

WORKING PAPER SERIES

# **ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA**

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**INSTITUTIONAL DEFICIT, REPRESENTATION,  
AND DECENTRALIZED FOREST  
MANAGEMENT IN CAMEROON**

**ELEMENTS OF NATURAL RESOURCE SOCIOLOGY  
FOR SOCIAL THEORY AND PUBLIC POLICY**

By

Phil René Oyono  
March 2004



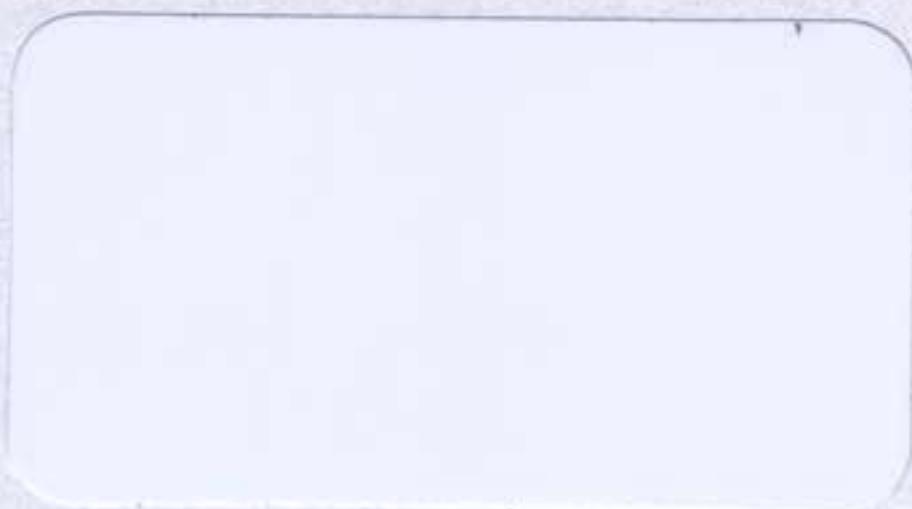
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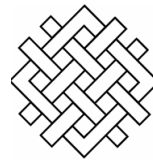
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## ABSTRACT

Evolutions in the international context at the beginning of the 1990s—carried on a wave of democratization and liberalization, and coupled with internal demands for change—inevitably resulted in an environment of profound socio-political, institutional, and structural change that would shape development across sub-Saharan Africa. The decentralization of forest management in Cameroon is a part of this process, benefiting from national advances, but also falling victim to a multilevel crisis necessitating correctives. Decentralization of forest management is both a policy and a political option within a larger body of reforms. Oriented towards forest governance, the current decentralization process can be summarized as a transfer of management rights and responsibilities to peripheral actors, local groups, and local communities.

Conducted in the East, South, and Northwest Provinces, this study aims to provide an explanation and understanding of the organizational and institutional infrastructure of decentralized management of Cameroon's forest—also referred to as “local forest management”—and the mechanisms of the transfer of powers and responsibilities to decentralized entities. The study also questions the ecological and socio-economic results of these processes. It shows that in Cameroon's forestry domain, the institutional arrangements necessary for local management of common pool resources are either non-existent or insufficient, hence the notion of “deficit.” Under such conditions, the higher objectives of local management and forest governance are largely bastardized by a profusion of interests that determine the heterogeneous strategies of manipulation and appropriation of forestry income in Cameroon.

What ensues under deficit conditions is a deviant decentralization of forest management and its “capture” by a village forestry elite, supported and fed by the external actors. This occurs as the organizational infrastructure (village committees), in coalition with an elite from the urban centers (external elite), subverts managerial control and uses it as a socio-political and symbolic resource, which they channel “upward,” toward the rest of the “gang” (in a mild sense of the term). In these social and tactical circumstances, the local forest management committee members generally evolve into “free riders,” resulting in what can be called the “trivialization” of representation, and, ultimately, “the tragedy of representation.”

The study demonstrates that the Cameroonian model of decentralization of forest management is, in the end, an interrupted process, blocked mid-way to fruition by forces on the regional level (mid-level actors) and by a village elite. The findings give rise to a theory of deviation and of a pattern of regional “capture” of forestry localism and decentralized management. The central State, having failed to establish regulation mechanisms and an approach to monitor the process in all its length seems to have been caught short, leaving decentralization in the hands of networks and mid-level actors whose primary interest is financial gain. This shift permits the diversion of forest governance and the setup of legal “gangsterism” in a field where corruption and abuse of power was already deeply entrenched.

This study also enumerates different forms of instrumentalization of decentralized management of Cameroon's forests, as well as the indicators of socio-economic and

ecological counter-performance linked to current social and institutional arrangements. The prerequisites that define collective organization are scattered throughout this social and political experiment, although too sparingly to favor the emergence of robust norms and rules of local governance. In the absence of strong codes, self-interest, opportunistic strategies, as well as individualistic behaviors, infect decentralization, impeding the establishment of mechanisms that could enable local people to take over local management and development processes, and root them in their local society.

The failure to establish local rooting also raises the issue of “ownership” of decentralization by local communities. Despite setbacks and fetters, the Cameroonian forest management decentralization experiment represents a step forward. It can be re-worked and re-equipped in the light of social and policy research to function better. Decision-makers can then be charged with directing the process away from the current damaging tendencies to re-centralize and informalize powers through manipulation by mid-level actors, elites, timber companies, and representatives of local communities. In short, the Cameroonian experiment in decentralized forest management—a public policy issue of which representation is the crux—is inextricably linked to the broader critical question of how different actors are positioned to access all of the country’s resources, to participate in their management, and to distribute the revenues which they produce.

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### **World Resources Institute**



## ACRONYMS

<b>CIFOR</b>	Center for International Forestry Research
<b>GIC</b>	<i>Groupe d'initiative commune</i> (Common Initiative Group)
<b>MINAT</b>	<i>Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale</i> (Ministry of Territorial Administration*)
<b>MINEFI</b>	<i>Ministère de l'Economie et des Finances</i> (Ministry of Economy and Finances)
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>SNV</b>	<i>Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers</i> (Netherlands Development Organization)
<b>WRI</b>	World Resources Institute

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\* Known since August 2002 as the Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale et de la Dècentralisation (Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization).

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

The central African country of Cameroon has an area of approximately 475,000 square kilometers.<sup>1</sup> Having been a German protectorate from 1884 to 1918, the country was then governed for forty years as a territory under French-British mandate. In 1960, it became independent. As Stark (1980:113-123) notes, the changes in the colonial power created a variety of political and administrative cultures. From a bio-geographical perspective, Cameroon has four major ecological regions (Gartlan 1993:111). The largest of these is a dense rainforest, which covers 40 percent of the national territory (Letouzey 1985), and is the focus of this study. The study examines recent attempts to decentralize the management of the forests and the revenue derived from their exploitation.

Cameroon's forest resources have great potential. On the whole, 175,000 square kilometers have been identified by the government as production forests. Although precise data on production and employment is difficult to obtain, it is estimated that in 1995 the country's timber production was about 2.3 million cubic meters (OIBT 1995:10-12), and that by 2002 it had increased to 4.6 million cubic meters (Karsenty 2002). It is also estimated that the commercial forestry industry employed approximately 30,000 people in 1995<sup>2</sup> and contributed close to 8 percent of the gross national product, while in 1999 production was valued at US\$9,187,000. The extraction of Cameroonian timber begun under German colonization,<sup>3</sup> became more highly structured under the French (Meniaud 1948:23-25), and reached its peak—quantitatively and qualitatively—at the end of the 1980s (Buttoud 1991:179-182; Rice and Counsell 1993:69-70). The exploitative structure gradually took the form of sprawling interwoven networks of management by European countries, including France, Italy, the Netherlands and Germany. Buttoud (1991:180) has demonstrated how the post-colonial State, concerned by increasing its revenue, encouraged both supply and demand, and initiated innovative strategies of collaboration with the European operators. However, Karsenty (2002) notes that, since the mid-1990s, the forestry sector has attracted more and more national operators, including senior political and military figures.

The economic significance of forest exploitation in Cameroon is matched by its social importance. The ties between people and the forest, well illustrated by Vansina (1990:17-30), are a key factor in understanding current issues. These structural ties, which are both symbolic and practical in nature (Oyono 2002a:6; Diaw and Njomkap 1998:6-10), determine the material and cultural stability of these societies.<sup>4</sup> They reflect an ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates of surface area varied during the colonial period. According to Mveng (1985), in 1899, at the mid-point of German colonization, three estimates of the area of the territory were made: 478,000, 480,000 and 493,600 square kilometers, respectively. In 1911 the Germans measured the area of what was then called Neu-Kamerun at 750,000 square kilometers.

<sup>2</sup> This figure has surely grown since 1995. Despite the absence of reliable data, there is reason to assume that the forestry sector, which is very active with the increase in individual enterprises (Bikié et al. 2000: 10-20), is today an important source of new salaried jobs.

<sup>3</sup> According to the geographer Jean-Félix Loung (personal communication), commercial logging in Cameroon began in 1892.

<sup>4</sup> The population of the regions consists of sub-groups of the Pahouin ethnic group (see Alexandre 1965: 26-33) and peoples of the Kwasio group (Maka, Djem, Nzimé and Bajouer from East Cameroon).

relationship between people and resources (Pourtier 1992:13-16). It is this symbiosis that led Oyono et al. (2000:10-16) to conclude that the forest is the natural and socio-cultural “home” of local communities. There are also high political stakes involved in the management and commercial exploitation of the dense Cameroonian forest. The populations that settled across the southern part of Cameroon throughout the nineteenth century see themselves as “owners” of the forest, thus giving their discourse regarding it the stamp of legitimacy (Oyono and Diaw 1999:14-20). However, the modern State, in the process of establishing itself, developed another discourse, in direct opposition to that of the native forest populations,<sup>5</sup> whereby it declared itself to be the rightful “owner” of the forests. This legal dualism has often led to open disputes and symbolic as well as material conflicts (Bigombé Logo 1996; Verhagen and Enthoven 1993:7-13). Moreover, it has been complicated by the arrival of other parties, such as timber companies and agro-industries, whose interests are profit-motivated.

The restructuring of the public management of Cameroon’s forests has occurred in a context of profound economic recession, which has been ongoing since 1988, as pointed out by Tchoungui et al. (1995:112-119). Furthermore, a fifty percent devaluation of the local currency (the CFA franc) in 1994 and the establishment of a program of a structural adjustment program, increased the impoverishment of the most vulnerable sectors of the population. According to Mosser-Cléaud (2003:67), fifty percent of the country’s population is affected by poverty. This in turn has dramatically increased human pressures on forest resources (Kaimowitz et al. 1998:57-63; Oyono 1998:558-559; Essama Nssah and Gockowski 2000:3-7). Both rural and urban populations, motivated by the precarious state of their livelihood due to the drastic drop in their incomes,<sup>6</sup> have developed new strategies to access forest resources, thereby accelerating their exploitation (see Ndoye et al. 1998:2-9).

Cameroon, like almost all of the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa (Bratton and van de Walle 1997:160-185), has, in relative haste, reorganized the framework of its political system during the last decade. Governed until the beginning of the 1990s according to an “authoritarian principle” (Mbembé 1995:131-152), the Cameroonian political structure has, over the past decade, progressively opened itself to an emergent democracy. With a given diversity of political thought and a degree of pluralism, the political opening has resulted in a stream of legislative and administrative changes.<sup>7</sup> The arenas of power—that is, the “spaces” or “spheres” in which people participate and contribute to decision-making—have been changed to favor “non-State” actors and civil society. The decentralization of the management of Cameroonian forests and of the profits from their commercial exploitation may be regarded as part of this transition to democracy. Quite obviously this is a matter of crucial significance, in terms of both the interests at stake and the number and nature of the actors involved (Karsenty 2002; Milol and Pierre 2000).

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<sup>5</sup> Hence, the language conflicts whose maturation was nourished by a new political consciousness born of the democratization initiated at the beginning of the 1990s.

<sup>6</sup> Oyono (1998:555) documented this drop in rural purchasing power. In the East Province, the main regional focus of the case study, the average annual rural income dropped from US\$83.50 to US\$20.00 over the 1994-1996 period.

<sup>7</sup> We can cite the law on multiparty systems (1990), the rural reform law (1992 and 1993), the new forestry law (1994), and the new constitution that heralds administrative decentralization.

## Objectives and methods

A key element of Cameroon's forest-sector decentralization was to establish a community management organizational infrastructure composed of village—or local—management committees. This structure, which was prescribed by various legislative acts and orders of the central State, was intended to enable policy choices liberated by forestry reforms to be adapted to local social conditions. The committees represent the village populations in all of the transactions related to the establishment of decentralized management. As such, they interact with a multiplicity of actors, in addition to the local communities: non-governmental organizations (NGOs); municipal authorities; central government administrative authorities; Ministry of Forests officials; timber companies; operators of small-scale sawing concessions; and the local elite living in urban centers (commonly called the “external elite”). The process of local management involves three main sets of actors: 1) the central State; 2) the mid-level actors enumerated above, who play an important role in political innovations; and 3) the local communities.

This report presents data supporting the following hypothesis. Lacking adequate institutional arrangements (notably, mechanisms for upward and downward accountability) and being prey to external interests, the process of local forest management is captured and confiscated at the middle levels of organization with the complicity—voluntary or imposed—of the village committees. Under these circumstances, improvements in the standard of living, in equity and in ecological sustainability, which the reforms are intended to produce, are delayed and compromised.

The research was carried out in thirty villages, located in five different sites (see map, Figure 1: Dimako/Mbang and Lomié (both in the East Province); Ebolowa (South Province); Mount Cameroon (Southwest Province); and Oku (Northwest Province). The Dimako site, where the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR's) Adaptive Collaborative Management Research Program, contains a council forest, and Lomié is an experimental site for the establishment of community forests. Work on the decentralized management of forestry fees was carried out at Mbang, Dimako, and Ebolowa. The last research site, Oku, in Northwest Province was selected for comparative purposes and is outside the forest region where the study was focused. It was chosen because both the political culture and the traditional social systems are significantly different.

Our research methods combined the following:

- An extensive review of theoretical and empirical systematic interviews with relevant institutions and organizations in urban centers;
- Extensive participatory observation at the local level;
- Analysis of historical trends;
- Structured and semi-structured interviews with key informants at the local, provincial and central levels;
- Focus group discussions at the local level; and
- Elaboration of agro-ecological matrices.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> An "agro-ecological matrix" is a map made to characterize an agro-ecological landscape (usually mixed agricultural, pastoral and forest space) in a given area at a given time.

