

Community forestry in the Bamenda Highlands region of Cameroon: a partnership for conservation

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SUMMARY

Forests once largely covered the Bamenda Highlands region of Cameroon. However, the forests were progressively cleared for farmland and grazing until today only patches remain. Although small, these patches are recognized as globally important sites for conservation of biological diversity. At the same time, the forests are very important for the people living around them, as they supply water, fuelwood, medicines, honey and other products and have cultural and spiritual importance.

The montane forests of the Bamenda Highlands region are unlike other forested areas of Cameroon where there is high potential for income generation through timber exploitation and where community forestry is often seen as a means of redirecting some of these benefits towards community development. Instead, in the Bamenda Highlands region, community forestry has developed as a partnership between the conservation community, which is interested in conservation of biological diversity, and the local population, which is interested mainly in the various benefits to be derived from the forest. A committed member of this partnership is the Ministry of the Environment and Forestry (MINEF).

This successful partnership started with the Kilum-Ijim Forest Project (KIFP), which focused on the conservation of the Kilum-Ijim Forest, the largest of the remaining forest patches, through the development of a system of community-based management. Seeing the success of community forestry at Kilum-Ijim, other communities also started to request assistance to manage their forests. This resulted in the development of the Bamenda Highlands Forestry Project (BHFP), which works throughout the Bamenda Highlands region with any community interested in conserving and managing its forest. Response to the new project has been overwhelming. As the new project provides mostly technical advice, with very limited material inputs, the incentive for forest management appears to be coming from the communities themselves.

Although BHFP can be considered a geographical scaling-up of community forestry activities, it should also be considered a scaling-down of outside intervention to support community forestry, as it is a much smaller project than KIFP in terms of staffing, resources and financing. By mobilizing the considerable energies of interested communities, it appears that much can be done with few resources. The single most critical factor to the success of community forestry in the region has been the communities' genuine interest in conserving and managing their forests. Now that community forestry is well established in the region, further strengthening of the capacity of MINEF and local non-governmental agencies is needed to ensure that all interested communities have the possibility of managing their forests in the future.



Identification of the case

The last five years have seen remarkable growth in community forestry initiatives in Cameroon, as increasing numbers of communities and organizations take advantage of provisions in the 1994 Forestry Law that introduced a new category of “community forest”. This is a forest that is managed by the neighbouring community according to a management plan agreed with the state, with all benefits generated by forest management accruing to the community. Before the 1994 law came into effect, there was no legal basis to safeguard community-based efforts to manage forests. Much of the current interest in community forestry in Cameroon has been due to the potential for redirecting some of the profits to be gained through timber exploitation towards community development initiatives. That is, instead of outside logging firms exploiting forests for their own benefit, communities now have the possibility of managing timber exploitation themselves and of keeping the profits for their own benefit.

In the Bamenda Highlands region of Cameroon (see Map 1), however, community forestry has developed somewhat differently. The forests of this region are predominantly montane, in which most trees are too small and inaccessible to be of interest to commercial loggers. There is thus little potential for timber exploitation. Instead, community forestry in this region has developed as a partnership between:

- the local population, which values the forests for their many essential and useful services and resources, such as water, fuelwood, medicines and honey;
- the conservation community, which values the forests as globally important centres of endemism.

While these interests are different, there is overlap between them in that both partners have an interest in maintaining the forests at their present extent and in a more or less natural state.

Community forestry started in the region with the assistance of the Kilum-Ijim Forest Project (KIFP), a project carried out by BirdLife International in collaboration with the Cameroon Ministry of the Environment and Forestry (MINEF). This project was set up to conserve the Kilum-Ijim Forest, the largest forest in the region and the most important remnant of Afro-montane forest in West Africa. Founded in 1987, KIFP has been working with the communities surrounding the forest since 1995 to establish a network of legally attributed community forests covering the entire forest. This process is now well

advanced and it is expected that the last of the community forests will be legally attributed by June 2002. In the meantime, the communities are implementing their forest management plans so that the forest may be conserved both for use by community members and for conservation of biological diversity.

The success of the Kilum-Ijim communities in managing their forests did not go unnoticed by the rest of the Bamenda Highlands region and, over the years, other communities approached KIFP for assistance in managing their forests. The end result of this interest in forest management was the creation of a new project, the Bamenda Highlands Forest Project (BHFP), which was also executed by BirdLife International in collaboration with MINEF. BHFP works throughout the Bamenda Highlands area, assisting any interested community to manage its forest. The response to this new project, launched in June 2000, has been overwhelming. In just over a year, more than 40 communities requested assistance from the project, and most have now taken steps to start the process of establishing a community-based system of forest management. As the project provides mostly technical advice, with very few material inputs, it would seem that the interest in forest management is genuine and that the incentive for forest management is coming from the value the communities place on their forests. Community forestry in the Bamenda Highlands is thus an example of a successful conservation partnership that has moved beyond its initial target and is spreading throughout the region.

