

## CHAPTER 10

# **SOCIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL ROOTS OF ECOLOGICAL UNCERTAINTIES IN CAMEROON'S FOREST MANAGEMENT DECENTRALIZATION MODEL**

**Phil René Oyono**

Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR)  
Central and West Africa Regional Office  
PO Box 2008, Yaoundé/Messa, Cameroon  
r.oyono@cgiar.org

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## Summary

Decentralization in Cameroon’s forestry sector has opened opportunities for peripheral actors to participate in forest management. But local governance structures created to represent local communities are not grounded in local realities. Instead these committees obey instrumental and administrative priorities, resulting in weak structures that are not supported by sound institutional arrangements or local collective action. This weak organizational infrastructure has generated inefficiency in local management of forests and related benefits, a new social stratification, and the hijacking of committees by a self-interested elite connected to state authorities. The process has also led to ecological uncertainty, due to local opportunistic behavior.

## Introduction

The end of the eighties was marked by waves of social and political protest against existing governance systems in Sub-Saharan Africa [Mamdani, 1990: 53-60; Wunch, 1990: 62-6]. This was the outcome of the conspicuous socio-economic and political constructions of severe crisis [Synder, 1992: 383-9; Joseph, 1992: 12-16; Robinson 1994: ]. Bratton and van de Walle [1997: 45-63], in a study of democratic transitions in Africa, isolated many supra-domestic and domestic explanatory variables behind these crises. In the case of Cameroon, two determinants stand out: first, bad governance, internal imbalances, and the collapse of the world market price of cocoa and coffee plunged the country into a deep economic recession in 1986/87; second, at the same time, social and political actors demanded the restructuring and democratization of domestic political systems. These crises, in many cases, were unexpected by political regimes. Some social and political economy theorists believe that under such situations, policy makers or policy managers frequently react to complexity by undertaking system reforms [Grindle and Thomas, 1992: 3-10]. Forestry reforms conducted in Cameroon since 1994 are part of official and political responses to the country’s systemic crisis.

Ongoing decentralization of forest management in this country is a central element of these gradual forestry reforms [Ekoko, 1998: 9-16; Bigombé, 1998: 7-8; Diaw and Oyono, 1998: 25; Vabi et al., 1998: 4-10, 2000; Fomété, 2001: 5-8]. The present article examines Cameroon’s model of forest management decentralization by characterizing its organizational infrastructure and by assessing—and anticipating—ecological effects of those policy changes. The article is

based on environmental governance research conducted in Cameroon during the last three years. Five Community Forests, one Council Forest and nine forestry fee management committees were covered by the study. Methods of data collection included participant observation, analysis of historical trends, semi-structured interviews at the regional level, focus group meetings, historical transects of landscape and future scenarios. Qualitative data analysis aimed to understand forest management organizations at the local level, modes of representation, and accountability mechanisms.

In the first section, the article describes the key reforms put in place by the new forest management regime [following Vabi *et al.*, 2000: 6-7; Ribot, 2002:14; Oyono, 2003: 25-37; Bigombé, 2003: 6-31; Etoungou, 2003: 10-4], including the institutional and socio-organizational choices legally prescribed for outlying actors in the decentralized management of forests and their revenues. The mechanisms connecting these institutional and socio-organizational choices to implementation—that is, the management of Community Forests, Council Forests and forestry revenues—are examined in the second part of the article. The third section assesses the social outcomes of these processes. Ecological risks and uncertainties due to the way decentralized management is conducted at both the local and the regional levels are addressed in the fourth section. This is followed by the conclusion.

## **Reform initiatives and the model of forest management decentralization**

### *Policy change and the founding principles of the model*

Colonial logics of resource accumulation, including building financial capital on forest exploitation - see Schanz [1914: 4-10] and Meniaud [1948: 112-22]—have been replicated, with some modifications, by the Cameroonian post-colonial state. The legal principle according to which forests belong to the state remains sacred. Focusing on income from timber exports, forest policy managers and political elites produced a highly centralized ‘forestry state’ during the seventies and eighties [Brown, 1999: 3-11; Karsenty, 1999a: 10-11; Fomété, 2001: 9-12]. Under those circumstances, the management of forests as well as related revenue became highly politicized—involving top state authorities and their families—and was transformed into a sensitive issue, a taboo topic, not submitted to any social or public debate [Verschave, 2000: 3-12; Mbarga, 2002: 24-5]. In light of this, Oyono [2001: 6-8] has shown that politically polarized conflicts of interests and deep *conflits de langage* have continually emerged regarding forest and forestry revenue issues over the last three decades. For example, for many years the post-independence state insisted that forest management issues should remain its ‘own affair’. In contrast, local communities in Cameroon’s forest zone<sup>1</sup> have continued to claim their rights over forests and substantial portions of income accruing therefrom.

