

## **Assessing Accountability in Cameroon's Local Forest Management. Are Representatives Responsive?**

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## Introduction

Decentralization is defined as a process by which the central State transfers clearly determined powers and responsibilities to non-State actors or to sub-national actors (Mawhood 1993: 3-4; Oyugi 2000: 3-6). Viewed as such, it can take several types (Manor 1999: 4-5): geographical decentralization (in other words deconcentration); fiscal decentralization; bureaucratic or administrative decentralization (another version of deconcentration); and democratic (also known as political or functional) decentralization, or devolution. Ribot (2001: 4-5) defines democratic decentralization as a process through which powers and resources are transferred to actors who represent local populations, and are accountable to the latter. This is the case for elected village representatives and for local governments. Democratic decentralization generally suffers of overgeneralizations, and, accordingly, clarifications are necessary.

Firstly, under democratic decentralization, people talking in the name of the public are elected (Larson 2000: 10-23). Secondly, this form of decentralization, which is based on responsible representation and accountability, is supposed to transfer aspects of decision-making to local populations and to other local actors, thereby increasing public participation and efficiency of public service provisions, empowering local citizens at the occasion (Agrawal and Ribot 1999: 4-8; Francis and James 2003: 325-334). Thirdly, democratic decentralization is a ground where local democracy should be promoted, fertilized, enhanced (Ribot 2002). Since 1994, Cameroon is experiencing a process of forest management decentralization. This policy innovation aims at transferring rights to local communities for the management of forests (Diaw and Oyono 1998: 22-23; Etoungou 2003: 5-10), and for access to portions of financial benefits accruing therefrom (Milol and Pierre 2000: 5-13; Carret 2000: 44-49; Fomété 2001: 4-7; Bigombé 2003: 12-27). In a domestic context marked by the weakening of central State capacities, Brown (2002: 1-3) and Oyono (2004 forthcoming) note that forestry is the entry-point to governance reforms in Cameroon.

This paper focuses on democratic – not instrumental – decentralization in Cameroon's forest management. On the whole, it presents an evaluation of accountability in this process. That is how do representatives elected at the village level account – or not account – to those they represent? The first section defines accountability. The second section describes the local infrastructure set up for representation at the village level. The third section assesses accountability in this context, using the Ribot's Framework of Accountability Assessment (RFAA). In the conclusion, the author presents some ecological risks and makes some recommendations for policy designers and decision-makers.

## What is accountability?

Numerous studies are focusing on the issue of accountability. Keohane and Duke (2002: 2) emphasize that accountability derives from Old French equivalent *comptes à rendre* (the rendering of accounts). Oakerson (1989: 114) notes that “to be 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: 115; Keohane and Duke 2002: 2-3). When accountability is generated by a democratic form 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 (2002: 2-4) talk of “upward accountability”, on the one hand, and “downward, or democratic, accountability,” on the other.

“Upward accountability” is the accountability of non-State actors, like for instance locally elected bodies, to the administrative staff of political parties, regional governments and the central State. Conversely, “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. Schedler (Keohane and Duke 2002: 2-3) notes that when there is democratic accountability, elected representatives are accountable to those they represent, and accordingly are obliged to keep the public informed of their actions. Francis and James (2003: 325-336) talk of “horizontal accountability” when democratically elected local politicians interact with local administrators. Downward accountability is of particular importance in this paper, because it is the very essence of democracy. Downward accountability creates counterbalances by giving local people rights to demand an accounting from those who have been given powers to make decisions on their behalf. It accordingly crystallizes a social contract between representatives and those they represent.

### **Local representation infrastructure**

At the local level, the decentralization process in Cameroon is rooted in three key innovations and ‘instruments’. First is the creation and the management of community forests, at the village level. Second is the creation and the management of council forests, for rural local governments. Third is the allocation of portions of forestry taxes to villages located besides forest concessions, and having customary rights on the latter. A community forest is a non-planted village forest, subject to a management agreement signed between the village community concerned and the Ministry of Forest and Environment. A council forest is a forest classified for a local government.

The enforcement decree of Forestry Law No. 94/01 of 20 January 1994 requires a village community to become a legal 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 29 April 1998) signed 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 fees 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 in the whole ‘forested’ Cameroon in response to these requirements (Oyono 2003: 10-14). These organizations are of three main types: community forest management committees; forestry fees management committees, and, as a third variant, council forests management committees. The community forest management committees and the forestry fees management committees function essentially at the village level, while the council forest management committees cover an entire council. The local representation infrastructure in the decentralized forest management is made up of these committees grouping elected and designated members.

The mandate of all these committees is to defend local peoples' interests. In the case of community forests management, committee members are responsible for the negotiation of prices of planks with town-based timber companies and for the management of revenue accruing therefrom, with a priority for the implementation of small-scale socio-economic projects. Forestry fees management committees are asked to define socio-economic priorities and negotiate with council authorities and town-based contractors for the implementation of micro-projects in villages. About 61 community forests are under exploitation to date in the country, with substantial revenue (in average \$ 10, 000 annually for each community forest). In addition, the last two years nearly \$ 4,000,000 were given to local communities as forestry fees all over the 'forested' area of Cameroon.