Status of the forest resources

Montane forests are rare globally, and in Cameroon are found only along the chain of mountains that follows the Cameroon–Nigeria border. The Bamenda Highlands region was once largely covered with montane forests. Over time, however, the forests were progressively cleared for farmland and grazing until today there are only patches left, often on the more remote hilltops or on steep slopes where farming is difficult. Although small compared with the vast lowland forests of the Congo Basin, these patches are recognized as globally important centres of endemism, containing significant numbers of birds, animals and plants that are found nowhere else in the world. For example, 15 montane bird species endemic to Cameroon are found here, two of which are classified as endangered according to World Conservation Union (IUCN) criteria. At least 40

species of plants endemic to Cameroon are found here and new species are still being discovered. Mammals, reptiles and amphibians have been less well studied, but it is known that at least six species of mammals are endemic to the Bamenda Highlands, while 11 species of reptiles and amphibians endemic to the Cameroon Highlands have been identified in the region.

At 20 000 ha, the Kilum-Ijim Forest is the largest of the remaining forest patches in the Bamenda Highlands and, as already mentioned, the most important remnant of Afro-montane forest in West Africa. Other forests in the region range from the very small (< 50 ha) to the not so small (500 to 1 000 ha), but all provide habitat for many endemic montane species.

Deforestation has increased in the region over the last two decades, as a rapidly growing population has combined with declining economic conditions and decreasing soil fertility to increase the demand for new farmland. The most recent land rush came in the late 1980s, when drastically reduced coffee prices sent many farmers further up the slopes for new land on which to plant alternate cash crops of beans and potatoes. The pressure for new farmland remains very high, as the population living in the Bamenda Highlands region is among the densest in Africa, with densities reaching 300 to 400 people per square kilometre in some areas.

Despite the enormous pressure for new farmland, the montane forests remain very important to the surrounding populations. Most critically, the forests act as watersheds for many of the watercourses in the region. The relationship between forests and water supply is well understood by the population, as many communities have felt the impact of streams that have stopped flowing in the dry season after forests were cleared. The forests are also sources of important resources, particularly fuelwood, medicines and honey. For many people, the forests are their only sources of these vital products, which may be either used directly or sold. In addition, the forests have significant cultural and spiritual value for the people of the area. Certain traditional ceremonies and rites, for example, are carried out in the forests to ensure good crops and the good health of the community. Much of the traditional music and dance of the area has its origins in the forest. For various reasons, many people feel a strong resonance between the traditional values attached to the forests and the global environmental ethic that has emerged in recent decades.



The participatory forestry process

The community forestry process used by BirdLife, MINEF and the communities in the Bamenda Highlands region is founded on a convergence of interests between the conservation community and the local population. As already noted, the conservation community's primary interest is in ensuring the survival of the many rare and endemic species found in the montane forests. For the local population, there is a multiplicity of interests, ranging from water to forest products to cultural concerns. The interests of the two groups are *not* the same. However, there is overlap between them in that each partner has an interest in conserving and managing the natural forests of the region.

It should be noted that there are many ways of conserving and managing forests, of which community forestry is only one. Community forestry works as a method of conservation of biological diversity in the Bamenda Highland region because of the convergence of interests. If the communities had no interest in conserving and managing their forests, BirdLife and MINEF would have to look for other ways of achieving their objectives for conservation of biological diversity, such as government-managed or private protected areas. All options, including community forestry, have advantages and disadvantages, which must be analysed according to the particular circumstances. In the case of Cameroon, however, it should be said that the record of management of government reserves has been poor, and that this was one of the main factors leading to the development of community-based management options.

Given that a convergence of interests does exist in the Bamenda Highlands region, the role of the projects has been primarily to catalyse and facilitate the process to establish community systems of forest management. Despite the communities' interest in managing their forests, the information and capacity to do so often do not exist at the community level. While there is considerable experience with more traditional community-run development activities, such as schools, health centres and roads, the kinds of skills and institutions needed for the management of a common pool resource such as a forest are different and often need to be developed. Thus, much of the work of the projects consists of helping communities to develop their technical and institutional capacity to manage their forests. In addition, the projects may assist communities materially in a very limited way with, for example, items such as signboards for the permanent demarcation of the forest limits or costs associated with the legal attribution of the community forest.