The political rhetoric used by the state regarding forest management, up until the launching of the forestry reforms in the mid-1990s, had a hegemonic resonance developed in the sense of what Scott [1990: 7-28] calls ‘public transcript’, or a political discourse; that is, a unique version (or translation) of the reality disseminated by the dominant bloc. For local communities and their

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<sup>1</sup> The forest zone of Cameroon comprises five provinces and accommodates 22 million hectares of forest.

‘infrapolitical discourse’<sup>2</sup> [Scott, 1990: 7-28], forest management and timber revenue are unquestionably social and public issues to be debated in the public sphere [Hodenthal, 1992: 103-7]. It is on the basis of these mechanisms of ‘natural’ elimination and exclusion of other actors—local communities primarily - from the sphere of forest management and forestry revenue circulation that a *cordon sanitaire* was set up between policy managers, official decision-makers and forestry experts, on the one hand, and the ‘others’, on the other, as emphasized by Ribot [2001a: 3-7]. In order to implement new modes of action and increase its capacity for socio-political regulation of forest management, as well as to depolarize functional misunderstandings around this issue, the Cameroonian Government used decentralization as a strategic weapon.

Decentralization is defined as a process through which a central government cedes powers and responsibilities to actors and institutions at lower levels [Mahwood, 1983: 6-14; Smith, 1985: 20-6]. Democratic decentralization occurs when powers and resources are transferred to authorities representative of and downwardly accountable to local populations [Crook and Manor, 1998: 11-4; Agrawal and Ribot, 1999: 475-7; Larson, 2002: 19-22; Ribot, 2003: 2-3]. Viewed this way, decentralization in forest management could—in the case of Cameroon—‘decompress’, in the short term, the dissident subculture of local communities, and dampen their resistance in a number of villages<sup>3</sup>. The first package of policy innovations aimed at decentralizing forest management in Cameroon established a new typology of forests (see Table 1) and redefined their social status. Formulated with the close support of the World Bank [Essamah Nssah and Gockowski, 2000: 57-71], the 1994 forestry Legislation generating these legal tools is presented as being the most innovative in the Congo Basin [Nguinguiri, 1997: 4-7]. It also inaugurated a pioneering experiment in forest management decentralization for the whole ecoregion.

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<sup>2</sup> Scott [1990: 35-47] sees in the ‘infrapolitics’ invisible political strategies carried out by subordinated groups, in order to circumvent total control.

<sup>3</sup> In many parts of the east and south provinces of Cameroon, local communities are regularly and openly targeting logging companies’ interests in their protestations of the ‘forestry order’; in such circumstances logging tracks were barricaded and workers and their patrons were kept locked out. Oriented to the requirement of more social equity, the recruitment of young men originating from neighboring villages was a cyclical social demand. Thus in 1995, the *Société Forestière de la Sanaga* was obliged to push out 23 ‘outsiders’ among its workers in order to recruit indigenous in the Lomié region, east-Cameroon.