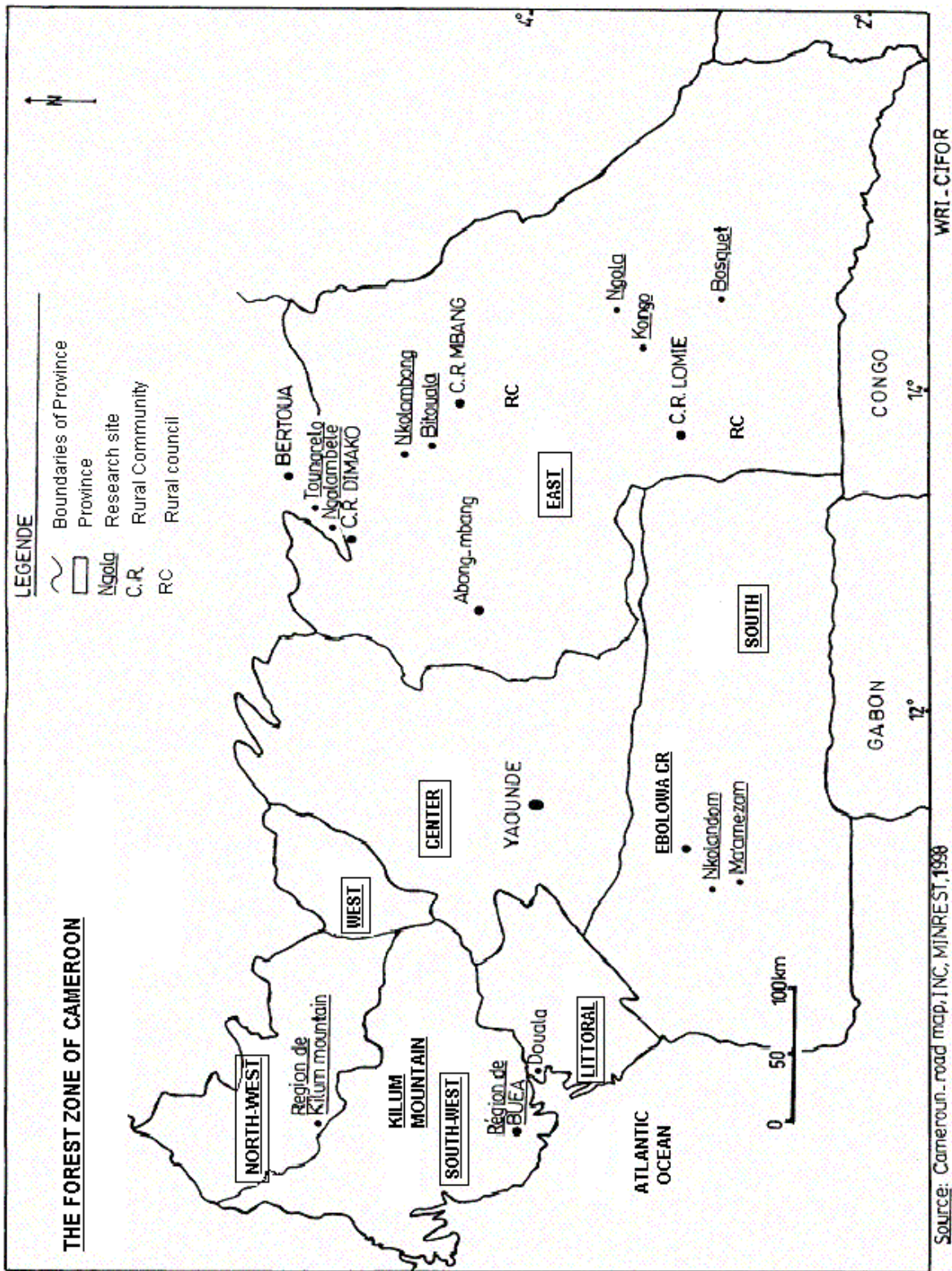


Figure 1: Location of the Case Study (Southern Cameroon forest region)

The information collected allowed us to characterize the system of public management of Cameroonian forests and to understand what occurs when organizational systems resulting from the reforms are superimposed upon others that are more firmly anchored. The data also provided an invaluable basis for analyzing local representation and accountability and for developing our conclusion on the “retention and capture” of the decentralized management of Cameroonian forests.

### **Conceptual and theoretical framework**

Decentralization is an act by which the central State grants powers and responsibilities to lower-level institutions and to local actors (Mawhood 1993:3-4). Defined as such, it can assume several forms (Manor 1999:4-5; Larson 2000): geographical decentralization (in other words, deconcentration); bureaucratic or administrative decentralization (another version of deconcentration); fiscal decentralization; and democratic (also known as political or functional) decentralization.<sup>9</sup> Manor (1999:8-10) and Ribot (2001:4-5) define democratic decentralization as a process through which powers and resources are transferred to actors who represent local populations, and are in return, by definition, accountable to those populations. The actors in democratic decentralization should ideally be elected. This form of decentralization, which is based on representation and accountability, is supposed to transfer aspects of decision-making to local populations, thereby increasing public participation and efficiency of public service provisions, and empowering local citizens (Agrawal and Ribot 1999:4-8; Francis and James 2003:325-334).<sup>10</sup> Tabetsing (2003:10) purports that, in a context like Cameroon’s, decentralization is comprised of all that is passed from the administrative monolith to diverse managers once territorial unity is achieved. When applied to the management of natural resources, democratic decentralization can generate a greater sense of ecological responsibility among non-State actors, environmental justice and better governance (Overdevest 2000:692-693; Wellstead et al. 2003:3-9; Steel and Weber 2003:120-126).

Public participation and democracy require, in principle, clear mechanisms of representation (Pitkin 1967). As such, representation presupposes that a person or a group of persons have powers and rights allocated to them by a larger group of persons at a given time. Under liberal principles however, “free and transparent” elections are the most accountable mode of “representation-building” (Lonsdale 1986; Ribot 1999b:19-21). In that sense, representation implies that values and actions of representatives correspond to those of the general public (Pitkin 1967), that is it should reflect citizens’ interests. Therefore, according to Wellstead et al. (2003:3-6) “representatives mirror who they represent.”

Numerous studies have tackled the issue of accountability. According to Dubnik (1998:6) and Keohane (2002:2) accountability derives from Old French equivalent *comptes à rendre*, in other words “the rendering of accounts.” Oakerson (1989:114) says that “to be

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<sup>9</sup> There is a great deal of confusion regarding the conceptual differences among these variants of decentralization.

<sup>10</sup> All of the theoreticians studying this question agree that this is the best variant of decentralization.

accountable means to have to answer for one's action or inaction, and depending on the answer, to be exposed to potential sanctions, both positive and negative." Accountability, as such, is a "power relationship" based on information and sanctions (Oakerson 1989:114; Keohane 2002:2-3). When accountability is generated by a democratic mode of governance it fulfills a double requirement: it gives one both the right to be accounted to and the responsibility to account to others. Brinkerhoff (2001:2-4) distinguishes three types of accountability: "democratic, or political, accountability"; "financial accountability"; and "accountability for the performance of services."

Ribot and Veit (2000:2-3) and Ribot (2001:2-4) refer to upward and downward accountability. Upward accountability is the accountability of actors, such as locally elected bodies, to the administrative staff of political parties, regional governments and the central State. Downward accountability, which is the central mechanism of democratic decentralization, is when representatives and elected bodies answer for their actions to the citizens they represent (Gonella et al. 1998:86-88). Quoting Schedler (1999:13-28), Keohane and Duke (2002:2-3) note that "when there is democratic accountability, A is accountable to B when A represents B and is therefore obliged to keep B informed of his actions and responsibilities, to justify them, and to be subject to rewards for good conduct or penalties for bad conduct." Francis and James (2003:325-336) talk of "horizontal accountability" when democratically elected local politicians interact with local administrators.

The decentralization dealt with in this study involves, as already indicated, three levels of actors: central, regional or mid-level, and local. Mawhood (1993:19) and Huang (1996:655-659) define the "central" level as the organizing centralizing State, and the "local" level as local communities. There is also a regional, or "middle" level, which occupies an important place in this study. It serves, along with State representatives, sub-national authorities and council authorities, as the link between the central and the local bodies. Seen in this way, decentralization presupposes, among other conditions, a democratization of relations between the central and the local (Oyugi 1993:134-137). The dynamic of transferring powers for community-based management of resources to non-State actors consequently depends on the ethical and material values of democracy (Berezin 1999:230-232).

Although initially concentrated on issues related to local governments, the literature on decentralization has moved gradually toward the problems of local and community-based management (Fisher 1999). The concept of collective action, which leads to the question of institutional arrangements for the local management of common pool resources,<sup>11</sup> is of considerable importance in theoretical and empirical research (Olsen 1965:16-92; Wade 1987:219-230; Ostrom 1990:33-76; Berkes 1996:87-93; Thomson and Schoonmaker 1997:59-97; Klooster 2000:1-20), a position uncontested by the current work. This suggests the need for user groups to define collective, operational, and "constitutional" rules for controlling the access to and use of common resources. Wade (1987:190-192) defines collective action as an action carried out by a group of people seeking to attain a

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<sup>11</sup> The question of common pool resources has been at the center of scientific investigation for close to four decades, occurring as it does at the confluence of social systems, ecological systems, ownership rights and sustainability considerations.



common goal or satisfy a collective need. Ostrom (1990:35-57) widens the perspective and underscores the institutional dimension of this concept: for her, collective action is “a body of rules, directives and normative mechanisms erected, in the case of common resources management, to provide for monitoring, resolution of conflicts, and application of sanctions” (see also Meinzen-Dick and Knox 2001:41-60).

The rules,<sup>12</sup> directives, and obligations established locally for the management of community forests and forestry income may, like laws and administrative decrees, be regarded as “institutions” (Thomson and Schoonmaker-Freundenberg 1997:57-69 and 132). Such institutions constitute the social and ethical foundations of “management organizations” (North 1990:5-6). To that effect, the basic principles of institutional theory suggest that the tenability of renewable resource usage is dependent on the configuration and functioning of the community organizations and institutions that are mandated to manage and regulate the resources (North 1986:230-237; Froger:1977; Rutherford 1996:23-98; Lynch and Harwell 2002:3-15). However, these community organizations do not function in a monolithic way. Institutional analysis highlights the conflict that, in situations of collective action, occurs between “social individualism”<sup>13</sup> – based on the self-interest resulting from the individualistic and strategic motivations of homo economicus—and “social holism,” see, for example, Field (1979:49-72) and Eggertson (1990:26-72).

The present research project draws on this proliferation of conceptual indicators and theoretical foundations. It attempts to identify the deficiencies present in the organizational and institutional infrastructure of the decentralized management of Cameroonian forests, and to assess their impact. In order to do this, it seeks to:

1. Define local actors and assess the powers they hold;
2. Assess rural representation in the decentralized management of forests in light of Overdevest’s “representative democracy paradigm” (2000:685-696), Pitkin’s “descriptive representation,” Wellstead et al.’s “representation of subjective interests,” and Kuhn’s concept of “social leadership” (Kuhn 1966:487-490);
3. Decipher accountability mechanisms in these situational structures; and
4. Determine the weight of local collective action in the decentralized management of forests.

The study attaches less importance than Mahwood (1993:3-10) and Huang (1996:655-660) to opposition between the central State (to which the regional or mid-level actors are linked) and the local level, also emphasized by some political ecology theorists (O’Connor 1998:98-105). It also puts into perspective Karsenty’s argument concerning the “revenge of local communities.” Karsenty (1999:8-11) argues that locals who have been excluded from access to forest resources and income and they therefore want to “revenge” their exclusion by themselves partaking in exploitation and benefits. This paper argues that, in response to overall conditions in Cameroon, the central and its

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<sup>12</sup> These are residual rules implicit in interior rules, except in the forestry fee management committees.

<sup>13</sup> Institutional economic theory describes the individual as a social atom acting outside of the norms for his own benefit (Field 1979: 49-72). On the other hand, for authors such as Elster (1983: 99-117), the individual is conditioned both by self-interest and social norms.

regional representatives and the local coalesce through an alliance of interests and, rooted in this fertile ground, it outlines a theory of the “capture” of local committees within the sprawling operational networks of the “Forestry State.” Furthermore, this study provides a nuanced view of representative democracy, commonly presented in exclusively positive terms as beneficial (Overdevest 2000:686-690), and questions the validity of this absolute characterization, as in Knopp and Kaldeck (1990), cited by Wellstead et al., *ibid.*

# THE CONSTRUCTION OF A SYSTEM OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT OF CAMEROON'S FORESTS

## Introduction

The decentralization of the management of Cameroon's forests is, in essence, an enterprise of the State.<sup>14</sup> It is the central State that determines the potential roles of other actors, who are subject to decentralization reforms made by the State and then decide whether to adopt or reject them (Karsenty 2002). In order to appreciate the significance and implications of this point, it is necessary to look at the historical context. This chapter thus provides an historical overview of Cameroon's forest management. It shows how both the colonial and the post-colonial State, (Diaw 1998:3-8; Muam Chi 1999:10-17), enforced a uniform adherence by imposing a technical, or expert, management approach. Thereafter, as part of the restructuring of its systems, the central State agreed to decentralize forest management. In that sense, decentralization appears as a process of deconstructing this "Forestry State," which had assumed the place of local communities (Karsenty 1999:10-11; Bigombé Logo 1996:3-6).<sup>15</sup>

## Centralism and State Hegemony

It is said that colonizers professed to have found lands in black Africa that were "unoccupied and without masters" (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1982:65-70). This notion gave rise to a concept of a "legal void," which was introduced in Cameroon by German colonizers through the imperial edict of June 15, 1896. After the German period, the British and, to an even great degree, the French continued to act on the basis of these exclusivist postulates. Thus, through German edicts (of 1896, 1900 and 1913), British decrees (of 1916, 1927, 1937 and 1948) and French legislation (1920, 1926, 1935, 1946, etc.), the rights of native communities with regard to their own forest ecosystems were repeatedly and consistently negated (Diaw and Njomkap 1998:21; Muam Chi 1999:10-38).

Olinga (2001:8-14) maintains that the public options for forest management in Cameroon were articulated around two central legal provisions resulting from a law on State lands promulgated on January 12, 1938.<sup>16</sup> The entire body of lands belonging to the State was,

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<sup>14</sup> The State and the populations come to forest ownership discussions with different assumptions, resulting in an awkwardness of language. 'Forest populations', when they evoke the process of requesting a community forest according to the State offer of decentralization, want to know "if you have to ask for something that already belongs to you historically?" For more on this matter, refer to Diaw and Oyono (1998: 22-25).