Particularly in the case of BHFP, which works only with communities that request assistance from the project, the community forestry process is very much community-driven. Communities have their own ways of working and work at different speeds and times. At any given moment, project staff work only with those communities that need assistance at that time, while other communities carry out activities on their own and others may have different preoccupations for the moment. Overall, this approach can take longer to implement but has the advantage that work goes ahead only when communities themselves are ready to move forward. Or, in other words, the communities move forward when they are very sure among themselves of the benefits that will follow from the time, effort and resources that they are about to invest.



This approach also ensures that communities themselves solve most of the problems that might arise. Conflict and compromise are integral to any process involving land management, particularly in an area as densely populated as the Bamenda Highlands region. When communities are driving the process it is they who must confront the conflict and find a way through it. The process of resolving conflicts within and without the community can actually lead to greater bonds and stronger relationships among the various actors, thereby creating a firmer foundation on which to build a community-based system of forest management.

The community forestry process is centred on three main actors: the community, the traditional authorities, and the Government Forestry Service. The system that is eventually put in place is one that requires the collaboration of all three. The projects act together with MINEF to facilitate the process. Although specific activities vary greatly from one community to the next, the process used can be described as consisting of five broad phases.

Information and consensus building

In this phase, the idea of community forest management is discussed with and within interested communities, including the traditional authorities. Communities learn about the 1994 Forestry Law, particularly the section on community forests, as well as the main steps involved in creating a community-managed forest. Community members develop consensus about the need to conserve their forest and demarcate the area they decide to conserve. A consensus on conserving the forest is, of course, the key factor to ensuring the success of the rest of the process. Depending on the particular circumstances of the village, this can take as long as all the other steps combined. In cases where consensus cannot be reached, or where interest in forest conservation is weak, the process will not take off. The project takes great care at this point not to push the community into agreement, but to ensure that the consensus is generated within the community.

From the first contact with a community, every effort is made to be transparent about the objectives of the intervening agency, which in the case of KIFP and BHFP is conservation of biological diversity. Rather than tell people what they ought to do, the work of the project is described and people are asked if they are interested in working together. This immediately puts the communities in the position of decision-makers and builds trust through openness.

Investigation

During this phase, past and present forest resource availability, use and management are investigated, usually using participatory rural appraisal (PRA) tools such as mapping, historical matrices, time lines, semi-structured interviews and forest walks. This provides community members with the opportunity to pool their knowledge about the forest, as individual users share what they know about the forest. In addition, these exercises help the community to come to a common understanding about what is important to it about the forest and why it wants to conserve it. As part of this phase, a qualitative inventory of the forest is also conducted.

Planning and negotiation

As a next step, the community creates a forest management institution representing all sections of the population and, in particular, involving those who use the forest intensively. This is a fairly long process that involves, among other things, discussions about the best type of institution to establish, the preparation of articles of association and rules for the group, as well as a membership campaign to ensure that everyone in the community has an opportunity to join the organization. The distribution of benefits from the forest is debated and the final decision included in the articles of association. Forest management objectives are determined. Using the results of the forest inventory and the other information generated in the investigation phase, a five-year forest management plan is negotiated, which is agreed by the Forestry Service and which reflects both the community's objectives for forest use and its objectives for forest conservation. If legal attribution of the forest is desired, the necessary legal steps are undertaken.

Implementation

Communities implement their management plans with the technical assistance of MINEF and, possibly, of project staff. Communities also monitor the condition of the forest and the health of the forest management institutions. All of these activities require considerable time and effort on behalf of the communities. Given the nature of the montane forests and the communities' objectives for their management, most of the management activities involve much volunteer labour. Examples include patrolling the forest or making firebreaks. These do not require much equipment or money, but they do need time and effort.

Review

Annual work plans are prepared following the five-year forest management plan. According to law, the management plans themselves are reviewed and revised by the community and the local forestry administration as needed, at least once every five years.

While conceptualized as consecutive phases, in practice these five phases tend to overlap and iterate as communities develop in different ways according to their particular circumstances.

Over the years, those involved with community forestry in the Bamenda Highlands region have benefited greatly from the fact that others have been working at the central government level to ensure that the necessary institutional and procedural arrangements were made to permit the application of the 1994 law on community forests. Although the legal attribution of community forests has not always gone smoothly, there has at least been a structure in place to deal with applications for community forests. Without this support at the national level, implementation of community forestry at a local level would have been far more difficult.