**Table 1: Classification of forest types under the 1994 Legislation**

Permanent forests <sup>4</sup>
a) <i>Unités Forestières d'aménagement (UFA)</i> are concessions of up to 200,000 hectares awarded to logging companies within the permanent forest estate. These replace the former logging licenses, which did not require management plans to be formulated before exploitation of the concession areas [Eba'a Atyi, 1997: 48]. These plans must state the subdivision of the UFA that will be exploited annually (these units are called <i>assiettes de coupe</i> ).
<b>b) Council Forests (<i>Forêts Communales</i>) are managed by elected local councils or municipalities, based on management plans approved by the Ministry of Forests.</b>
Non-permanent forests <sup>5</sup>
<b>a) <i>Ventes de Coupe</i> are licenses awarded for the exploitation of standing volumes on small tracts of land in the non-permanent forest, of up to 2,500 ha in size. They do not, of themselves, require management plans, though they are subject to limitations as to the levels and type of off-take permitted.</b>
b) <i>Forêts Communautaires</i> (Community Forests) are a new and potentially very innovative class of forest exploitation, by which it is intended that, for the first time in Cameroon's history, rural populations can themselves gain direct, legal access to forest products, including timber. The maximum area of any single Community Forest is 5,000 ha. Exploitation of Community Forests will be by sale of felling rights to licensed companies or other legal entities, though, unlike conventional <i>vente de coupe</i> , the community is required to produce a management plan detailing the terms under which logging will be undertaken.
c) <i>Personal authorizations</i> allow individuals to log up to 500 cu. meters of timber for non-commercial use.

SOURCE: Brown, 1999: 12.

### *Council Forests, Community Forests and forestry fees*

The Cameroonian model of forest management decentralization has embraced several specific options. As noted above, the first one is related to the transfer of management responsibilities and powers to council, known as *communes*, and their elected bodies—the mayor and councilors—for the creation and management of Council Forests (see Table 1). The second is based on the transfer of management responsibilities and powers to village communities, for the creation of Community Forests. The third policy option is presented in Table 2. It transfers portions of annual forestry fees or taxes to local communities. It also prescribes the allocation of forestry royalties—a sort of eco-tax—to local communities having traditional rights over small forest concessions (*ventes de coupe*, see Table 1). These two categories of taxes have led to the

<sup>4</sup> Permanent forests are lands that are to be used solely for production forestry, preservation and/or wildlife habitats. Their 'permanence' relates to their long-term utilization: this includes forest concessions, plantations, council forests, national parks, game reserves, forest reserves, botanical gardens, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Non-permanent forests comprise the rest of the forest estate, and include all forestlands that can be converted (temporarily or permanently) to purposes other than forestry, like human settlement and agriculture. That type of forest refers to national domain forests (*Forêts du Domaine Permanent*), community forests and private forests (*Forêts des Particuliers*).

decentralized management of forestry revenues, a new taxation system synonymous with fiscal decentralization [Karsenty, 1999b: 147-53; Carret, 2000: 37-45; Milol and Pierre, 2000: 2-23 ; Bigombé, 2003: 4-8]. Before the reforms, the crisis of Cameroon's forestry system, a corollary of the whole crisis of the 1980s, was embedded in the issue of intergenerational access to benefits and in bottom-up oriented requirements of equity, security, and justice. Decentralization appeared, at least on paper, as a response to these needs.

**Table 2: Transfer of rights and powers in the decentralizing Forestry Law of 1994**

Rights	Aspects concerned	References in the Law
Rights to existing resource management transferred to outlying actors	Exploitation of Council Forests and Community Forests	Article 7, 16 and 17 of Law 94/ 01
Customary and use rights	Exploitation of all the products of "Private Forests" ( <i>Forêts des Particuliers</i> )	Article 8, 26 (1), 30 (2), 36 and 86 of Law 94/01
Benefits of part of timber revenue	Revenue from logging	Art. 68 (2) (3), of the Law and Art. 85 of the Decree of Application
Monitoring and controlling bush fires	Resource conservation	Article 7 of the Decree of Application
Rights of opposition to the classification of protected areas	Exploitation of forest resource	Article 6, 18 and 20 (1) of the Decree of Application

**Council Forests**—Council Forests are any forests classified on behalf of the council/municipality concerned or that were planted by the council. The act of classification defines the limits and the management objectives of the forest, which can be the same as those of national domain forests, as well as the exercise of users rights for local communities. Council Forests belong to the private domain of the councils concerned. To date, only one non-planted Council Forest has been officially approved. Technical studies conducted from 1999 to 2001 established the basis for its management plan.

According to Diaw *et al.* [2001: 8-14], social dimensions—that is, the taking into consideration of local communities' collective representations, discourses and practices in an 'interactionist' perspective—were insufficiently captured and, in the final analysis, under-integrated in the operations undertaken by forestry experts. The interactionist perspective refers, among many other things, to the way actors recognize each other in a co-operative process [Turner, 1982: 390-8]. In the case of the Dimako Council Forest, experts have simply reproduced the top-down approach in force since the colonial period. This explains how it is possible that farmlands of two villages located in the northern part of the Council Forest were annexed by the delimitation and classification operations [Assembe and Oyono, 2003: 4-6]. After the publication of the Forest's classification decree on behalf of the rural council, these local communities turned to violence to defend their claims.