<sup>15</sup> The Cameroonian initiative of decentralization of forest management is a pioneering model for all of the sub-region of the Congo Basin (after the Amazon, the largest forest in the world). In this regard, see Nguinguiri (1997: 5-14). The lessons learned from this experimental process, significant for the formulation of policies and research, should serve to demonstrate its potential for replication in the sub-region.

<sup>16</sup> According to Olinga (2001:15), "Not having taken a revolutionary approach after Cameroon's accession to independence, the juridical structure of the management of Cameroonian forests will sink into paralysis, like several sectors of the state apparatus that deal directly with political and social reforms.... A continuity

in Chapter 1 (Title 1) of the law, defined as “unoccupied lands without masters” or land “not having the regular title of owner or user.” There were, nevertheless, various concessions and dispensations to this law which accorded certain ownership and usage rights to natives. Through this legal “compromise,” the notion of a permanent forest estate, which put 80 percent of forestland under the ownership of the State, was transformed to meet administrative and operational exigencies.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Configuration of Decentralization**

In line with the reconstruction of its political system and the institutionalization of public participation, Cameroon promulgated a new forestry legislation in 1994.<sup>18</sup> It divides the forests into “permanent” and “non-permanent” forest areas: the “permanent” forest domain is formed by State’s forests (protected areas, council forests and forest concessions). Community forests are part of the “non-permanent” forest domain. The decentralization of forest management plays an integral part in these institutional changes.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the Law of December 1990, regarding freedom of association and that of August 1992, regarding Common Initiative Groups (*Groupes d’initiative commune*—GICs) and cooperatives opened up arenas of power and responsibility to civil society and non-State actors (Oyono and Diaw 1998:6-13). Organizational systems involving GICs generated new local initiatives for agricultural development and for the management of natural resources (Oyono and Temple 2003:68-78), thus becoming incontestable instruments of community action in rural Cameroon.

Table 1 below summarizes the powers and rights transferred to local communities and their legal basis. The Cameroonian decentralization ‘model’ is built on three fundamental “yields”:

1. the potential for villages to create and manage community, or village, forests;
2. the potential for local governments, more specifically councils, to constitute and manage council forests; and
3. the potential for village communities situated within or bordering logging sites to which they have traditional rights, to have access to the profits generated from them through a decentralized forestry taxation system.

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in institutional and statutory centralism adopted during the colonial period appears in current laws. All exploitation (of the forest) is subject to obtaining a permit issued by the forest administration under the exclusive control of forestry agents for whom decree No. 86/230 of March 13, 1986 specifies the wearing of uniforms and rank insignia, and the bearing of arms and munitions.”

<sup>17</sup> This “compromise” is even more entrenched today, as demonstrated by an analysis of the process of establishing the Zoning Plan for Southern Cameroon, for which the State tried to obtain a paradoxical compromise between the affirmation of ownership rights of the forest and the recognition of village lands as “separate goods.”

<sup>18</sup> From 1990 to 1994, the Tropical Forestry Action Program discarded the scientific and methodological bases of the forestry code reform, starting with a diagnostic of current forestry policies, all at the behest of the World Bank (Kuwik 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Unlike the Sahelian countries, where the process of decentralization was initiated by deconcentrating administration (Ouattara 1999: 39-40), the Cameroonian ‘model’ entails the devolution of responsibilities in the matter of forest management.

A fourth “yield”, the pre-emption right, that is the right allocated to village communities to exploit, as community forests, small concessions of not more than 2,500 hectares called “*Ventes de coupe*”, is not tackled by this study, because it is a discontinuous process not requiring any form of community arrangement or collective behavior. It is an individual right.

**Table 1: Transfer of Powers and Rights to Local Communities in Current Forestry Legislation**

Powers/Rights/Abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rights attached to the ownership of resources</li> <li>• Customary or usage rights</li> <li>• Access to a portion of the income foreseen in article 61 (3) of the Law and defined in article 66 (1); notably, part of the income from the sale of forestry products and all of the contribution toward community projects</li> <li>• Anti-brushfire surveillance and fire fighting</li> <li>• The right to oppose the classification of forests and protected areas</li> </ul>
Relevant Aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploitation of council and community forests</li> <li>• Exploitation of all of the forestry, fauna and water-based products from all private forests</li> <li>• Income from the exploitation of forestry resources</li> <li>• Conservation of resources</li> <li>• Exploitation of forestry resources</li> </ul>
Legal References	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articles 7, 16 and 17 of Law No. 94/01</li> <li>• Articles 8, 26(1), 30(2), 36 and 86 of Law No. 94/01</li> <li>• Article 68(2),(3) of Law No. 94/1 and article 85 from the Enforcement Decree</li> <li>• Article 7 from the Enforcement Decree</li> <li>• Articles 6, 18 and 20 (1) from the Enforcement Decree</li> </ul>

SOURCE: Adapted from Yantio Yantio 2000:27.

The decentralized forestry taxation system has two components: annual forestry fees and a “village eco-tax.” Not actually a form of taxes, the forestry fees are sums paid annually by timber companies from the logging of forest concessions, or Forest Management Unit (UFAs); 50 percent goes to the State; 40 percent goes to the rural council to which the forest is attached; and 10 percent goes to villages communities in each rural council with forest concessions under exploitation. The village “eco-tax” is a payment of US\$1.50 per cubic meter of wood cut in smaller concessions (*ventes de coupe*), which is made to the

populations residing in the area as compensation for cutting rights or a kind of “royalties.” The latter fee is the most remunerative: for example, it generated US \$42,000 for discretionary use by a group of villages around Dimako city in 2000 (Mendouga Mebenga of the Forêts et Terroirs Project, pers.comm., Dimako 2001).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The payment of forestry fees to local governments (to *communes*, or council, in English, for example) and to village communities may be a form of fiscal decentralization whenever it supports the functioning of local governments (Smoke 2000: 2-3). For a qualitative and quantitative approach to forestry fee management in the context of the WRI/CIFOR Research Program, refer to Bigombé Logo (2003: 6-20).

## **EMPIRICAL EXTRACT: THE OPERATION OF THE LOCAL FOREST MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

### **Introduction**

The State undertook the task of decentralizing forest management with the aim of attenuating the “*authoritarian principle*” in forestry (Karsenty et al. 1977:44-45; Egbe 1997:2-7; Karsenty 1999:4-6).<sup>21</sup> This move to redistribute power and provide arenas for public participation in decision making can be deciphered and explained from several angles. The review by Vabi et al. (2000) of the juridical, social and technical aspects of community management in community forests has posted markers along the paths of understanding, while Ekoko (1998:6-16), Egbe (1997:3-12) and Olinga (2001:3-14) have analyzed the nature and significance of the legal instruments of successive forestry codes in Cameroon. This chapter provides an overview of the social and organizational foundations on which the Cameroonian “model” of decentralized forest management rests.

### **Basic Social Organization in South Cameroon**

All of the societies among which this study was located, except those of the Northwest Province, are organized according to what anthropologists have called a “non-hierarchical model.” Ngoa (1968:22-47), Ruel (1969:19-55), Laburthe-Tolra (1981:99-139), and Geschiere (1982:1-33; 1995:43-86) have documented the morphology of these forest societies, concluding that, despite the existence of recognized leaders,<sup>22</sup> authority and power are highly dispersed, establishing a kind of “stateless communities” at the end (Mamdani 1996:40-41). Because of the principle of fluid spatial grouping, individuals are *de facto* distanced from any source of authority. This is in contrast to the structure of societies in the Northwest (the extension study site), where power is more concentrated, and the links to authority very dense (Delarozière 1949:8-13; Fisiy 1994). The next chapters will show how this form of socio-political organization is affecting local management in a decentralized context.

During pre-colonial and colonial eras, traditional society accommodated community-based organizations built on solidarity (De Thé 1970:17-62; Maquet 1971:217-229). They included breakaway groups, socio-economic associations, multi-purpose aggregates, and so forth. In all cases, their characteristics were derived from the key norms of the societies in question: respect for blood ties, relative pluralism, and social egalitarianism. Oyono (1998b:7-13) recalls that colonial enterprises and, in a sense, the

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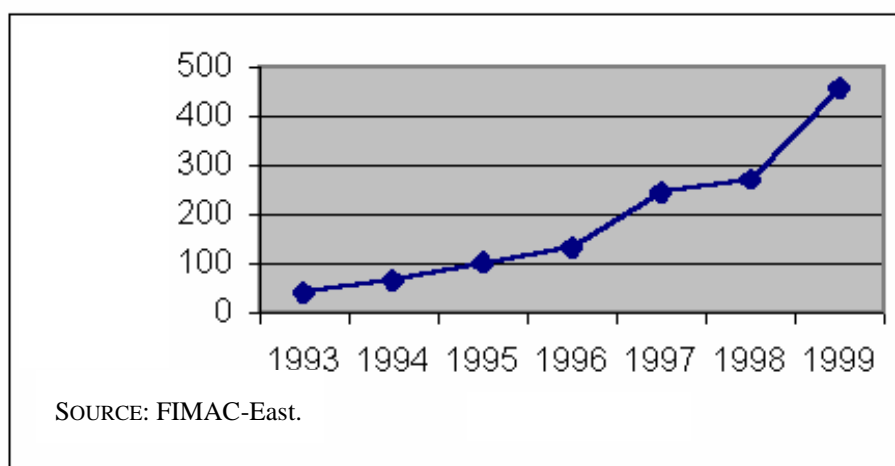
<sup>21</sup> This principle is a carry-over from the juridical system of appropriation and management of forestlands associated with colonization. As has already been emphasized, it remains a factor due to politically-motivated pursuit of control of the forests and income from their use.

<sup>22</sup> Though it has often been said that Cameroon’s “forest communities” lack leadership, this is not at all the case. There is an atomization of political hegemony as it functions within each lineage, yet sources of power and tangible authority, both material and symbolic, are in force. The socio-political order may be diffuse, but it is not acephalous. Based on plural powers, it can be said that the operative authority in these societies is a community authority (Ruel 1969: 133-136).

agents of Christianity, traumatized and disrupted these arenas of common social action.<sup>23</sup> Without completely suppressing them, the colonial administration and, the post-colonial administration, disturbed their social and ethical roots. For instance, during the 1960s the post-colonial administration superimposed, sometimes by simple reformulation of existing structures, organizations such as the *comités villageois de développement* (Village Development Committees), *groupements d'agriculteurs modernes* (GAM), and State cooperatives, all of which were less immersed in societal norms and values than their predecessors.

The transition to some democratic principles, which has overtaken Cameroon since 1990, has given rise to a number of legal innovations, including Law No. 90/53 of December 19, 1990, on freedom of association,<sup>24</sup> and Law No. 92/006 of August 14 1992, legalizing cooperatives and GICs. In the context of the new dispensation, numerous rural micro-organizations have metamorphosed, very often with the operational support of NGOs and bilateral and multilateral cooperation projects.<sup>25</sup> From the start, the NGOs and projects in question believed they could create genuinely cooperative institutions through a local iteration of the principles articulated by Axelrod (1984:1236).<sup>26</sup> Figure 2 hereafter illustrates the exponential increase in organizations, which—as we will see later—led to confrontation with traditional institutions and authorities (Oyono 2002b).

**Figure 2: Registrations of New Forms of Rural Organizations (GICs) by Deconcentrated Services of the Ministry of Agriculture in the East Cameroon Province, 1993-1999**



<sup>23</sup> As was the case for young boys' age-group associations, viewed by the colonial administration and the Catholic Church as an impediment to the boys' education.

<sup>24</sup> Two days later on December 21, the multiparty system law was also passed.

<sup>25</sup> Besides the projects, NGOs (national and international) and parastatal organizations such as SODECAO, a special unit - the CUROR (Central Unit for Rural Organizations Reform) - was created within the Ministry of Agriculture, with the financial support of the World Bank. Intense organizational metamorphoses followed. In addition to vectors cited above, administrative authorities touring the villages and politicians on the election trail widely propagated the idea that populations must create GICs as the means to access income available from donors in favor of rural development (Ticha and Tchakouté 1996: 4-12). The increase in rural organizations was so great that a village of 200 inhabitants could group together 8 to 10 GICs; hence the expression "fictive GICs," very widespread in the NGO world, with regard to this abundance of rural organizations (Oyono and Diaw 1998: 6-19; Etoungou 2003).

<sup>26</sup> We should note that Axelrod's work, in fact, treated larger-scale institutions.



## **Local Management Committees**

The application decree (the Regulatory, as opposed to Legislative portion of the law) of forestry Law No. 94/01 of January 20, 1994 requires a village community to become a legally recognized entity and “to make itself officially recognized” in order to acquire a community forest and to manage the forestry fees. Four years later, a joint Order (No. 000122 of April 29, 1998) by the Ministry of the Economy and Finance (MINEFI) and the Ministry of Territorial Administration (MINAT) prescribed ways in which income destined for village communities from logging can be used. According to this Order, villages located around or in forest concessions must create forestry fee management committees. Before that, the Ministry of Forests, through the Community Forests Development Project, had also prescribed the creation of committees for the management of community forests. A stream of organizations were created—or reconfigured—in the study zone in less than three years in response to these requirements. These organizations are of three main types: community forest management committees, forestry fee management committees, and, as a third variant, council forests management committees. The community forest management committees and the forestry fee management committees function essentially at the village level, while the council forest management committees cover an entire council. In Francophone Africa, the council (*la commune*) is, at least on paper, a local government established at the level of a District and headed by an elected mayor, surrounded by an elected municipal council.

These three types of committees are the focus of this research. The study examined six community forest management committees, six forestry fee management committees and one council forest management committee.<sup>27</sup> The research confirmed the observation made in the previous section that external actors operating in the localities concerned have played an essential role in the emergence of these committees. Thus, for example, the Dutch NGO, Netherlands Development Organization (SNV), provided support in the Lomié community forests, while the Forêts et Terroirs Project played a similar role in the Dimako Council Forest. However, the forestry fee management committees were created as a result of the actions of mayors, District administrative authorities (*sous-préfets*), and regional officers of the Ministry of Forests under the provisions of the joint MINEFI/MINAT Order of April 29, 1998. Municipal authorities, through a deliberation, created the Dimako Council Forest management committee.