The impact of participatory forestry

As the tool by which previously unmanaged forests are now managed, community forestry has had a significant impact on the forests of the Bamenda Highlands region. Most important, destruction of the Kilum-Ijim Forest and of others throughout the region has been halted. If the rate of destruction of the Kilum-Ijim Forest in the early 1990s had continued, there would be no forest there today. Rare and endemic species now living in the forest could have become extinct. Watersheds serving hundreds of thousands of people would have been destroyed. A vital source of fuelwood, medicines, honey and other forest products would have disappeared. While it is not always the case that community forestry can improve rural livelihoods in a significant way, there can be no doubt that in this region it has prevented their major deterioration.

Analysis of satellite images shows that the extent of montane forest in the Kilum-Ijim area has actually increased since 1991 through the regeneration of degraded areas within the forest boundary. As other communities in the Bamenda Highlands region now begin to undertake the conservation and

management of their forests, it can be expected that similar results will be seen throughout the region over the next few years.

While there have been no formal studies of the sociopolitical impact of community forestry on communities in the region, anecdotal evidence suggests that the establishment of a community-based system of forest management strengthens communities as entities able to initiate and carry out development processes. The generation of consensus and the resolution of conflict within a community not only allow that community to manage its forest, but also are often the catalyst for a whole range of other initiatives that were not possible before. When groups within villages who used to dislike each other now come together, energy is released that can be put to constructive use.

Even more broadly, community forestry can be considered as a positive contribution to the process of democratization, as it brings together government personnel, traditional authorities and community members in ways that were not previously common and that encourage the growth of respect for each other. By working together on a concrete issue such as forest management, people can establish a basis for collaboration and cooperation on a broad range of other issues. In some communities, people see community forestry as an opportunity to take back a degree of control over their resources from a remote central administration.

Community forestry is now accepted in the Bamenda Highlands region. It is no longer a new idea to be tried out, but an established fact. Its advantages have been concretely demonstrated in the particular context and are generally acknowledged, among both government services and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). An important challenge now is to ensure that capacity for the implementation of community forestry is as widespread as interest. One aspect of the mandate of BHFP is therefore to work with NGOs and government services to increase their capacity to assist communities who wish to conserve and manage their forests. The main approach is one of "learning by doing", but a wide range of other means are used, including internships, seminars and training workshops on particular topics.

While community forestry does play an extremely important role in forest management in the Bamenda Highlands region, it should be noted that there remain many forests in the area not amenable to community-based management. Most critically, there are some communities with no interest in managing their forest. In some cases, the forest may already be designated

as a government reserve and by law must be managed by the government. In other cases, disputes between villages neighbouring the same forest may be too difficult to overcome. Community forestry is a very important tool for forest management but it should be remembered that it is only one among many options and may not always be the most appropriate.

Scaling-up

As already described, community forestry in the Bamenda Highlands is an example of a successful conservation partnership that has moved beyond its initial target and is spreading throughout the region. The success of community forestry at Kilum-Ijim was the inspiration for other communities to undertake similar initiatives, leading to the creation of BHFP. The stimulus for the geographical scaling-up of community forestry in the Bamenda Highlands was thus the interest and initiative of many communities to conserve and manage their forests. That this remains the driving force behind the spread of community forestry in the region can be seen in the ever-increasing numbers of communities that apply to BHFP for assistance in conserving and managing their forests, despite the fact that BHFP provides mainly technical advice and very little material assistance. The incentive for community-based forest management does appear to come from the communities themselves.

While BHFP can be considered a geographical scaling-up of community forestry activities, at the same time it should be considered a scaling-down of outside intervention to support community forestry. BHFP was deliberately designed as a much smaller project than KIFP in terms of staffing, resources and financing. By mobilizing the considerable energies of genuinely interested communities, it was felt that considerably more could be done with fewer resources. Whereas, for example, KIFP has employed up to ten field staff to work with the 35 communities neighbouring the Kilum-Ijim Forest, BHFP employs just three full-time field staff (two animators and one forester, assisted by management) to work at more than 40 sites throughout region. This can work only when the community forestry process is community-driven and communities really do most of the work. If project staff have to spend their time convincing communities to do something rather than working with the communities to accomplish something, this scaling-down of staff and resources is no longer feasible.