**Community Forests**—A Community Forest is defined as ‘A forest of the non permanent domain, subjected to a “Convention of Management” between a village community and the Administration in charge of forests. The management of this forest is entrusted to the village community concerned, with the technical support of the Administration...Community Forests are equipped with a “Simple Management Plan”...a contract by which the Administration entrusts [to a village] a parcel of forest from the national domain, for its management, conservation and exploitation for the interest of the community ...and which fixes the activities to carry out’ (Article 3 of the Decree).

Between April 1998 and November 2001, the Community Forestry Unit, a technical structure created within the Ministry of Forests, has received 136 applications from local communities. About 30 Simple Management Plans are already approved and more than 20 Conventions of Management have been signed with village communities to date, that is to say nearly 15 percent of the requests. About 25 Community Forests are now being managed, among these five in the Lomié region (east Cameroon). Created and implemented with the support of a Dutch NGO, the *Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers* (SNV), the Community Forests of the Lomié region are both a policy laboratory and units of scientific observation and monitoring [*Djeumo, 2001: 4-8; Klein et al., 2001: 8; Efoua, 2001: 4-6; Etoungou, 2003: 17-32*].

Although it has been fully demonstrated that NGOs are responsible, in a detrimental way, for the basic operational aspects of the request for and creation of Community Forests [*Etoungou, 2003: 26-30; Oyono, 2003: 34*], these forests are, to some extent, an emanation of powers transferred to local communities as a whole. Community Forest experiments are characterized by a two-level transfer of powers: (i) first, the state transfers management powers to local/village communities requesting Community Forests; (ii) second, these communities transfer powers to village committees to represent them in official arenas [*Oyono, 2003: 30-33*].

**Forestry Fees**—The 1994 Forestry Law articulates the reformist changes offered by an authoritarian state with the continuous demands of local communities for minimum inclusion in the ‘forestry game’ [*Oyono, 2001: 6-8*]. The law states that, ‘for the development of the bordering village communities of national domain forests, part of the income drawn from the sale of forest products must be transferred to local communities, according to mechanisms of the Decree’ (Forestry Law, Article 68).

Forestry fees are shared in the following way: 50 percent to the state; 40 percent to the council in whose domain the exploited forest is located; and 10 percent to neighboring village communities. Calculations of the financial sums to allocate to these various actors are made based on exploitation type: CFA francs 2,500 (\$4) per hectare exploited in a *vente de coupe*; CFA francs 1,500 (\$2.5) per hectare for a forest concession; CFA francs 1,500 (\$2.5) per hectare by holders of a private forest license. In addition, in *ventes de coupe*, bordering villages are given CFA francs 1,000 (\$1.7) per cubic meter. Compared with commercial exploitation of Community Forests and Council Forests, forestry fees, as a channel of direct and instantaneous access to cash income, represent more closely local communities’ expectations regarding the decentralization of forest management in Cameroon [*Milol and Pierre, 2000: 10-15*].

## **Institutional and socio-organizational infrastructure of the Cameroonian model**

In order to promote decentralization to village communities as defined by the forestry law, policy-makers deemed it appropriate to prescribe the creation of management committees. These organizational constructions were to be village-based. But such a prescription has the ultimate political intention of justifying reforms with social legitimacies. In 1992, before the forestry reforms, the government of Cameroon—with the support of the International Labor Organization, French Cooperation and the World Bank—carried out an extensive rural reform aimed at establishing efficient social and organizational conditions for agricultural development. As a result, many village organizations were transformed into Common Initiative Groups, which proliferated in an unprecedented manner [Oyono and Temple, 2003: 67-79]. On the whole, by prescribing the creation of village community organizations concerned with forestry fees and Community Forest management, the decentralization model adopted the matrix proposed by the rural reform, which was based on a structural, but not necessarily social, rationality [Djeumo, 2001: 4-9; Oyono and Temple, 2003: 67-79].