## **Mechanisms for Rural Representation – and Misrepresentation**

The decentralization of forest management is occurring at a time of considerable change at the local level. Of particular significance is the return to the village of the external elite (retired civil servants, unemployed individuals with diplomas, and others excluded from the urban system since the beginning of the 1990s), and the drastic social effects of the economic recession. When combined with the proliferation of local organizations in the

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<sup>27</sup> These are the community forest management committees of Kongo, Ngola and Moangué-Le-Bosquet (Lomié district, East Province), Aboh (Oku, Northwest Province) and Ando’o (Beng-Bis, South Province); the forestry fee management committees of Toungrelo, Ngolambélé, Bitouala and Kolemboung (Mbang and Dimako Districts, East Province), Nkolandom and Ma’anemezam (Ebolowa District, South Province); the Dimako Council forest management Consultative Committee (Dimako District, East Province).

forest zone, this provides an interesting setting in which to study the concept of rural representation and a relevant framework to assess social leadership in a public issue, as induced by the “game” played at the intersection of external elite, rural elite and “simple villagers.” Such a concern would cover the area of natural resource management as well as the management of other resources and politics. In the whole it affords a view of the mechanisms for “reinforcing civil society” (Lonsdale 1986:126-187; Crook and Manor 1998:16-46; Ribot 1999a:18-20; Ribot 1999b:23-65; etc.), for creating “representative democracy” (Overdevest 2000:685-696; Pacheco 2002:5-12), “local democracy” (Sundar 2001:2010-2018; Kaimowitz and Ribot 2002:3-10), or unfortunately, for generating “the representation of subjective interests” (Wellstead et al. 2003:5).

### ***Modes for Constructing Representation***

For the purposes of this study, the critical mechanisms for constructing rural representation are the procedures for choosing or appointing members of the village committees created in response to the changes in forest policy and aiming at “backing,” at the local level, the decentralized management of forests. Five different modes of appointment were observed: competitive elections, appointment by consensus, statutory appointments, self-appointment, and co-optation. They are described below.

Competitive elections are generally presented as the best way of achieving representative democracy (Ribot 1999:2-5; Ribot 2001:14-19; Overdevest 2000:685-690). In the Dimako Council Forest, the elective mechanisms functioned, in a mostly transparent manner, under the supervision of experts from the Forêts et Terroirs Project (Assemble 2000:2-6). Each of the seventeen villages that make up Dimako Council is represented on a Forest Management Consultative Committee. In eleven of the seventeen villages, there was more than one candidate for the position of village representative to the committee, with an average of five candidates per village. In the Ngola, Kongo, and Moangué-Le-Bosquet villages (Lomié District), where community forests are being managed, executive posts in some committees are held by individuals chosen through electoral competition. In this case, SNV, which provided technical support for the creation of the community forests, facilitated the process.<sup>28</sup> In the Mont Oku zone (Northwest Province), all the villages held competitive elections.

Appointment by consensus was observed in Dimako Council. In each of six villages, one member was appointed to the Dimako Council Forest Management Consultative Committee through consensus, selected from candidates who offered to be the village representative. Representation of the village populations on the community forest management committees of Kongo and Ngola (Lomié District), and on the forestry fee management committees in Nkolandom and Fe-eyop (Ebolowa District) was determined in the same manner. Appointment by consensus is rooted in the historical patterns of representation in the zone covered by the study. According to the villagers, there are

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<sup>28</sup> The involvement of external actors in creating rural organizations often results in failure, due to a tendency toward methodological reductionism. A perfect illustration is the documented failure of the Yanasha Forestry Cooperative, in Peru; instituted by USAID and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the common pool resources group was designed without taking into account Yanasha’s social structures. See Morrow and Watts-Hull (1996: 1941-1967).

individuals who, due to their status and integrity, are able to negotiate alliances, eventually resulting in consensus.

In the case of *statutory appointment*, committee members are appointed on the basis of their existing official status, in accordance with the relevant legal provisions. This is the case, for instance, in the nine non-village members and seventeen village representatives that make up the Dimako Council Forest Management Committee. According to Assembe (2000:4-6):

The provisions of article 2 of the Municipal Deliberation enlighten us as to the quality of members of this commission. The composition of the Consultative Committee is the following: The president is the mayor or his representative; the councilor is the representative of the Forêts et Terroirs Project ; members are the presidents of each commission of the Municipal Council (Public Projects, Social Affairs, and Finance), the mayor's general-secretary, the head of forestry operations, the head of agricultural operations, the head of the Bakoum-Pol grouping, and an elected representative of each village.

*Self-appointment* is a form of representation in which individuals—such as village chiefs, notables and the elite appoint themselves as members of a committee. The Ma'anemezam and Féeyop forestry fee management committees in the Ebolowa District are constituted in this way. In Bitouala, in the Dimako District, the village chief admits to having appointed members of the forestry fee management committee without consulting the population. The duration of the mandate of members of these committees is not specified.

*“Vertical” co-optation* occurs when a village chief, already self-appointed as a member, then co-opts his dependents, supporters or individuals who have obligations to him as members. It is common in the formation of forestry fee management committees, as, for example, in five villages in the Dimako District. The term vertical co-optation is used to distinguish it from statutory appointment, which might be regarded as “horizontal” co-optation.

### ***Indicators of Rural “Misrepresentation”***

Democratic decentralization is founded on locally accountable representative authority, ideally through local councilors and other elected authorities (Ribot 1999b:36-42). Its advocates using the theory of public choice as a referent (Bromley 1991:37-183), and argue that it will shorten, or even eliminate, the distance between the point at which decisions are made (which was previously the center) and the specific populations that stand to benefit from the decisions. Thus, a local committee's main concern would be to fulfill the needs and aspirations of the local community. However, the way in which such committees are formed and operate can affect the degree to which this occurs in practice.

Most of the modes of committee formation described above, particularly statutory appointment, self-appointment and “vertical” co-optation, are not democratic in nature. The only genuinely democratic form, that of competitive elections, made a weak showing. On average it was used to select only 10 percent of committee members, while the self-appointment model accounted for the selection of 43 percent, appointment by consensus 20 percent, and statutory appointment and vertical co-optation together 27

percent. The result is that most of the representatives of local populations involved in the decentralized management of forests are members of the elite, such as chiefs and those based outside the village, the “external elite.” In the Koungoulou and Echiambor villages, for example, the community forest committees were “captured” by urban-based elite who wield control from their city bases. It is quite often this elite that negotiates with timber companies and other loggers (Bouki and Aya’a-Aya’a 2002:4-6). In other words, the current system of representation does not create institutions established to defend the communities’ interests. In some cases, the selection of committee members is contested because of this lack of social legitimacy (Assembe 2000:6-9). Part of the problem can be attributed to the joint MINEFI/MINAT Order of 1998, which encourages the involvement of administrative and municipal authorities in the functioning of forestry fee management committees. According to Articles 4 and 5 of the Order:

The management of income destined for local communities is assured by a Management Committee, hereafter designated the “Committee,” and instituted in each beneficiary community. The Committee is placed under the guardianship of the nearest administrative authority (the *sous-préfet* or the *chef de District*). The Committee provided for in article 4 is composed as follows: the president, being the mayor of the commune or his representative having the status of municipal counselor; six representatives of the village community; and the local representative of the Ministry of Forests.

Moreover, the problem was exacerbated by the fact that the forestry fee management committees were assembled hastily. The administrative authorities and timber companies suggested to communities, sometimes in an authoritarian manner, the use of statutory appointment, self-appointment, and co-optation as methods of selecting members. In some instances these mid-level actors actually instructed villagers to appoint certain individuals as committee members, thus creating for themselves a local clientele. The villagers are aware that no preliminary analysis guided the effort by outsiders to construct a rural representation, and that the ways their societies function were not even minimally taken into account.

Rural representation in the local management of Cameroonian forests then is essentially “neo-patrimonial” in character<sup>29</sup> (Bratton and van de Walle 1997:61-63), with, as it will be evidenced in the next sections, the personalization of power and rights and the confusion between the “public” and the “private.” Through an overlapping of formal and informal practices, this insures the perpetuity of the “power of those that have the power.” As such, many of these representatives are motivated by individual strategies of socio-economic mobility and by what Wellstead et al. (2003:1-11) call “subjective interests,” rather than by local communities’ substantive interests. This is inconsistent with the principles of “collective choice” that underlie genuine democratic representation (Ostrom 1990:50-54 and 192-195). These empirical elements also show that the method of constructing representation does not necessarily determine how well that

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<sup>29</sup> The word “patrimonial” is derived from the French word *patrimonialisme*. *Patrimonialisme* and *neopatrimonialisme* are usually associated with chefferies and political regimes. We use *neopatrimonialisme* here because of its aptness in describing the functioning and effect of the management committees, as they are connected to the administrative apparatus.

representation will be exercised. Even when representatives have been selected through competitive elections—in accordance with democratic norms—there is no guarantee that the representation will be based in common interests or the substantive interests of those being represented.

### **The Powers of Local Management Committees (the Representatives)**

The powers and responsibilities of the committees are defined, on the one hand, by administrative orders and legal instruments and, on the other, by the mandates given to them by the village communities that they represent.<sup>30</sup> This section examines the nature and extent of the powers held by the three types of committees created for the purpose of decentralized management of forests in Cameroon: community forest management committees; forestry fee management committees; and the Consultative Management Committee of Dimako Council Forest.

#### *The Nature of the Committees' Powers*

The powers of community forest management committees are prescribed by Law No. 94/01 of 20 January 20 1994 (which concerns the management of wildlife and fish as well as forests) and its enforcement decree of 1995. The Law states that:

All communities desiring to manage a community forest must hold a consultative meeting of all components of the community toward appointing the local body, which will be responsible for managing said forest and for defining its boundaries and objectives. This community must be organized as a legal entity in accordance with legislation in force.

This Law gives a great deal of power to the body responsible for community forest management. The fact that it is the committee as a whole that has the ultimate responsibility for forest management, places it in the position of liaison with all of the external actors. The Law does not specify a limit to the scope of this responsibility. As for specific situations in the villages that were visited, the community forest management committees have received two powers from “above” or from the “top”—the central State and the administrative sphere: 1) that of interface between the populations and external actors; and 2) that of monitoring establishment of a simple management plan—the schema that will define the management modes of a community forest.

The forestry fee management committees were set up by administrative and municipal authorities, in response to the joint MINEFI/MINAT Order of 29 April 1998. No real power has been transferred to village management committees, apart from the one “to represent” village communities. In some villages, these committees found themselves in competition with previously existing entities, such as village development committees (Bigombé Logo 2003:34-46) and customary/local authorities (Oyono et al. 2002a:8-10). In other villages, for example in the Mbang District, these committees have not managed to establish an organizational base and are just keeping their heads above water.

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<sup>30</sup> Manual on establishing and managing community forests also provides orientation.

The Dimako Council Forest Management Consultative Committee was established by Deliberation No. 01/D/CR/DKO of the Dimako Municipal Council, a decentralized assembly representing the villages of Dimako Rural Council.<sup>31</sup> The Committee is composed of seventeen members appointed by the seventeen villages of the Council, together with “statutory” members recruited from the municipal authorities and State administration. Dissonant and contradictory determinations—unfortunately typical of Cameroonian administration—plagued the emergence of this organization. Because confidence in the Municipal Council had been eroded, it was unable to win sufficient support to represent the population over such a crucial matter on its own (Assembe 2000:5-6); a separate committee dedicated solely to this task was more attractive to the local populations. However, the committee’s powers are very limited. They are defined by the Municipal Order that created it. Since the Committee is cohabiting with the Municipal Council, which normally has its own mandate for representation, it comes to be regarded as merely an extension of the Council, a superstructure without significant meaning.

The powers described above are powers previously held by the center, which have been transferred downward to the committees. However, since the committees are in their very essence representative of local communities, or of the constituencies, powers have also been transferred upward to them, in other words from the “bottom”. The powers transferred upwardly to these committees mean that they serve as an interface with external actors. In this respect, their role is to represent and defend collective or

substantive interests and take reasonable measures to assure an equitable sharing of forestry fees and income from the commercial logging of associated forests. These responsibilities are social and political in nature; they are not directly ecological, though their exercise has an ecological dimension. Some of the committees have constitutions designed specifically to emphasize their role in representing local community interests. Examples are the Dimako Council Forest Management Committee and the Lomié

**Box 1: The Trivialization of a Management Committee**

A Management Committee has been created...and has as its objectives: (a) to participate in all of the operations convergent on the classification of this forest and its benefits to the Council; (b) to propose to the Municipal Council any suggestions toward a healthy, profitable, transparent and sustainable management of said forest; (c) to propose to the Municipal Council a balanced plan for use of the income through judicious selection of projects on a village-by-village basis... The objective of the Committee is to manage the Council forest. This Committee does not act as a substitute for the Municipal Council; it assists the Municipal Council in developing matters to be put to decision. It serves as interface between the populations and both the Municipal Council and the forestry administration. It assures representation of the villages. It formulates questions on forestry operations in the Forest. Any decisions (of the Committee) are only propositions that are then addressed to the Municipal Council; the latter can then ratify, amend or reject them.

SOURCE: Deliberation No. 01/D/CR/DKO of the Dimako Municipal Council.

<sup>31</sup> Study of the implementation of this order will serve sociological and political ecology research seeking to draw lessons from the structural and institutional limits of the decentralization of Cameroonian forests. The Dimako Council Forest is one of sixteen of this type envisioned in the Southern Cameroon Zoning Plan. For more on the sociological ramifications of the classification of this forest, consult Diaw et al. (2001: 44-50). For the legal status of Dimako Municipal Council, see law no. 74/23 of 5 December 1974 on communal organization.

community forest management committees, which have statutes and modes of self-regulation drawn up with the assistance of NGOs and externally funded projects (See Box 1.).

### ***The Extent of the Committees' Powers: a Minimalist Transfer and Centralizing Tendencies***

The situation of the village-level forestry fees management committees call for thorough examination. A look at the joint Order reveals that they do not operate independently. It should be strongly noted that in each rural council, all the village management committees are headed by a “regional committee,” a “committee above committees,” hereafter the “Committee.” In actual fact, Articles 4 and 7 of the Order state that the said “Committee above committees” is placed under the supervision of the closest administrative authority” (a *sous-préfet* or a *chef de District*) and that “to accomplish its missions, the Committee needs a certifying officer (to handle expenses) and a comptroller.” The village committees are thus controlled by three external forces which function as a kind of executive committee: the *sous-préfet* (or sometimes the Divisional Officer himself, the *préfet*), who also serves as committee head; the mayor, who is the certifying officer for village project expenses; and the municipal receiver, who acts as the comptroller for the Committee.

