation described by the 1991 Forest Policy. Additionally, logging is responsible for a larger overall share of deforestation than is usually reported. The OED report clearly identifies the existence of an environmental conflict between public interests represented by the government and civil society, and private interests defended by the companies.

With respect to the effects on forests of other policies implemented by the Bank, the report considers that although the Bank has undertaken little direct forest investment over the past decade, forest sector issues have been part of the Bank-financed Structural Adjustment Programme since 1989. According to the OED "the Bank has been trying to follow a multisectoral approach in Cameroon" and to involve local populations in forest management. Nevertheless the results in this regards can be considered poor. Moreover, it is the powerful logging companies operating in the country who have benefited from the opening of the economy that the Bank is promoting worldwide. In sum, while the OED report largely blames the government for its failure to pull Cameroon out of the economic crisis, it also clearly admits that ten years of Bank structural adjustment efforts failed to improve things and that its structural adjustment programs did not put poverty at the center stage of the reform agenda.

The support to road building and the case of the Chad-Cameroon pipeline are also mentioned. The 5th Highway Project Loan of the WB determined the opening up and greater exploitation of the frontier forests of the East Province, which constitute a threat to the livelihoods of the indigenous Baka forest people, and has provoked a serious impact on the fauna of the region. The report admits that the Chad-Cameroon pipeline megaproject is a polemic issue and that the arguments of the NGOs against it in relation to corruption and human rights are very hard to dismiss. It also considers that the Bank is very sensitive to these concerns. Nevertheless, no explanation is provided on which steps have been taken in this regard.

Additionally, the report states that the results of the 1991 Forest Policy in relation to the Bank's mandate of reducing poverty were not satisfactory. The concentration of power in the hands of the logging industry is another problem not addressed by the Bank's policy, even if it is a factor of poverty generation in Cameroon. On the contrary smallholder agriculture, contributes directly to more than 2 million livelihoods. The OED insists in pointing out that, given the importance of this objective and the fact that a key determinant of poverty is inequality in the distribution of social decision power, the Bank should have insisted on this issue.

In its Summary Evaluation, the OED report concludes that with the 1991 Forest Policy Cameroon did not improve its forest cover. The improvement in the way the country addresses forest sector issues is negligible, as well as the impact of the Bank's strategy to overcome poverty.

To our view the most interesting points highlighted in the OED report are:

- the problem is not the policy in itself but its implementation;
- in spite of the Bank's stated intentions, participation of local communities and forest peoples has been neglected;
- logging companies constitute a powerful lobby which opposes the reform in the forest sector and benefits from the economic policy at the national level promoted by the Bank;
- other policies influenced by the Bank -e.g. structural adjustment, road building, fossil-fuel megaprojects- have had negative effects on forest sustainability;
- the Bank has not accomplished its mandate of reducing poverty, and the situation tends to worsen;
- the Bank was not influential in ameliorating the forest situation in Cameroon.