The law indicates that the village community applying for a Community Forest must be organized as a ‘moral entity’ (a legally incorporated body) legally recognized by the state<sup>6</sup>. Technical tools developed to facilitate the implementation phase—for example the Procedural Manual for Community Forest Attribution and other existing legal provisions—have, to that effect, promoted the creation of the above-mentioned management committees. Superimposed on village communities, then, Community Forest Management Committees are composed, in general, of less than ten persons. In the case of managing forestry revenue, the law did not propose a specific organizational form but mentioned the need to establish appropriate local institutions. This was further clarified in 1998, when the Ministries of Finance and of Territorial Administration published a joint order prescribing the creation of village committees for the management of forestry fees. As do Community Forest Committees, these committees are structurally uniform, each with a chairperson and a handful of members.

Committees for the management of Council Forests represent the third socio-organizational choice made under the Cameroonian model. As already stated, only one Council Forest, that of Dimako, in the east province, has official recognition in Cameroon so far. It should be managed by a Consultative Committee composed of representatives from the 14 villages under the council’s jurisdiction. The creation of that committee is explained, *a priori*, by the need for council authorities to have a space for interaction, as a balancing mechanism between the council and constituent villages. The committee is then presented as a tool for local community participation in the management of the forthcoming benefits of logging activities in the Council Forest.

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<sup>6</sup> Forestry reforms have adopted the organizational forms proposed by the Law on the Right of Association of 1990 and by the Rural Reform of 1992 [Oyono and Temple, 2003: 78-84]. It is said in these legal frameworks that, to participate in the ‘public debate’, village communities should be represented in development issues and, for this purpose, in forest management issues by organizations (like committees). In that sense, four types of legal entities are recommended to rural organizations, to be officially recognized and to be institutionalized actors in the game: i) the common initiative group; ii) the association; iii) the economic interest group; and iv) the cooperative.



The empirical and theoretical insights of this article derive from these three socio-organizational choices. The management committees for Community Forests, forestry fees and Council Forests are, in the end, the only officially recognized local actors to be involved in the ‘forestry game’. Local communities, by themselves, do not have a significant role to play [Djeumo, 2001: 7-8; Oyono, 2003: 23-30; Etoungou, 2003: 24-32; Eoné, 2003: 20-24]. The principal role assigned to these committees ‘at the bottom’ relates to the defense of local community interests (livelihoods, domestic accumulation, and well-being). Thus, committees could be conceived as socio-political resources trying to make ‘hidden transcripts’ explicit, in the sense of Scott [1990: 120-25]—that is, local discourse about justice and claims of rights over forests, and attempts to establish evidence of well-being in the popular imaginary. In short, these committees should be local communities’ voices and the translators of the non-dominant discourse.

In the African context, the history of management committees created for rural development programs and social forestry projects is highly controversial, for most have been external initiatives [Dia, 1996: 10-19; Ribot, 2000: 33-41; Mapendza and Madondo, 2003: 5-9]. In the specific case discussed in this article, the socio-genesis of the new organizations created in Cameroon by the decentralization process reveals that the role of external actors is central to their emergence and operation, as noted by Assembe [2001:15]: ‘On this point, one notes in a recurring way that at the origin of these structures there are external actors. NGOs, project experts, administrative authorities and loggers have encouraged villagers to create these committees, hence the strong implications of these external actors, from their installation phase to the present.’

### **The complexity of the model and its paradoxical outcomes**

Democratic decentralization theorists argue that public participation and appropriate institutional arrangements at the local level could lead to greater government responsiveness and to positive and sustainable social and ecological outcomes [Overdevest, 2000: 685-96; Ribot, 2001b: 7-12; Manor, 2002: 2-5]. Such a postulate appears to be embedded in a causal and positivist axiom in which given determinant causes must always generate precise outcomes. But there can be public participation or institutional arrangements without positive effects, or with mitigated effects. Preliminary assessment of the Cameroonian experiment demonstrates that, because this is a process involving powerful actors at national, sub-national (regional) and local levels, its outcomes are paradoxical. In recent studies Oyono [2003: 30-37] and Bigombé [2003: 22-8] conclude that—though there is participation, through committees, a new regime of forest ownership, and a new mode of access to financial benefits—the process of forest management decentralization is hijacked at the regional level by mayors, administrative authorities, timber companies, politicians, and many other interest groups. In some cases, forest concessions and *ventes de coupe* belong to ministers and army generals, who do not want to hand over the local community portion of forestry fees; in other cases, mayors and regional administrative authorities misappropriate the funds in question.

