

Gouvernance et participation dans la gestion des ressources forestières au Cameroun : Impacts inattendus sur les pratiques foncières*

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Abstract

The protection of forests is not a new preoccupation in African countries. There already existed a homogeneous forest legislation for the African countries under French domination since 1935. However, attention was given to the regulation of the utilitarian aspects of forest management without taking into account the stakes of a sustainable management of the environment. The exploitation of wood and the control of extraction quotas were the main concerns, but not the environment.

After having attained independence and having become sovereign states, the former colonies opted for the continuation of the colonial legislation.

As the states grew more mature, their legislation began to show a clear trend towards more ecological concerns. But the weakness of the regulatory frame could not cope with the rapid increase of resource extraction and other human activities such as agriculture and hunting, which led to an accelerated decline in forests. Until the Rio Conference in 1992, the model of management remained heavily influenced by that of the forestry State (“*État forestier*”): it was based on the State’s monopoly to manage the resource, with all the prerogatives involving the distribution of exploitation rights and of tax collection that this entails. In this system, populations living in the zones where the resources are extracted did not benefit from the fruits of this very profitable forest exploitation. Besides being marginalized, they were also required to obtain special authorization from the administration in order to have a restricted access to the resource. Analysts agreed that such exclusion bears a risk for the concerned resource. As professor De la Mettrie noted in an analysis on forest and agronomy policies in 1990: “An estate that is appropriated by the State with no respect paid to procedures of customary allocation, with no real approval of the populations and with no benefit for them, becomes ecologically endangered.”

What holds true for an estate (“*terrain*”) is all the more true for the resource it sustains. This conviction was shared by the administration of Cameroon. In the introduction to Cameroon’s official document on forest policy of 1995, it is explicitly recognized that the populations who are excluded from the management and the sharing of the benefits that arise from the exploitation of the resources they have actively helped to preserve cease to feel concerned by the protection of these resources.

The programme of political action is therefore oriented towards the following objective: “to perpetuate and develop the economic, ecological and social functions of forests in the frame of an integrated and participative management that ensures the conservation and the utilization of the resources and of the forest ecosystems in a sustainable way.”

Through pressure exercised by NGOs and those providing funds, and with the help of international cooperation, governments implemented new regulations and modern tools of control and of management. Today, many programmes and projects funded by international cooperation require the increased participation of civil society. Thus, on the ground, the exploitation of the forests, which represents a significant budgetary reserve, was to be continued with the objective of seeking to establish an equilibrium between exploitation and regeneration, as well as the participation of the local

□ Governance and Participation in the Mangement of Forest Ressources in Cameroon and its Unforeseen Impacts on Land Use Practices

populations in the benefits of growth.

It was only in 1994 that Cameroon initiated an ambitious programme of reform of its forest policy and of the sustainable management of renewable forest resources. This reform has produced real tools promoting participative management: the promotion of social forestry through the creation of a new category of forests, viz. community forests, and of spaces, viz. community hunting spaces. These two new institutions are open to exploitation by the local populations for their own benefit with a less burdensome procedure.

The sharing of certain forest tax revenues among the State, decentralized collectivities (*communes*) and the populations living in the areas where the activities of forest exploitation are carried out has been institutionalized. But these reforms do not bring the expected results, for endogenous as well as exogenous reasons¹. The present article presents the changes that can be observed in the management practices of farmland and natural resources (*pratiques foncières*). It suggests that these practices be considered as popular modes of political action. Populations seem to use the management of land and natural resources as a tool for passive resistance against a new order each time the latter fails to represent their interests in an adequate way.

At the local level, the aim of this research is to assess the real impacts of forest and environmental policies on the farming communities. It looks at the social as well as at the environmental impact, approaching the management of land and natural resources as an implicit social fact through which it is possible to understand the games the actors play. The stake is to reconcile the conservation of vital spaces for biodiversity with the frequently conflicting and vital interests of the local communities in these spaces for their survival.

¹ But, eleven years after Rio, the Johannesburg Summit closed on an alarming note: the destruction of forest ecosystems is increasing exponentially. Quite a paradox, if one considers that the quasi-totality of the concerned countries have implemented or are currently implementing modern tools of management and, in principle, have the means to control the exploitation. The “participatory management” once advocated as an alternative to deforestation is questioned today.

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