This is what the joint ministerial order enunciates about the Committee:

On the basis of identified needs, the Committee shall: adopt programs and work plans and corresponding budgets; allocate resources to each program (project) according to priorities and available income; and monitor and control execution of projects financed by community income. Programs and work plans may include and are limited to: conveyance of water, electrification, construction and upkeep of roads, bridges, works of art or sports equipment; construction and upkeep or the equipping of educational establishments and sanitary facilities; acquisition of medicine; and any other projects of value to the community.

The constant and decisive involvement of the mayors and *sous-préfets* in the functioning of the village-level forest fee management committees is of particular significance. In most cases, it is they who manage the forestry fees for the village communities. The authoritarian nature of this interference and the many cases where committees have been taken over by these actors, has discredited the process of fiscal decentralization in the eyes of the village communities. In the Ebolowa District, for example, the popular attitude to the powers of the village level forestry fees management committee—and the reports that engender this attitude—are generally negative. Local resistance has developed, although for the time being it is confined to verbal comment and discursive reactions. “We no longer want this policy,” a group of young people from Fe-eyop said on 13 July 2001. “It’s a cheat. If forestry income comes back to the administrative and council authorities to be managed, they will continue to enrich themselves by it.” On March 16, 2001, another group of people from the same area reported that:

To our knowledge, the “regional committee,” in other words the Committee, has never really met (despite the requirements of the Order). Furthermore, the mayor

does as he pleases. He even influences the selection of village-level committees' members. When the people of our village ask him something, he says he will send a letter. The village committee is a hollow body. The mayor and his friends are the sole managers of forestry fees.

As for the Dimako Council Forest Management Consultative Committee, it is clear from the Municipal Deliberation under which it was created that its responsibilities are very limited and that it is subordinate to the Municipal Council. Moreover, under that Deliberation, the Committee's responsibilities diminish over time, thus limiting the future of village participation in the management of the Dimako Council Forest. Assembe (2001:3-6) makes the following comment on that particular point:

The Committee, as its name indicates, is only a consultative organ, that is to say, it can only make proposals.... Given its lack of power, one must have reservations about its potential and ability to invoke dynamic change in sustainable forestry management. The fact that the proposals are obligatory is no obstacle to the organ invested with decisional powers (the Municipal Council), which can dismiss what has been recommended.

For the purposes of this research, an important issue is the effectiveness of the village committees as managers of common-pool resources: community forests, forestry fees, and council forests. Focus group discussions in the research areas, analysis of the parties/actors involved in forest management in each village, and analysis of local discourse, all indicate that the existing committees are, in most cases, ill-equipped to perform this function and that, in the eyes of the populations they serve, they do not have any direct ecological mandate. This is partly due to the fact that the committee structures are essentially transplanted (Dia 1996:10-19; Ribot 2000:34-39); the responsibilities given to the committees, whether from above or from below, do not have any social or historical legitimacy. As Diaw (1997:4-8), Diaw and Oyono (1998:27-39) and Oyono (1998b:7-14) have already documented, indigenous institutions are constitutionally recognized as legitimate managers of common pool resources, while imposed structures, such as common initiative groups and committees, are of superficial importance.

Scott (1990:28-34), referring to "domination and the art of the resistance," analyzes the operational dimension of power and its relation to action as well as to "deciding to act." In a related context, Agrawal and Ribot (1999:4-7) distinguish four types of powers in relation to the decentralized management of renewable resources: "the power to make decisions and to enforce them; the power to create rules and/or modify them; the power to settle disputes with regard to the establishment of rules; and the power to enforce penalties on the basis of established rules." The committees examined in this study have not received real powers, either from above or from below. In a study based on political economy of social forestry in the West African Sahel, Ribot (2000:32-46) illustrates that local authorities as *groupements* do not in practice make decisions, resulting, he concludes, in the failure of public participation. Similarly, in Cameroon, the responsibilities transferred to the committees from above are weak and lack consistency, and they have received nothing from the local populations they represent—in other words, from below—that bestows them with the power or authority required to support "local collective action," in the sense of Wade (1987:190-195) and Ostrom (1990:22-60).



## Accountability and Rural Representation<sup>32</sup>

Two forms of accountability have been identified in the field of local forest management: upward accountability—for example, of the forestry fee management committees to the mayor and municipal tax collector; and downward accountability—of the committees to their local communities. Both are critical to the exercise of “ethical, social, and democratic” accountability (Gonella et al. 1998:45-48; Ribot 2001:78-83). However, downward accountability is of particular importance in this study, because it is the very essence of democracy. Downward accountability creates counterbalances; for example, it gives local people the power to demand service from those who have been given powers to make decisions on their behalf. It also crystallizes a social contract between representatives and those they represent (Brinkerhoff 2001:16-17). Downward accountability is structurally and functionally different from upward accountability. In upward accountability, those who must account for their actions are subject to pressure from the forces above, that is, the politico-administrative machine (see Bachrach 1976:93-103).

In the Dimako Council Forest Management Consultative Committee, there is very little downward accountability. It has already been noted that the Committee exists only “for show.” It is functionally and organizationally dependent on the Council, of which it is gradually becoming a mere component. Moreover, its statutory members (such as the mayor, the *chef de poste forestier*, and presidents of the Municipal Council Commissions) and the administrative authorities have appropriated decision-making power for themselves, depriving those members who represent the local communities of any substantive authority. These community representatives, whose actions are subjugated to those of the Council authorities, do not account for anything to anyone in the community. According to widespread local opinion, the Council intends to deal with this forest as it pleases despite the fact that the villagers view it as historically their own. The first commercial logging operations in the forest will start shortly. The local communities, therefore, will henceforth be principally concerned with getting their share of forestry income (Karsenty 1999:10-13); the question of an equitable access to profits is accordingly already being posed with acuity (Oyono 2002b:6-10).

The forestry fee management committees are more interesting. As already noted, the joint ministerial Order for the management of forestry fees places the mayor (an elected authority) and the *sous-préfet* (a nominated administrative authority) effectively in control of the management of forestry fees at the village level. Although local communities should be responsible, at least on paper, for determining the socio-economic priorities to be financed in the villages and for monitoring their achievement (Bigombé Logo 2003:33-57), and to the instrumental character of various village committees, it is very often the mayor (and/or the *sous-préfet*) who determines priorities, establishes community projects, and manages the funds paid by the logging companies. According to Efova (2000:3-6), this is what comes out from the local discourse in some villages of the Ebolowa District:

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<sup>32</sup> In the original French version of this paper, the author noted that *la reddition de compte(s)* is the only concept available in French to designate the English term, “accountability.”

The mayor is everything: manager, president, treasurer.... We think that, if the local populations are to benefit from the development of the forests, they must truly assume all of the responsibilities that are attached to it. The mayor already manages the 40 percent that is allotted to the *Commune*, according to the forestry law; now he takes our place in managing the 10 percent allotted to the local communities.

However, although the mid-level actors dominate the committees, the village representatives are not completely excluded from the “game.” Working together, mid-level actors and various management committees form an opportunistic alliance—a forestry “gang”—with the objective of diverting the forestry fees allocated to the village communities for their own personal ends. No members of this strategic alliance—municipal authorities, administrative authorities, or village representatives—account for their decisions, behaviors, or actions to the village communities (Oyono 2002b:5-15; Bigombé Logo 2003:33-35). The impact of these alliances has become increasingly evident over the last three years. The situation in Ma’anemezam village (Ebolowa District), where alliances woven between the mayor and local committee members are regarded with much suspicion, is a striking example. The situation is similar in Bitouala, Nkolembong, Toungrelo, and Ngolambélé, in the Mbang and Dimako Districts; that is, there is a significant shift of representation and social leadership from the defense of substantive and collective interests to that of subjective and individual interests.

The capture of the village committees by municipal and administrative authorities delegitimizes them and dilutes their role, and this in turn limits their upward and downward accountability. Thus, since the village committees have been stripped of actual responsibility, they cannot assure upward accountability; as Angu Angu (2001:8-9) noted in the Lomié neighborhood, they have “nothing to say.” Similarly, there is no comprehensive or regular downward accountability; local communities are provided with no more than fragmented information; for example, the dates when fees are due to be remitted.

As Assembe (2001:3-5) reports:

The committees are not accountable and do not publish reports of expenditures. The most striking example is the case of Toungrelo, in the Dimako District, where the committee, aided by highly placed accomplices, is accused of having diverted around US \$14,000.... There is tacit complicity between the administrative authorities and some committee members.... Judging by what can be observed one could conclude that, from the time the directors actually receive money into their hands, the practice of submitting a public financial accounting is forgotten.

The community forest management committees experience similar problems of accountability. An example is the small-scale logging of some community forests in Lomié District, which began slowly at the end of 2000 and accelerated in 2001. The

wood stocks were cut with a portable saw<sup>33</sup> and put on the market. The division of profits from the sale created considerable conflict. The management committees were accused of diverting sums of money. In the case of Echiambor village in the Lomié District, the chairman of the committee diverted US \$8,500 in 2001. Efoa (2002:4-5) showed that the local communities do not know exactly how much profit comes from the wood sales, while Klein et al. (2001) emphasize that, since the community forest management agreements were signed, the external elite have invaded the committees, with the aim of manipulating them and diverting the profits. Etoungou (2003:22-45) reports the following comments by people in Ngola village (Lomié District):

Everything is in a real shambles since the signing of the community forest management agreements in Lomié. We find ourselves with three contracts for the same forest. Certain rural leaders now go to stay overnight in the inns at Abong-Mbang (the main town of the area) and return with new clothes, food provisions, red wine, and sometimes whiskey. There are a lot of wrongs being committed. What's shocking is that [the leaders] answer to absolutely no one.

There have been efforts to control these problems in the village of Moange-Le-Bosquet, where community forest management operates under the guidance of SNV. SNV suggests proceeding in ways that reflect a reasonable approach to community forest management. However, despite their efforts, there is a notable difference of opinion between the committee and the local community over the management of forestry income (Bouki and Aya'a Aya'a 2002:4-7).

### **Paths of Assessing Accountability Mechanisms**

Ribot (2001:78-83) identified twenty-two mechanisms that promote accountability. In democratic decentralization, such mechanisms act as counter-powers; they are elements of what Dahl (1989:108-23) calls a "polyarchy"—a "several-headed" system designed to minimize or eliminate abuse of powers by those to whom the responsibilities have been transferred. This section gives concrete examples of some of these mechanisms in operation—and some others we have added—in order to provide a greater understanding and appreciation of downward accountability in the decentralized management of forests in South Cameroon.

### ***Legal Recourse***

There are very few cases where people have resorted to legal action to resolve local forest management issues. In the village of Toungrelo, in the Dimako District, some important persons filed a complaint against the local forestry fee management committee to force it to account for the funds received, but the *sous-préfet* subsequently asked them to withdraw the complaint. In the Lomié region, despite a great number and variety of efforts to demand information on profits from community forest management

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<sup>33</sup> The populations were very reticent to use this instrument. From interviews carried out in the villages it is evident that this mode of logging demands a large work force. The populations refer to a "return to the indigenat."

committees, in only one case have individuals resorted to legal recourse. This was a complaint filed by the people of Echiambor village against the president of the community forest management committee; the matter is currently under consideration. Similarly, although there is evidence of the diversion of forestry fees by mayors, representatives of the central State and sub-national authorities, the local communities have never sought to bring these authorities to justice (see Bigombé Logo 2003). This apparent reluctance to take legal action reflects the aversion ordinary citizens have for modern judicial systems (Oloka Onyango 1994:463) and their lack of confidence in State institutions.

### ***Balance of Power***

A “balance of power” is a situation in which the powers given to elected officials or representatives of the society are counter-balanced by the rights of the represented to demand accountability. In the decentralized management of forest resources in South Cameroon, such counter-powers exist but they are weak and largely ineffective. For example, we saw earlier in this section that the Dimako Rural Council, having created a Council Forest Management Committee that is only consultative in character, does not respond to pressure from below. The statutory members of the Committee—that is, the Council and administrative officials – appear to ignore the locals’ attempts to make their voices heard. The rural people say that these statutory members are “too high up for us to ask them anything at all.” In this case, the counter-powers simply do not function. In the community forest management committees and, in particular, the forestry fee management committees, the many abuses of power by committee members attest to the weakness of the counter-powers at the village level.<sup>34</sup> They also suggest that part of the problem is the absence of a set of rules with locally enforced penalties.

### ***Third Party Arbitration***

The management of forestry fees as it is currently structured lacks a system for arbitrating or resolving disputes between the committees and the communities they serve. The politicians and mid-level authorities—that is, the mayors and the *sous-préfets*—could facilitate such a system, but they do not, see the case of Toungrelo, mentioned above, where the *sous-préfet* asked villagers to withdraw the complaint they had filed against the individuals who had diverted funds. When communities approach the committees to get explanations for financial misappropriations, the administrative authorities and the police protect the accused (Assembe 2000:6). In the case of community forest management in the Lomié District, the NGOs are equipped to intervene as arbitrators when such situations arise. In the case of Kongo, however, since the NGOs were perceived as partial, their arbitration failed.

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<sup>34</sup> For example, financial misappropriation and private negotiations with the timber companies which do not benefit the community as a whole.

### ***Public Debate and Dialogue***

There is a public record of dialogue regarding “power relations” between the community forest management committee in Moange-Le-Bosquet and the population it represents. However, there is no evidence of such debate in the management of other community forests, nor in the management of forestry fees. The individuals in charge of the forestry fee management committees avoid all public discussion. For example, in the Ebolowa and Dimako Districts, they refuse to engage in open dialogue and regularly instruct the public to address their issues to the mayors. In addition to our observations, Bigombé Logo (2003:17) notes that, in Ebolowa District, the forestry fee management committees do not publish written reports of fund allocations, thereby avoiding public debate.

### ***Proximity of Representatives to the Represented***

As previously shown, the members of forestry fee management committees—or at least a good number of them—tend to orient themselves upward; they are drawn, on the one hand, by the authority exercised by administrative and municipal actors and, on the other hand, by potential payoffs for those who control the resources. In cases where the committee leadership admitted to making a conscious effort to attach themselves more closely to those in authority. Once on this path, they lose the sense of obligation to answer for their actions or fulfill their responsibilities to the people whom they are supposed to represent. Moreover, in the case of the mayors, although locally elected, they take pains to create an ethical and social distance between themselves and those they represent when it comes to transactions tied to forestry fee management. Before the municipal and legislative elections held on June 30, 2002, many candidates for the positions of mayor, municipal councilors, and/or parliamentarians in the forested regions of the country promised to work for more equitable access to forestry fees and good “environmental representation” (Galega and Oyono 2002). According to the rural people, these candidates were no sooner elected than they forgot their campaign promises and distanced themselves from the village communities.