With regard to the issue of power transfers in the framework of environmental decentralizations, as a founding principle of rights sharing, Oyono [2003: 49-52] expresses doubts about the capacity of the existing configuration of representation arrangements to make the co-management of forest resources and benefits socially feasible. He has noted that many committee

members are part of the external, urban elite and that they have joined these local initiatives for their personal interests, such as the misappropriation of funds. In addition, important powers are still retained at the national and regional levels.

This said, what is the nature of the outcomes or, short of those ‘infraoutcomes’ that have emerged from the various village-level committees that have been created for decentralized forest management? In this article, the concept of infraoutcomes refers to visible signs ‘of something’ that is still in the maturation process and, in the final analysis, remains in the antechamber of effective outcomes. On the whole, these are mid-term empirical observations needing to be confirmed.

### **Positive outcomes and infraoutcomes**

The decentralization of forest management and its local organizational arrangements are potentially transformational in social and psychological terms. Local communities, by setting up committees, have demonstrated a certain degree of organizational capacity. At the same time, the ‘political distance’ between communities and forests—and related benefits—seems to be shortened, thanks to the decentralization process. Kouna [2001: 6-10], Oyono *et al.* [2003: 8-9] and Bigombé [2003: 39-42] provide examples demonstrating that despite bad practices at the regional level, portions of forestry fees are effectively channeled to socio-economic initiatives (classrooms, health centers, etc.) in some villages of the east province. In another effort to demonstrate positive socio-economic effects of forest management reforms, Fomété [2001:9-11] reports that in 2001, 42 *communes* of south Cameroon received forestry royalties of about \$2,666,670. In addition, the villages Echiembor and Ngola, in the Lomié region, earned \$18,500 and \$24,750 respectively in 2002 from the management of their community forests [Efoua, 2001: 4].

In many villages, local actors struggle to promote local democracy in decentralized forestry management. Using available counter-powers, such as popular protests, villagers have succeeded in removing corrupt members from their positions on forestry fee and Community Forest management committees, as in the Ebolowa and Mbang regions. This is one example, though isolated, of accountability practices and of a minimal internalization of the democratic version of local forest management. In addition, the Cameroonian decentralization model has allowed social groups that have been marginalized for many years to create a new niche. This is the case of the Baka Pygmies of east Cameroon. Considered by historians and ethnographers as the first inhabitants of the Congo Basin [Bailey, 1992: 43-8; Seltz, 1993: 14-35], their interests were never taken into account by forestry laws before 1994 [Oyono, 2003: 12-16]. To rationalize this marginalization, official discourse has always asserted that it is a nomadic group without *a territorial base*. The opportunity to create Community Forests has finally allowed Baka Pygmies the right to manage a forest ecosystem, as in the village Moangué-Le-Bosquet (Lomié region).

## The other side of the picture: negative outcomes

Nevertheless, financial resources given to local communities are, on the whole, insignificant<sup>7</sup>. In addition, according to reports from Kouna [2001: 5-7] and Bigombé [2003: 32-5], council authorities and state representatives at the regional level improperly manipulate fees intended for villages. It has also been observed that when these eco-tax or royalty fees are directly transferred to local communities, their destination is socially and economically inappropriate—they are used, rather than for local development, for food and drink [Bigombé, 2003: 34]. Village committees created for the management of forestry fees generally engage in rent seeking, in the sense of Eggertson [1990: 45-67]; that is, they disconnect themselves from the communities they represent and join the strategic and hegemonic bloc composed of administrative and council authorities and logging companies [Oyono, 2003: 40-44]. This misrepresentation, combined with the absence of solid institutional and organizational arrangements for the reliable local management of forestry fees, suggests an informalization of the fiscal decentralization option.

The irrelevance—or weakness—of existing institutional and organizational arrangements has also increased insecurity in intergenerational access to resources and benefits. The younger generations, believing they are the losers, seek to negotiate their solid participation in the flow of forestry revenues. The following remark, made by young people of a village in the Lomié region, is revealing: ‘The state, those who are dead, the elderly and our fathers have eaten too much from these forests. Now it is our turn.’ The prospect ‘to eat well and drink well’ from forests is leading to a battle of wills at the local level.