The presence of established community forests at Kilum-Ijim has been invaluable to the work of BHFP. Communities wishing to set up their own system of forest management find it extremely useful to meet with communities that have already done so and to learn from their experience. Exchange visits are probably the most valuable learning tool that BHFP uses. Even just hearing through the media or other means about other communities that are acquiring community forests appears to be a strong motivating factor. Often, community pride leads to a community's desire to prove that it can do what others are doing. Conversely, those that have already established community forests often find it encouraging to have others show interest in what they have accomplished.

Just how far the idea of community forestry will spread remains to be seen. The context of forests in the Bamenda Highlands region is very different from that in other areas in Cameroon, particularly the southern part of the country, where the lowland forests are a magnet to large-scale timber exploiters. It may be that this is a constraint to the spread of community forestry by word of mouth beyond the Bamenda Highlands region. Certainly, applications have already been received from communities neighbouring all the major known montane forests in the region. Communities that are applying now tend to have smaller forests or ones at lower altitude, where forest use patterns are different and the motivations for forest conservation are consequently different. On the other hand, conditions in the Sudano-Sahelian zones of northern Cameroon may have more similarity to the Bamenda Highlands region in terms of uses and perceptions of forests. Thus far, however, there have been few initiatives in community forestry in those areas.

The principles of participatory forestry are also beginning to be applied to forests other than legally designated community forests. In particular, it is now the policy of the Government of Cameroon to encourage the participation of communities in the management of state reserves. While implementation of this policy has been slow, there are currently some promising initiatives. Experience in the Bamenda Highlands region suggests that, if the government were to engage communities in dialogue on reserve management more often, there is potential for the establishment of management schemes to which both parties would be committed. In such cases, the net effect could be much the same as community forestry in terms of better forest management and greater benefits to communities.

Recommendations for the promotion of participatory forestry

Following on from this discussion, the single most critical factor favouring the success of community forestry in the Bamenda Highlands region has been the communities' genuine interest in conserving and managing their forests. This was the basis on which a partnership between the communities and the conservation community was developed at Kilum-Ijim. Later, it was the motor behind the establishment of BHFP, which extended support for community forestry throughout the entire region. Managing a forest requires considerable time, effort and resources on the part of the community. There is no point in suggesting that a community manage its forest unless members of that community feel that their investment is going to produce something that they value, whether tangible or otherwise.

As a general principle, those interested in promoting a community-oriented development process, whether in forestry or in some other sector, need first to take the time to understand what interests and potential motivating factors are present in a community before identifying specific goals and strategies. In most cases, it will be possible to achieve more with less effort by mobilizing and nourishing existing interests rather than trying to convince communities to act in a way suggested by an outside intervener.

The other side of this principle is that intervening agencies also need to be very clear about what their own interests or objectives are. Once the two parties have some appreciation of each other's interests, they can evaluate the degree of convergence and decide whether there is a basis for collaboration. In the case of forest management, if a community does not value its forests, options other than community forestry need to be considered as a means of managing that forest or of promoting the welfare of the community.



The example of KIFP and BHFP shows that geographic scaling-up does not necessarily mean that interveners such as projects or government services have to scale up in terms of staff, resources or financing. Indeed, in the case of BHFP, it was possible to scale down the resources used while covering a much larger area. As more experience is gained and word spreads about successful community forestry, the level of effort required to create more community forests may decrease further. If communities are truly interested in managing their forests, a community-driven community forestry process ensures that communities are doing most of the work themselves and asking for assistance only as needed. It is important that communities work at their own pace and in their own way so that the systems for forest management that are put in place really do belong to the communities and will therefore have a better chance of survival in the long term.

Thus far in Cameroon, there are very few examples of communities that have obtained a legally recognized community forest without the intervention of a third party facilitator, such as an externally funded project

or a logging company (in the case of forests with valuable timber). While in principle MINEF alone should be able to assist a community through all the steps of a community forestry process, in practice MINEF's implementation capacity has been weak. To ensure that all communities have the possibility of obtaining community forests in the future, further strengthening of the capacity of MINEF is required, as well as that of local non-government agencies. Simplification of the procedures for the legal attribution of a community forest would also make the process easier for many communities.

The experience of community forestry in the Bamenda Highlands region of Cameroon shows that community forestry is a viable option for conservation of biological diversity. It also shows that high-cost inputs are not needed when the community forestry process is community-driven and based on the genuine interests of communities. Such experience may be of use in other parts of Africa where forests are used and valued in ways similar to those found in the Bamenda Highlands.

MAP 1 • Location of the Bamenda Highlands region, Northwest Province, Cameroon, and approximate distribution of forest in 1987