### ***Dismissal and Renewal of Representatives***

In both Bitouala (Mbang District) and Adjap (Ebolowa District), committees were forced to re-form as a result of popular pressure, and in Nkolandom (Ebolowa District) two committee members were dismissed due to their excessive abuse of power. In Moangué-Le-Bosquet, a Pygmy village, the community forest management committee, the “Communauté Baka du Village Moangué-Le-Bosquet” (COBABO), has already changed its leaders three times since 1999, as a result of internal conflicts. However, such cases are relatively rare. Moreover, the constitutions of the forestry fee management committees in Nkolembong and Toungrelo (Dimako District) fail to include any limits on the term of office of members. This entrenchment of the leadership of most forestry fee management committees is proof that, despite numerous accusations of mismanagement, those in charge are strategically connected to the administrative and municipal authorities, and thus shielded from attempts to remove them.

### ***Social Movements and Resistance***

Public resistance is one of the favorite themes of eco-sociologists and theoreticians of environmental justice (see, for example, Löwe 2002:121-127; O'Connor 1998:93-103). The shortcomings of the local forestry management committees have aroused a few such protests. For example, when the forestry fee management committee in Toungrelo was accused of diverting US\$ 14,000, the local people raised their voices in demonstration. Similar public reactions have been noted in Adjap (Ebolowa District), Kongo (Lomié District), and Kolembong (Mbang District). They have been most effective when local communities, particularly their younger members, have opposed the extension of commercial forest exploitation activities when they have received no significant financial compensation. This was the case in Akok (Ebolowa District) in June 2002, when a group of young people blocked trucks carrying timber, protesting against the lack of “royalties” received locally. Overall, however, public protests have been minor in scope and impact.

### ***Witchcraft as Recourse***

Witchcraft, in the African psyche, is an essentially evil, harmful practice (Geschiere 1995). For societies that function on the basis of maintaining an equilibrium, however, sorcery has an ambivalent aspect; though considered an evil force, it is also a tool for “social leveling”: villagers who enrich themselves illegally and to others’ detriment should, quite legitimately, be “eaten” by sorcerers (Arens 1979), or punished by ancestors with a “mysterious death” (Kiernan 1982). Committee members who act as “free riders” could find themselves in this category of potential victims. As the practices involved inhabit the symbolic realm, on the cusp of the visible and the invisible, case examples are hard to find. However, a case is reported in Feeyop (Ebolowa Division), in which a witchdoctor threatened the president of the forest fee management committee with “reprisals” if he continued to divert monies (A. Zeh, personal communication, June 22, 2001).

### ***Social exclusion***

The threat of social exclusion presents itself as another means of influencing representatives to account for their actions to those they represent. If account is not given, the person accused of withholding it is excluded from all public affairs, a dishonor in African villages. Even though there exist cases in which several committee memberships have been revoked, by the villagers themselves, for bad financial management and complicity in the diversion of funds, this study has yet to uncover a case of social exclusion or, in the full sense of the concept, ostracism.

### **The Negative Involvement of External Actors**

In this section, we have examined the Cameroonian “model” of decentralized management of forests and of the income generated from their commercial exploitation, through a study of both the operation of the local, or village, management committees and representation. It is clear that these committees were created by external actors:

timber companies (Efoua 2000:4), administrative authorities (Kouna 2000:6-7), and NGOs (Etoungou 2003:23-26). The case of village-level forestry fee management committees, whose operation is particularly sensitive, is most telling. Bigombé Logo (2003:15-16) notes that in the case of the South Province, it is the governor himself that asked the *préfets*, *sous-préfets*, and *chefs de District* to create forestry fee management committees in the villages. In many other cases, it is the mayor who has set up these committees in the villages. Box 2 shows how a *sous-préfet* and other external actors are involved in the setting up of forestry fee management committees.

**Box 2: A case of the meddling of external actors in the emergence of local committees**

The *sous-préfet* of Yokadouma District, Mr. Guiakam Jacques, recently undertook on his own the official installation of the presidents “appointed”—not elected—to forestry fee management committees. The *sous-préfet* asked that these newly promoted committee members assure the transparency in managing the funds to be allotted them. Immediately upon taking office, they were enrolled in a training seminar presided over by a representative from the Ministry for the Environment and Forests, with the principal technical advisor from GTZ. It can be noted that Yokadouma District currently has five forestry fee management committees, located in Bidjouki, South Pon-Pon, West Pon-Pon, South Konambembé, and West Konambembé.

SOURCE: Camnews, March 03, 2003.

It is equally evident, as will be shown in the next sections, that the committees have subsequently been “captured”—or taken over—by the elite, including both an administrative elite and an urbanized, or external, elite. Thus subjugated, the committees answer to these actors and not to the village communities. Ordinary members of these communities continuously emphasize that the local committee members “do what they want in terms of forestry fee management, with the support of the mayors” (Efoua 2000:6-9; also see Kouna 2001:8-10).

There are variations in the social and historical bases of the committees, and therefore in the mechanisms for appointing members, defining powers and responsibilities, and the nature and extent of downward accountability. However, the empirical evidence assembled in this study indicates that most of the village-level management committees lack local legitimacy, and function as an instrumental extension of the domination of the central administrative apparatus over the process of decentralized management of forests. Under these conditions, downward accountability is seriously compromised at the point of institutional and social connection between committees and the village communities.

## **SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND ECOLOGICAL OUTCOMES**

### **The Primacy of Social Distortions**

The decentralization of the management of Cameroonian forests has had both positive and negative social effects. On the positive side, it has created a profitable new landscape, in which forest peoples, who were marginalized socially for so long, can stake a claim. The Pygmies of East Cameroon are an obvious example. Although considered by historians and ethnographers to be the first inhabitants of the Congo Basin (Schkopp 1903:284-285), the Pygmies were never taken into account in Cameroonian forestry legislation and policies. The post-colonial State has always justified this exclusion by arguing that they were a nomadic tribe—in other words, that they had no defined territory. However, the introduction of community forests has provided new options for the Pygmies. In Moangué-Le-Bosquet village, in Lomié District, for example, they have been granted official ownership rights over a forest ecosystem. Moreover, community forests exploitation has also curtailed the exodus of youth to the cities. The prospect of accessing their own share of the abundant forestry resources has encouraged them to stay in the villages. In addition, community forests show a significant potential in reducing rural poverty. Vabi et al. (2002:39-41) reveal in that sense that the additional net annual contribution of community forests to poverty reduction in the Cameroon's dense forest could be estimated at US \$121,000.

On the negative side, however, decentralization has created a new social stratification, a new social elite, and new forms of social conflicts. By creating new organizations for the local management of forest resources, rather than utilizing indigenous institutions, the creators of decentralization dealt their creation a damaging blow at its very base, since they disabled the existing instruments of social regulation (such as respect of elders and traditional dialogue). Disabling these institutions cleared the way for the emergence of a local "forestry elite." Emerging social groups, young people in particular, began claiming a share in the disbursement of forestry income (Etoungou 2003). Even among the Pygmies of Moangué-Le-Bosquet, whose society is more markedly informed by egalitarian and cooperative principles (Guillaume 1989), these tendencies are beginning to become entrenched (Dkamla 2003:4-14).

In addition to conflicts of access to income and to power, the community forest management committee is vulnerable to conflicts between young people and old people and between "those who went to school" and illiterate people. Young people stand out as the most "advisable" persons to interact with external actors, because they "speak French." Provoked by the emergence of a local "forestry elite" and their determination to "eat and drink well from now on," some social groups, especially the youth, use the issue of forestry income as an opportunity to settle old scores and challenge traditional authorities, particularly the village chiefs. For example, in a village in the Lomié District, Karsenty (1999) reported that a group of young people told the older generation: "You've already eaten too much. Now it's our turn."

There have been cases of open confrontation with village chiefs over their interference in the composition of committees (against popular opinion), sometimes resulting in the



ejection of those committee members concerned. These conflicts are part of a wider reaction to the advent of democracy in general, which has created a climate of free expression, a much greater array of options, and an increase in self-interested strategies for accessing benefits in every area of initiative, not just forestry. The resulting conflicts have rendered some sections of society in the East, Center, and South Cameroon Provinces ungovernable (Angu Angu 2001:7-8), with for example young men challenging old persons and village chiefs. The weakness of the organizational infrastructure has thus brought about a state of near-anarchy, or a “panarchy.”

### **Marginal Economic Performance**

The economic impact of the institutional arrangements for community forest management will not be accurately assessed until more time has passed and the rate of forest exploitation has increased. At present, related income is not large enough to have a significant impact; for example, the total income from forestry fees to date amounts to only US \$22,580 in Ngola and US \$17,500 in Echiambor. There is no real economic change in villages selling cut timber from community forests in the Lomié District. Nevertheless, in the village of Kongo, for instance, as a result of a consensus decision, the income from the community forest was used to roof about thirty houses with sheet metal. Moreover, the village currently has US \$10,300 in savings. Some other villages use their forestry fees income to pay for small community projects, such as the re-roofing of schools, or churches. In the case of the Dimako Council Forest, commercial logging is still in the planning stages, and it is too soon to assess the economic impact of the arrangements made for its management. Nonetheless, in some areas, benefits can already be noted.

However, long-term negative effects are more than evident. The primacy of self-interest and individualism prohibit any attempt at coherent collective planning of the use of forestry fees. In the research sites in the East Province, money is shared among individual families, who spend it on food and beverage. This is an unproductive and inappropriate use of the forestry fees allocated to village communities (Bigombé Logo 2003:34-41; Kouna 2001:3-10). Milol and Pierre (2000:3-19) report that, of the 10 percent of the total fees that is allocated to local communities, less than 20 percent is spent on village projects, the remaining 80 percent being diverted. In Lomié District alone, a sum of US \$113,000 was distributed in the villages between 1999 and 2001 as “eco-taxes,” in addition to US \$28,000 from forestry fees. Furthermore, the revenue is seldom invested in productive activities, such as a community credit union, a village stewardship system, or agricultural development.

### **Ecological Uncertainties**

The decentralization of the management of Cameroonian forests has not, to this point, had beneficial ecological effects. In the current state of things, ecological benefit is not even on the agenda. The main reasons are the absence of internal arrangements rooted in the search for ecological sustainability, and the attitudes of the forest populations whose prime concern is to obtain financial benefit from the forests. The latter is of particular

importance. Throughout the region, people are waiting to finally have the money earned from the forests in their hands, after a long historical frustration; for them, the decentralization of local forestry income means that the time has come for them to earn a living from “their” forests. The majority of local communities are thus in favor of rapid logging of the forests; the concept of sustainable management does not arouse much enthusiasm. There is also a significant segment of the rural population, particularly the young, who would like to see an “eco-apocalypse,” the “end of the forests”—achieved by a one-time total exploitation, providing their percentage of the revenues to the current generation within a short period of time (Oyono 2002b:10-13). With the “end of forests,” no actor—whether it be the central State, the timber companies, the networks, the “forestry gangs,” the administrative and council authorities, or even the local communities—will profit from them any longer.

The impact of these attitudes can be seen in Lomié District, where there was a major debate over the choice between small-scale and large-scale, or commercial, methods of exploiting community forests (Klein et al. 2001). The defenders of small-scale methods based their arguments on the need for ecological sustainability and the fear of negative environmental impacts from large-scale commercial exploitation. They included the Ministry of Forests and SNV, which was assisting in the establishment of community forests in the district. Being an organization that promotes sustainable development, SNV advocated small-scale exploitation carried out by villagers themselves, using a special saw called a *gruminette*. However, most of the local people wanted to sign contracts with timber companies who would harvest the timber for processing or export, since this would result in faster and more financially profitable exploitation.

There were months of discussions between the village populations and SNV over this issue. It sometimes seemed that SNV’s concern was excessive. Eventually, the village of Moangé-Le-Bosquet opted for the *gruminette*. Some other villages chose an intermediate mode of exploitation, based on the use of a portable saw called a Lucas mill, which can fell three to five cubic meters of wood a day—considerably more than is possible with the *gruminette*. It is evident that the decision to adopt the *gruminette* was made under duress. As one Baka Pygmy of Moangé-Le-Bosquet stated, “It was our partner, SNV, that promoted the *gruminette*. They brought in the *gruminette*. I would have preferred the Lucas mill, because that would give me at least three cubic meters of wood a day instead of the one per day that I get with the *gruminette*.”

The village of Ngola signed a contract with a company called Gérard L. in 2001. The Ngola community had estimated, through a multi-resource inventory, that their forest contains 38,693 trees, of which 27,563 have a diameter large enough to exploit, resulting in a yield of 220,500 cubic meters of wood. The people said that they wanted to be able finally to live off “their” forest, in the same way that the timber companies, the State and its representatives have been doing. They had identified about fifteen projects to be implemented with the money from the logging. Although we do not have precise data on the rate of exploitation from the Gérard L. company, a “future scenario,” drawn up with a group of rural inhabitants, indicates that this forest will be devastated more quickly than if it had been exploited with small-scale operations—that is, with the *gruminette*. Data from the Kongo community forest, where the communities have also signed contracts with commercial companies, indicates the scale of timber production involved. Between

December 2001 and August 2002, a total of 88,921 cubic meters was extracted from the forest (31,683 cubic meters in Sapelli, 54,729 cubic meters in Iroko, 2,500 cubic meters in Doussié, and nine cubic meters in Sipo) and many other trees were felled and abandoned in the forest.

A related issue is that of ad hoc logging in *ventes de coupe* - small concessions of no more than 2,500 hectares. Karsenty (1999) notes that most local communities prefer the establishment of logging activities in *ventes de coupe* rather than long-term concessions in permanent forest estates. The reason for this is that in the former case the logging companies pay a tax of US\$1.5 per cubic meter tax directly to the local communities, while in the latter they pay annual forestry fees to the State, which are channeled through the forest fee management committees. This is also likely to have a negative impact on sustainability, since the State can more easily allocate *ventes de coupe* to timber companies and since there is less control over logging in the *ventes de coupe*. Ultimately, community forest(ry) as an option is evolving toward a “formal commercial logging” process. Many community forests are currently suspended because, according to the Ministry of Forests, they are very poorly managed (overexploited).