Committee members are generally selected from amongst retired civil servants, external elite, and urban youth; in short, committees are dominated by ‘those who went to modern schools’. Traditional authorities, like elders, heads of lineage, and village chiefs, locally recognized as people who have the power to control nature, have thus been rejected in the new ‘forestry game’ [Oyono, 2000:42-5]: they have not been taken into account by the social and organizational choices of the official model. As a result, there are prominent indications of ungovernability [Oyono, 2002: 4-8] in the villages and areas concerned. That is, the marginalization of traditional and local authorities in the forestry game has created a ‘panarchy’, characterized by the coexistence of many centers of power and authority (declining traditional authorities, village chiefs, young people, committee members, external elite, local politicians, etc.). Because those who traditionally have held power over nature have been marginalized and replaced by new local actors, the decentralization model has led to a conflict of authority.

In other cases, outcomes suggest the radicalization of local communities regarding the management of forestry fees by administrative and council authorities. Bigombé [2003: 23-5] notes that in east Cameroon, local communities are protesting against the involvement of these authorities in the ‘game’ of forestry revenue circulation. He talks of re-centralization. These communities sometimes refuse to participate in village forest management meetings organized by central state representatives [Efoua, 2001: 5-8]. For many peasants, the implementation of the decentralization model around administrative and official logics is indicative of its current limitations.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Fomété [2001:13-15], these sums represent approximately \$1.6 per villager.

Analyzing the course of these social experiments in the decentralized management of forests, particularly Community Forests, Klein *et al.* [2001: 16-20] have argued that the new context has induced a new social stratification. In a development that Institutional Economics refers to as 'egoistic choice' [North, 1986: 230-7]—similar to self-interested behavior—members of committees and other new social agents have come together to constitute a new forestry elite, not at all accountable to those they represent. Djeumo [2001: 9-11] has confirmed these social distortions, notably opportunistic behaviors amongst committee members, born from the implementation and management of Community Forests in the Lomié region. Two other factors also help explain these outcomes: first, the lack of administrative order, due to the weakness of the state, that leads many regional representatives and agents to behave as they please, and with impunity; and second, the culture of corruption among state managers, sub-national authorities, and state agents, combined with the absence of sanctions.

### **Ecological uncertainties**

The Congo Basin is home to one of the richest forests in the world, quantitatively and qualitatively. Experts have argued that, because of the abundance of resources, bordering people have never paid attention to the threat represented by the degradation of forest ecosystems. But this view is inaccurate; these communities do, in fact, have criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management [Tiani *et al.*, 2001: 7-13; Oyono and Efoua, 2001: 5-10; Mala and Oyono, 2003: 4-6]. In the Lomié region, the 'laboratory of Community Forests management', peasants regularly formulate what, to them, appear to be indicators of good ecological health conditions. As such, they are capable of conducting an ecological assessment of the forest. This does not mean, however, that they are unwilling to trade it in for income, at least to earn something while the state and timber companies take the lion's share.

For the past two years, the commercial exploitation of Community Forests for which Conventions of Management are already signed is at the heart of a triangular conflict among local communities, the Ministry of Forests and the Dutch nongovernmental organization SNV [Etoungou, 2003: 32-5; Efoua, 2001: 6]. The Forestry Administration, with the support of SNV, prescribed small-scale exploitation for Community Forests, which Auzel *et al.* [2001: 26] describe as follows:

This type of logging is based on a number of fundamental rules and techniques: i) the careful selection of trees to be felled, avoiding immature trees; ii) directional felling, to reduce the impact on remaining trees; iii) sawing of logs into planks *in situ* in the forest; iv) the manual transportation of planks to a central area, so as to avoid opening up secondary tracks.