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

Since institutions play a central role in the community management of natural resources (Wade 1987:190-210; Fox 1992:1-36; Beaucage 1994:33-55; Agrawal and Ostrom 2001:75-102), the analysis of these institutions is a major prerequisite for understanding the local management of “common pool” resources. In the previous sections, we presented the findings of our study of the organizations and institutional arrangements involved in the local management of some common pool resources—that is, the community and council forests, and forestry fees in South Cameroon. In this section, we draw some general conclusions from this empirical data. We look at the positive achievements of the forestry reform and at its shortcomings, we ask whether it can really be regarded as democratic decentralization, and we make some tentative recommendations for its improvement.

### Positive Achievements of the Forestry Reform

Despite its instrumentalization of forestry policy and numerous uncertainties, there are a number of positive achievements in the forest policy change in Cameroon. Through trial and error, a dynamic interaction has been created between the various actors involved in the local management of forests. The social dimensions of forestry reforms and decentralization have empowered local communities, even if this empowerment is, at this point, largely symbolic. The channels of communication between local communities and the technical services of the Ministry of Forests are improving. The representatives of timber companies, although often accused of being condescending to the rural people, now admit that they prefer working directly with the decentralized management structures than with administrative authorities and civil servants from the Ministry of Forests, whom they find hard to satisfy and always eager for more money. The committee structure does, despite its many shortcomings, provide an approachable, effective interface in some villages. Moreover, there are ongoing attempts to improve it. For example, in the Lomié region, SNV is endeavoring to develop a positive learning experience out of the current experience, while the Community Forestry Development Project, financed by the Ministry of Forests with British aid, has revamped the “community forests system” and has facilitated the emergence of more appropriate connections between that innovation and its social bases.

Furthermore, the mere fact that the decentralization of forest management in Cameroon was conceived, exists “on paper,” and has been attempted in practice, is in itself a significant achievement. Cameroon’s experiment in forest management decentralization stands as one of the chief socio-political innovations in the Congo Basin and places it several years ahead of other countries in the sub-region, several of which have drawn inspiration from the Cameroonian effort. Despite its shortcomings, the reform stands audaciously apart from all prior public forest eco-system management programs, in both its theoretical scope and what has actually been achieved. By relinquishing some of its

functions and responsibilities, the State has created a sense of promise. And whatever else may be said, central authorities and the legislature can show that they did what was called for; that is enable some decentralization. At an operational level, some re-direction of powers to the local arena has already taken place. Clearly, the lessons that we can learn are profound. Any comparison with the past will show that the experiment has ushered in a new era for local communities and forest populations.

### **Shortcomings of the Existing Institutional and Organizational Infrastructure**

The decentralization of forest management in Cameroon is part of a wider process of externally initiated reform, designed to reduce the role of the State. In the early 1990s, bilateral cooperation and multilateral funding programs required the central States in developing countries like Cameroon to devolve their powers as a condition of continuing aid. Introduced under the guise of a democratic transition, the reform was accompanied by new forms of social, economic and political relations, based on the paradigms of pluralism, participation, good governance and so forth. These developments are rooted in a neo-liberal philosophy that advocates greater involvement of non-State actors.

Introduced in the context of these reforms and under pressure from the World Bank (Essama-Nsah and Gockowski 2000:19-45), the decentralization of forest management was from the start a stopgap, a hasty and myopic process. In drawing up new frameworks of forest management, priority was accorded to bureaucratic and administrative approaches. *A priori*, no attention was paid to social research on the complexities of forest management, nor to the possible strategic support research could lend to the process. Now we see that, *a posteriori*, consideration of the social dimensions of this change was inadequate. Wittingly or unwittingly, numerous questions eluded planners' attention, and these questions have re-emerged today in full force. What social units are adequate for the local management of forests and forest income? What is the best framework of representation? What is the role of traditional authorities—or the process of social differentiation and integration? What of the problems imposed on societies by organizations such as the new local, or village, committees created by the decentralization process, and their impact on the traditional functioning of these societies? What types of responsibilities can be transferred to the committees and be locally validated—including management, legal, social, and ecological responsibilities?

A related problem is the lack of adequate rules and guidelines. As a result of the forestry law of 1994, some rules regarding the management of community and council forests emerged. However, these rules were vague and concerned only with bureaucratic technicalities and the administrative relations between public powers (notably the Ministry of Forests) and the managers of the local forests. The joint ministerial Order of 1998, which gave the forestry fee management committees the mandate to represent the local populations and manage forestry fees, contains similar administrative dictates. None of these administrative and legal instruments give any guidance to local communities as to what they must actually do. The community forest management committees and the Dimako Forest Management Consultative Committee have written constitutions, drawn up with the assistance of SNV (in Lomié) and the Forêts et Terroirs Project (in Dimako), which determine their internal functioning. However, these documents, based on a

modern, “formal institutional model” (Dia:29-32), contain neither stringent social dictates nor codes of conduct. The forestry fee management committees, which were hastily organized amidst a popular euphoria over the anticipated income from forest exploitation, do not have any such written rules. Moreover, most of them failed to benefit from the methodological support of the NGOs.

The findings of this study suggest that, as a result of this lack of forethought and preparation, the existing institutional arrangements for decentralized forest management have two major weaknesses: the capacity for effective collective action is lacking and the system has been captured by both local elite and mid-level actors. These two problems are discussed in turn below.

### ***Lack of Effective Collective Action***

The previous section outlined the historical evolution of representative institutions for local forest management in South Cameroon. It was shown how, over the course of a century, customary social institutions were replaced, first with modern colonial and post-colonial institutions and then with the local organizations created by the 1992 rural reform and the 1994 forestry reform (Oyono and Diaw 1997:5-9). Societal responsibility for the management of the community forests and forestry fees, as well as the institutional mechanisms created for their regulation, rests with these local governance organizations. In the paragraphs that follow, we consider whether the current institutions are appropriate for the effective management of common pool resources and, if not, whether any alternative institutions exist.

It is important to remember that the committees created as a result of the decentralization of the management of Cameroonian forests are the product of laws and official orders; they are not local initiatives that have grown from within the societies they represent. In that sense, the committees observed are not organically rooted in the collective organization of the “forest” societies onto which they have been grafted. The local people acknowledged that they “didn’t know what was happening regarding the management of the forests or what [they] should be doing from now on.” By encouraging village communities to establish externally designed management structures in order to achieve legal recognition for the community and ensure that they have official spokespersons, the external “initiators” of the committees have ended up creating interface organizations that are neither socially legitimate nor effective. This superimposition of an institution upon a society has already been analyzed here in Cameroon (Oyono 2000:4-9; Djeumo 2001; Etoungou 2003:36-43), and elsewhere (Morrow and Watts Hull 1996; Wang 1997:1436-1440; Hiboux and Banegas 2000:40-44; Ribot 2000; Kanyesigye and Muramira 2003). These analyses demonstrate the frailty and ineffectiveness of institutions created externally and then transplanted, and ultimately unrepresentative.

The operation of the committees reflects their external orientation. Ostrom (1990) sets out eight principles for the social validation of the management of common pool resources. The eighth principle, which is perhaps the most robust, deals with the link that should exist, in terms of organization and collective action, “between the institutions and the appropriation of resources, monitoring their management, establishment of sanctions and their application, and the resolution of conflicts.” The empirical data provided in the

previous section demonstrates that the committees treated in this study do not function in this way. The committees rarely give account to the communities they represent; rather, they are externally oriented. For example, in the case of the forestry fees, the “management monitoring” is external rather than internal, since it is undertaken by the mayor and the *sous-préfet*. Moreover, there are few sanctioning mechanisms, even in cases of diversion of funds, and where they do exist, they are rudimentary in form and there is no system of enforcement.

The ineffectiveness of the committees is partly due to the fact that, in the main research sites (Lomié, Dimako and Ebolowa Districts), the societies are fragmented because the power of traditional authorities was smashed by colonization. The systems of social control in force, as weak as they are, cannot, without a truly collective effort, produce a reliable indigenous system for the governance of common pool resources. In these societies, individual competition for access to resources and the benefits of their exploitation has flourished; hence the social conflicts and the concern with financial profit rather than ecological sustainability described in the previous section. The existing institutional arrangements—that is, the committees and their underlying operational rules—have not been able to change these attitudes. Empirical data gathered for comparative purposes in the Oku region (Northwest Province) suggest that the situation in the mountainous zones of West Cameroon is rather different. In these areas, customary authorities continue to play a major role. There is a strong collective organizational structure, consisting of the Kwifor (assembly of community leaders) and the Fon (head chief). The Fon controls the functioning of these societies, collective behaviors, and the forms of organization. In this socio-political system, qualified as “disciplinary” (Delarozière 1949:20-26), local forest management is under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Fon and the Kwifor and individual competition over access to resources is less likely to be condoned (Oyono et al. 2002a:6-8).

The absence of firm rules and a robust system of sanctions (or the inadequacy of weak versions where they exist) has generated “free rider” behavior among village management committees. As noted above, this behavior has detached the committees from those they represent. “Free-rider” behavior, described in the literature by Olson (1965) and Eggertson (1990:64-67), is manifested here, in a disconnection between the committee and the group or community to be represented, and by ignoring community rules and/or the common interest. In summary, therefore, the lack of effective collective action in the decentralized management of South Cameroon’s forests is caused by two related factors: first, the organizational and regulatory structure of the local societies; and second, the superimposition of externally designed committees onto these societies rather than the adaptation of existing local authorities in the village environment.

### ***A Theory of the Capture of the Decentralized Management by middle-Level Actors and Local Elites***

The 1990s were a time of great social and financial promise, in which Cameroonians, spurred by the economic crisis, showed a renewed interest in village life. This movement coincided with the reforms in forest management and in rural resource management in general. Access to income, from international support programs and from timber

companies (for agricultural development and for forest management), restructured local socio-political realities, and put local communities in a position where they could take their revenge on the centralized State (Karsenty 1999). In the eyes of the local communities, this revenge should take two forms: they should have guaranteed access to the forest's abundant resources—resources which they believe that they own, but of which they were for so long deprived (Oyono et al. 2002a:4-9); and they should be able to “eat and drink” with the income from the exploitation of the forests. In fact, however, there has been very little revenge, if any, due to two conditions. First, the management of community forests has been taken over by the committees and external elite, and the financial benefits, in most cases, have been concealed. Second, the forestry fees have been captured by local elite and mid-level actors. The empirical evidence does not support the thesis that local communities are taking their revenge on the State through forestry reforms.

The role of village committees in defending crucial community interests is jeopardized by so-called representatives who, following the historical pattern of elite formation among the societies of the region (Geschiere 1982), aspire to join the ranks of the *nouveaux riches* (Angu Angu 2001:13-14). The management of Cameroonian forests is increasingly monopolized by individual interest groups, or “gangs,” that compete for access to a share of the resources and, in so doing, dilute the legitimacy and effectiveness of the committees. Since these “gangs” draw upon all segments of Cameroonian society, they integrate a great variety of actors: political entrepreneurs, timber companies, administrative authorities, council authorities, external elite, ministers and army generals who have become forest operators, and so on. The committees have become enmeshed in these “strategic blocs,” their members attracted by the opportunities for material rewards and symbolic status that they offer. Consequently, they no longer represent the interests of the local communities.

Assessment of these modes of constructing and exercising representation shows that they are a key factor in what can be called “public participation.” The quality of representation and its commitment to the common interest are, in the final analysis, challenges to the local democracy in decentralized management of the forests of Cameroon. The present study, beyond other considerations, gives rise to a questioning of the relationship between personal/private interests and the common interest in a context informed by issues of power and of appropriation of financial resources. The best possible representation is that in which the relationship of the representers to the represented does not lead to conflicts of interest (Pitkin 1967); which, ultimately, is not at all the case with the “model” of representation examined herein, reflected by the observation by Wellstead et al. (2003:4-5):

The activity of representing as acting for others must be defined in “terms of what the representative does and how it is carried out”. Representatives are rarely ordinary people. Thus it is important to distinguish the actions of representing from representativeness.... However, as an activity, representation (acting for) may include subjective and objective interests which may not necessarily correspond to larger populations or even to people themselves.



The fact that the management committees are controlled and manipulated from the outside is an illustrative example. The role of mid-level elected authorities (the mayors), mid-level administrative authorities (*sous-préfets* and *chefs de Districts*) and NGOs in this process is particularly significant. The connection between these officials and the local committees is due partly to the legal and administrative instruments of forest management decentralization, which give the officials substantial authority. The other explanatory variable is the pursuit of personal interests by the one and the other, in that the financial benefits from commercial forest exploitation, to which those involved in its management have access, are of primary significance. Because of the significant financial stakes in play, the acquisitive dispositions of all the actors, and the sharp increase in networks of complicity, decentralized management has been used by one and all as politico-economic resources and as a means of increasing individual social status. Thus, the village committees, lacking effective power and cut off from local communities, became “captive” to motivations other than the good of the community. The problem was exacerbated by the “stopgap” manner in which the reforms were introduced. The central State failed to set up any criteria for measuring or indicating the transfer of responsibilities to local actors and the mid-level administrative and municipal officials and the urban-based elite used this lack of regulations to capture the transfer process.

A combination of factors—the consolidation of re-centralization tendencies, the retention of control at the central and middle levels, the emergence of strategic blocs and “forestry gangs,” and the diversion and subsequent displacement of the committees—has thus placed decentralization on the back-burner and helped private interests and parallel forces to confiscate the process of forest governance at the local level. This inept local management and capture by mid-level actors is an example of the “art of stealing public resources,” corruption, or the “misuse of public power for private gain” (Ackerman 1999:87-123), a phenomenon widely discussed with regard to Cameroon (Mbembé 1989; Bayart 1993; Abissama et al. 2002:6-7). When all is said and done, the fact is that representatives of the State must also “manage to ‘eat’ (divert funds) undisturbed and with impunity.” This phenomenon is becoming increasingly common in the management of the forests and of the income generated from logging therein. It could be called the “timberization”<sup>35</sup> of the management of Cameroonian forests. This is the origin of a concept and nascent theory of the capture of the local management of Cameroonian forests and its social capital.

In short, if the capture of management committees is ineffective, and low, then accountability is high, and effective. If the capture of management committees is effective, and high, then accountability is weak and low.

### **Is This Democratic Decentralization?**

The effectiveness of the decentralized forest management system is determined by three main factors: (i) the composition and the actions of the local committees—in other words,

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<sup>35</sup> “Timberization” is a neologism—already commonly used in tropical Africa—meaning that everything is determined by timber trade and by the search of revenue generated by timber. I am using this term because community forests, primarily justified by the fight against poverty and sustainability, are now transformed into formal timber exploitation forests by the external actors discussed throughout the paper.

the social capital—which is important not so much because of its effect on the communities’ capacity for economic production (Fiszbein 1997:1030-1031) but, as Cernea (1993:200-05) explains, because of its sociological significance; (ii) the capacity for collective action in support of decentralization; and (iii) the existence of strong village authorities, or social leadership, as an instrument of internal regulation. It is evident from the empirical data presented above that the current institutional and organizational arrangements are lacking in all three respects. The composition of the committees, the fact that they are not rooted in local institutions and their lack of effective authority is such that many of the powers ostensibly assigned to local institutions in the decentralized management system have reverted to central and mid-level actors.

There are increasing doubts as to the wisdom of foisting powers upon local communities committees that are largely controlled by outsiders, since this merely diminishes the communities’ authority. Moreover, since the committees were created with a complete disregard for key aspects of indigenous governance, the local populations view them with suspicion. And when the local urbanized elite and external forces then captured them, they lost all legitimacy in the eyes of the local people, and thus are rejected by the local communities. The future of local governance in the area of forest management will be decided by the quality of rural representation, that is, by the ability of representation to internalize the externalities (whatever powers it may be accorded), to gain other powers, and to externalize the internalities (the expectations of the village communities).

In the environmental field, as in all others, local democracy demands that the parties concerned have control over their own lives and livelihoods, and requires participatory arrangements and community involvement. In evaluating the democratic impact of the forestry reforms in Cameroon, it is therefore important to determine whether the system of forest governance introduced by State powers gives the individuals concerned such control. In this respect, the process must be assessed negatively, since it has been characterized by “bad” representation, patronage in the constitution of management committees, attempts to re-centralize powers by the State, resistance to change at the “top”, one step forward and two back (Oyono 2003:5-12), domination of the committees by a few individuals, “hijacking” of the said management committees by sub-national State authorities, weak institutional basis at the local level, polyarchy and “panarchy” due to the absence of strong internal rules, and a lack of downward accountability and sanctions. Moreover, the repeated subjugation of locally elected bodies—that is, the mayors—to State authorities, namely the *préfets* and the *sous-préfets* (Mahwood 1993a), constitutes a persistent obstacle to democratic decentralization in Cameroon. Genuine local democracy and democratic decentralization, environmental or otherwise, cannot exist in a situation where local forest management is controlled by external administrative and political forces and dominated by delinquency, corruption and “criminality.”

Recent attempts to re-centralize the management of Cameroonian forests are of particular concern. The forestry law enforcement decree sets quotas and mechanisms for allocating the revenue from annual forestry fees. It requires that 50 percent go to the central State, while the other 50 percent is divided between two categories of actors: 40 percent to the *commune* to which the forests concerned are officially designated and the remaining 10 percent to forest area villages themselves, who are regarded as having traditional rights to the forest and its resources. However, Peter Musonge, Cameroon’s Prime Minister, has

recently proposed legislation to create an “Equalization Fund,” managed centrally, in which the 50 percent share that until now has been remitted directly to the communes and village communities would be placed.<sup>36</sup> This proposal has provoked lively discussion in the East Province, the “paradise of timber companies,” with mayors, village elites and the general population objecting strongly (Channon 2002:4). If the mayors’ fierce opposition is a reflection of the benefits they will lose, then that of the forest area villages is equally understandable. Having witnessed the diversion of their 10 percent share of the fees by administrative and municipal authorities, they are convinced that the “Equalization Fund” will block their access to forestry fees totally.

In sum, therefore, the Cameroonian experiment in forest management reform cannot be described as democratic decentralization. If we are determined to retain the concept of decentralization in our description, we could perhaps speak of a despotic, compradore and corrupt form of forest management decentralization. It is despotic because of the failure to devolve effective powers, the domination by representatives of the central State administration, and the authoritarianism and coercion that has characterized their role in local forest management. It is compradore in that it serves the private interests of foreign timber companies. It is corrupt, because it has legitimized informal practices that are covert, suspect and often “criminal,” thereby undermining the enforcement of the law and respect for the formal systems of forest management.

### **Cross-Case and Cross-Country Comparison**

The present research on environmental decentralization in Cameroon encompasses two other case studies: The first pertains to the economic performance of decentralized management of forestry fees (Bigombé Logo 2003); the second to community forests (Etoungou 2003). Conclusions drawn from these and the present study on Cameroon underscore and reinforce each other on several points: the instrumentalization of forestry fee management committees; the negative role, in a decentralized context, of “regional committees” of forestry fee management (with mayors and administrative authorities); the capture of forestry fees by these mid-level actors; the take-over of the community forest management committees by NGOs; and the inadequacy of local collective action in decentralized forest management. Mutual analytical enrichments of this nature also emerge between this case study and those of some African colleagues. These intersections occur within themes such as the superficiality of the committees created by projects (Namara and Nsabagasani 2003; Kanyesigye and Muramira 2003), the inadequacy of devolved powers (Mapedza and Mandondo 2003), and the confrontation of committees and traditional institutions (Mapedza and Mandondo 2003). The relationship between these case studies allows scientific and political implications to be drawn and generalized to many regions of sub-Saharan Africa.

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<sup>36</sup> See Bigombé Logo (2003) for details of this Fund.

## **Epilogue**

The many shortcomings that have been observed suggest that Cameroon's attempt to decentralize the management of forest resources is doomed to failure. The persistent substitution of informal for formal mechanisms has made a mockery of the legal foundations of decentralization; the whole matter could take on the trappings of a socio-political drama. However, all evolutionary processes have the potential for both progress and stagnation. In order to identify the potential for progress in this situation it is necessary to consider the roots of the problems we have encountered. In other contexts, these kinds of problems tend to be attributed either to weaknesses at the local level or to the State and other external actors. In this case, our analysis has shown that both are responsible. On the one hand, the traditional social institutions at the village level have atrophied and thus failed to meet the demands of decentralization. On the other hand, external actors often have the means and the will to divert the process to meet their own ends. They do this by "capturing" the committee structure that has been erected, resulting in what may be called a "retention of decentralization" by the regional State representatives, urbanized elite and NGOs.

This suggests the need to tackle the problems at both levels. At the local level, the factors able to produce social, economic, political and ecological benefits, although largely latent, are occasionally evident. There is a need for inter-actor arrangements, in which each party promotes his or her own interests while respecting, as far as possible, those of others, and for plural and horizontal negotiation strategies, through experiments in working together. The adoption of these collaborative approaches should head off problems caused by external limitations or failures. In other words, it is up to the village communities themselves to create a milieu that is socially and institutionally feasible and less weighed down with laws and regulations. However, social and political researchers, as well as the NGOs, should contribute to the effort. At the national level, the central State should "re-launch" decentralization. In particular, care must be taken to ensure that the recent creation of a department of decentralization within the Ministry of Territorial Administration [and Decentralization] does not reinforce the current trend of retaining the powers supposedly transferred.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **NGOs can identify and establish mechanisms for institutional reconciliation.** That is, the composition of local management committees should accommodate traditional authorities, particularly lineage chiefs, and moral authorities such as priests.
- **Establish strong internal rules in favor of local management.** If “initiators” of decentralization failed to lay down rational basis of community management, field projects and local NGOs, not regional State authorities and timber companies (as it happened), should be involved in the process through the identification of social conditions capable of generating tangible local rules of sustainable and equitable management of common pool resources.
- **Give monitoring responsibility to NGOs.** Ideally, the responsibility for identifying and implementing village projects financed by forestry fees should be transferred to actors, such as NGOs, who have the expertise and do not behave with the impunity common to administrative and municipal authorities.
- **Improve the operation of management committees.** The committees’ skills in forestry representation should be reinforced, with the aims of making them into organizations that can learn and improve over time. Also train pressure groups to be resistant to outside forces.
- **Establish, reinforce and monitor accountability.** Criteria for the measurement of downward accountability (that is, accountability of the committees to the people they represent) should be defined and the institutionalization of obligations of downward accountability should be facilitated.
- **Simplify and deconcentrate procedures related to the creation of community forests.** The Ministry of Forests should decentralize the designation of community forests to its provincial offices in order to simplify and shorten the decision-making process.
- **Disseminate information on failures and successes of the decentralization process.** The Ministry of Forests should organize policy Forums for the exchange of practical information and to provide access to scientific studies on the establishment and management of community forests.
- **Establish links between village communities and small-scale loggers.** Village communities managing community forests can establish links with the operators of sub-sector sawing operations in an effort to open new supply sources to the local market and to avoid large-scale logging by timber companies.
- **Revise the principle of “one public treasury.”** The principle of “one public treasury,” which minimizes distinctions between the financial resources of the State and those of communes, should be revised.
- **Review the concept of an “equalization fund.”** There should be a critical review of the proposed “Equalization Fund,” with particular attention paid to increasing the share allocated to communes of the forest zone and to the direct payment of forestry royalties to local communities.

- **Link social/policy research and decision-making/policy formulation.** In order to provide research support, consultation and harmonization of views on decentralization, there should be “think tanks” in which representatives of the Ministry of Forests, the Ministry of Economy and Finances, and the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, as well as practitioners (NGOs) and researchers, will participate. The results of social and political research should be taken into account in decision-making and policy formulation.
- **Establish dialogue among actors.** NGOs and forest companies should establish a dialogue with administrative authorities and the chairpersons of forestry fee management committees in anticipation of situations that may require imposing penalties or seeking legal recourse.
- **Organize public forums and debates.** The Ministry of Forests, the Ministry of Economy and Finance, the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization and the timber companies should organize forums on inter-actor problems in the management of forestry fees, with the objective of mutual learning and better decision making.
- **Empower elected bodies.** Specific studies should be conducted—and increasingly heeded—on the problem of elected officials such as mayors being subordinate to administrative authorities in a context of functional decentralization. Give full autonomy to local governments such as councils and reduce their subordination to central State authorities.
- **Promote information campaigns on decentralization.** NGOs and donors can implement information programs in favor of local communities on the requirements of decentralization and on communities’ rights.
- **Clarify jurisdictions.** Define clear areas of jurisdiction between the Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization about forest management decentralization.

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### **Environmental Governance in Africa Working Paper Series**

The Environmental Governance in Africa Working Paper Series presents position papers, works in progress, and literature reviews on emerging environmental governance issues of relevance to Sub-Saharan Africa. The series is designed to circulate ongoing policy research and analysis that derives from and complements the Environmental Accountability in Africa (EAA) initiative of WRI's Institutions and Governance Program (IGP). Our target audience is the small group of researchers and activists directly involved with EAA. The authors and editors welcome questions and comments from readers. The series aims to stimulate discussion and dialogue on worldwide issues at the intersection of environment, democracy and governance, while providing constructive feedback to IGP and the authors. For more information about IGP and EAA please visit <http://www.wri.org/governance>.

EAA seeks to foster development of the essential legal and institutional infrastructure for effective, replicable and sustainable environmental governance. This overarching goal is supported by three specific objectives:

- To influence the character of ongoing World Bank, U.N. and other donor-driven African government decentralization efforts to ensure that rights, responsibilities, capacities, and accountabilities are consistent with sound environmental management;
- To promote national-level administrative, legislative, and judicial reforms necessary to accomplish environmentally sound decentralizations and to enable public interest groups to hold governments and private actors accountable for their environmental management performance; and
- To develop regional networks of independent policy research and advocacy groups that are effective in promoting and utilizing the above reforms in the interests of improved environmental management.

EAA achieves these objectives through three inter-related efforts: 1) Decentralization, Accountability, and the Environment, 2) Environmental Procedural Rights, and 3) Non-Governmental Organization Capacity-Building.

The Decentralization, Accountability and the Environment effort aims to identify and promote policies and laws essential for effective, efficient, and equitable decentralization, including those establishing accountable representative authorities for local communities in participatory natural resource management; laws specifying the distribution of decision-making powers over nature among state authorities, civil, and private bodies; laws assuring just recourse; and laws ensuring an enabling environment for civil action. Through informed analysis, the effort aims to influence national-level policy-makers to develop environmentally sound decentralization policies and an enabling environment for civic action concerning environmental policy and its implementation. It reaches this audience directly and through the international financial and donor organizations, environmental policy research institutions, and international and local non-governmental organizations involved in environmental policy matters. This effort supports research on

existing decentralization policies and on the enabling environment for civic action. To further these goals it conducts research jointly with independent policy-focused institutions, the preliminary results of which are presented in this series.

The Environmental Procedural Rights component of the EAA initiative is designed to establish and strengthen an enabling environment for citizens and advocacy organizations both to enforce their constitutional rights to a clean environment and to meet their constitutional responsibilities to ensure sound environmental management. This environment includes fundamental civil liberties, such as freedom of association and expression, and basic rights, including access to information, justice, and decision-making in environmental matters. This component works at three levels. At the national level in pilot countries, the initiative supports the work of local policy groups to improve the law and practice of environmental procedural rights. At the regional level, the initiative supports networks of local organizations to promote legally-binding regional environmental governance instruments, similar to the European Aarhus Convention, that provide for procedural rights irrespective of citizenship and place of residence. At the global level, this component supports African involvement in a coalition of organizations to collaborate on the establishment of international environmental governance norms and on ensuring compliance by governments and private corporations.

The Non-Governmental Organization Capacity-Building component of the EAA initiative aims to strengthen a select group of independent policy research and environmental advocacy groups and their networks. This group includes, for example, the Lawyers' Environmental Action Team (LEAT) in Tanzania, Green Watch, Advocates for Development and Environment (ACODE) and the Center for Basic Research in Uganda, and the African Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS) in Kenya. These environmental advocacy organizations seek to improve environmental management and justice by contributing to policy and legislative reform, and ensuring compliance to environmental laws and norms. The groups use a range of approaches and tools to influence policy formation, including policy research and outreach, workshops and conferences, public debates, press releases, and litigation. This EAA project component supports efforts in organizational development, capacity building in advocacy approaches and skills, and technical competence in specific environmental matters. Federations and networks of such NGOs, joint initiatives, and South-South collaborative efforts are also facilitated and supported. The Environmental Governance in Africa Working Paper Series aims to further these objectives. All papers in this series are reviewed by at least two outside reviewers. It is the aim of the editors that select working papers be published in more broadly circulating fora, including academic journals, or as WRI reports. The feedback gained from discussion of these working papers should form the basis for the authors to rewrite their papers for publication.

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