This formula may be appropriate, somewhere, for meeting sustainability objectives. In contrast, however, its potential for individual or collective accumulation is limited and, thus, underestimated by local communities, particularly in comparison with forestry fees and royalties [see also Mendouga, 2001: 4-7]. Villagers argue that it is time to 'live at last with money from forests', and quickly. When exploited according to the formula prescribed by the Ministry of Forests, Community Forests do not fully meet this expectation. Under these circumstances, local communities turn impulsively to the more profitable large-scale logging, which is expected to bring about a collective catharsis by generating important financial benefits and, therefore,

eliminating decades of frustration. Community Forest management committees are increasingly ready to negotiate and sign contracts with logging companies. Some of these companies (SFID and PALLISCO, in the east province) are among the giants of commercial timber in Cameroon: they practice both intensive and extensive logging and can devastate a Community Forest in less than two months. It is thus apparent that the eagerness of local communities to generate forestry revenues leads them, ‘naturally’, to turn to options of accelerated and intensive exploitation. These indications of a shift towards *vente de coupe* [Djeumo, 2001: 6-7]—or towards spaces of anarchistic exploitation—raise concerns about ecological sustainability.

In the pursuit of *ventes de coupe*, the formation of alliances is increasingly apparent between administrative and political elites, who are now deeply involved in the process of creating and acquiring Community Forests in their villages, and logging companies, which finance the technical and administrative operations, intending to collect timber in the future. In this regard, there are reports of urban elite attempts to divert Community Forests to their advantage [Efoua, 2001: 4-5]. Local communities—as in the Lomié region, for example—adhere instantaneously to this more profitable strategy, because of the cash income it generates.

Djeumo [2001:10] has emphasized that the application of certain provisions of the Law of Finances regarding fiscal decentralization, notably the sum of \$1.7 per cubic meter of timber paid to local communities living beside a *vente de coupe*, has obliged some logging companies to organize—with the support of the regional representatives of the central state—meetings for the official handing over of checks. Some of these meetings are mentioned in radio programs and shown on national television. The payment of these forestry fees may have stimulated other communities—conscious of the economic importance of forest products surrounding them and highly interested in exploiting them as fast as possible through Community Forests—to emulate them.

Echoing such empirical statements, Mendouga [2001:4-7] talks of the ‘tragedy of 1,000 CFA francs’ per cubic meter. In other words, the confluence of many variables, such as access to the eco-tax, the fever of annual forestry fees, and the transformation of Community Forests into disguised *ventes de coupe* generate within local communities a ‘maximalist’ and majority faction, primarily of young people, who want ‘to eat and drink now with the money from forests’. Fomété [2001: 12-14] also presents evidence that local communities largely express the desire to see forests surrounding them transformed into timber concessions and *ventes de coupe*, to be exploited at once. All of this enriches the thesis that the current model of decentralization is, at least for the moment, ecologically counter-productive.

## Conclusion

The available evidence demonstrates a significant gap between the experience in Cameroon and arguments that decentralization should necessarily lead to efficiency, equity, and ecological sustainability. This romantic and mechanistic view minimizes the fact that the supply/delivery side and the demand side of decentralization are not centripetal but centrifugal forces. On the one hand, the state does not want to continue to give up powers, and, on the other hand, peripheral actors are increasing their demands for further equity, justice, and well-being. To be productive, models of natural resource management decentralization, like the one implemented in Cameroon,

need to be substantive and not procedural or instrumental. They must favor basic values and practices, including downward accountability, local democracy, the mystique of responsibility, strong institutional arrangements at the local level, and the awareness of the common interest.

The Cameroonian decentralization model, though arising from political calculation, is a courageous initiative. It has, as shown above, already registered some positive 'infraoutcomes'. After all, decentralization is not mechanical: it is not only explainable by laws and institutional arrangements. Its implementation depends on many variables. It therefore requires sufficient time to develop: because of the complexity of human and institutional behavior and because of unpredictability, variability, contingency, and change, as well as many other stimuli. In sum, it is a 'story' of adaptation, with successes and failures. Policy innovations and reforms are in themselves experiments and should not be perceived as victories or crises, but, instead, as arenas of ongoing lessons and progressive learning.

Forestry revenue management and sharing requires a rigorous selection of relevant mechanisms aimed at reducing the involvement of administrative authorities and other interest groups. The institutionalization of a real representative democracy at the regional and local levels is also a precondition for successful decentralization of forest management in Cameroon. Collaborative strategies among actors, facilitated by NGOs and action-research programs, should also reinforce ongoing efforts. The process of decentralization and the improvement of decentralization policies also depend on social theory and the strategic information made available by natural resource sociology [Buttel, 2002: 205-10]. ]

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