### **Local Management Committees and the Exercise of Downward Accountability**

To date, the only council forest already officially recognized is the Dimako council forest, in the East province. Its classification act was signed by the Prime Minister in June 2001. Logging operations planned by its management plan will start shortly. But an assessment of ongoing preparation phases, and of many other arrangements (Oyono 2003: 20-21), shows that members of the Dimako council forest management committee do not account downwardly to the populations of the seventeen villages they represent. For local communities, this committee exists only "for show." It is dependent on the council, of which it is gradually becoming a component. Moreover, its statutory members (such as the mayor, the local representative of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, and the presidents of the 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 the local populations. 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. When the council forest will be logged, the local communities will henceforth be principally concerned with getting their share of forestry income. The question of an equitable access to profits is accordingly already being posed with acuity, and the absence of downward, or democratic, accountability practices is emerging as a serious treat.

The case of the forestry fees management committees is more interesting. As noted above, in April 1998 a ministerial order asked for the creation of village forestry fees management committees. This order says that the money representing forestry fees for local communities should be kept in town, at the council accounts services. This order places, *de facto*, the mayor and the *sous-préfet*, the regional level representative of the central State - a nominated administrative authority - effectively in control of the village committees. Although the latter are responsible, at least on paper, for determining the socio-economic priorities to be financed in the villages and for monitoring their achievement (Bigombé Logo 2002: 33-40), 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 Efoua (2000: 3-6):

*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 of fees that is allotted to the Commune, according to the forestry law; now he takes our place in managing the 10 percent given to the local communities.*

The control of village forestry fees management committees by municipal and administrative authorities dilutes their role, and this in turn limits their downward accountability. Thus, since the committees have been stripped of actual responsibility, they cannot assure upward accountability, as 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. Assembe (2001: 3-5) notes that these committees are not downward accountable and do not publish reports of expenditures.

The community forest management committees experience similar problems of downward accountability. An example is the small-scale development of some community forests in Lomié region (East-Cameroon), which began slowly at the end of 2000 and accelerated in 2001/2002. The wood stocks, which are cut with a portable saw, are put on the market. The management committees are accused of diverting sums of money. Efoua (2002: 4-5) reveals that most of committees members do not know exactly how much profit comes from the wood sales. Since the community forest management agreements were signed, the external elite has invaded the committees, with the aim of manipulating them and diverting the profits. Etoungou (2002: 22-45) reports that community forests management committees do not account to the local populations: "There are a lot of wrongs being committed. What's shocking is that the committee leaders answer to absolutely no one."

It is clear that management committee members do put downward accountability into practice in the exercise of their role. If these leaders are not responsive, one can conclude that there is no local democracy in the Cameroon's experiment of decentralized forest management. Middle-level actors (council and administrative authorities) dominate the committees. Working together, middle-level actors and various management committees form an alliance, with the objective of diverting the forestry fees allocated to the village communities for their own personal ends. No members of this strategic alliance – council authorities, administrative authorities, or village representatives – account for their decisions, behaviors, or actions to the village communities. There is therefore a significant shift of representation and social leadership from the defense of substantive and collective interests to that of subjective and *instrumental* interests.

### **A Framework for Assessing Downward Accountability**

Ribot (2002: 78-83) identified mechanisms that promote downward accountability. To the Ribot's Framework of Accountability Assessment (RFAA), Oyono (2003: 45) added two other mechanisms. In democratic decentralization, such mechanisms act as counter-powers, to minimize abuse of powers by those to whom the responsibilities have been transferred. This section gives concrete examples of some of these mechanisms in operation, 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 opted for legal action to resolve local forest management issues. In the village of Toungrelo, in the Dimako region (East province), some important persons filed a complaint against the local forestry fees management committee to force it to account for the funds received (about \$ 20,000), 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 revenue from community

forest management 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.

### ***Balance of Powers***

A 'balance of powers' 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 community forest management committees and, in particular, the forestry fees management committees, the many abuses of powers by committee members (for example, financial misappropriation and private negotiations with the timber companies which do not benefit the community as a whole) attest to the weakness of the counter-powers at the village level. 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 resolving disputes between the committees and the communities they serve. The politicians and regional authorities - that is, the mayors and the *sous-préfets* - could facilitate such a system, but they do not, as in 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.

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

There is no evidence of such debate in the management of many community forests, nor in the management of forestry fees. The individuals in charge of the forestry fees management committees avoid all public discussion. For example, in the Ebolowa and Dimako regions, 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 the Ebolowa region, the forestry fees management committees do not publish written reports of fund allocations, thereby avoiding public debate.

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

As previously shown, a good number of members of forestry fees management committees tend to orient themselves upward. 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. Many committee members have thus created an ethical and social distance between themselves and those they represent when it comes to transactions tied to forestry fees management.

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

In both Bitouala (Mbang region, East province) and Adjap (Ebolowa region, South province), committees were forced to re-form as a result of popular pressure, and in Nkolandom (Ebolowa region), two committee members were dismissed due to their excessive abuse of power. In Moangué-Le-Bosquet, a Pygmy village, the community forest management committee, called 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 fees 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 fees 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***

The shortcomings of the local forestry management committees have aroused a few such protests. For example, when the forestry fees management committee in Toungrelo was accused of diverting \$ 20,000, the local people raised their voices in demonstration. Similar public reactions have been noted in Adjap, Kongo (Lomié region), and Kolembong (Mbang region, East province). 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 region) 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’ – that is without any control from the bottom – 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 region), in which a witchdoctor threatened the president of the forest fees management committee with “reprisals” if he continued to divert monies.

### ***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, no case of social exclusion have been recorded so far.

### ***Conclusion***

As it comes out of this brief characterization of downward accountability and from the use of the RFAA, elected or designated management committee members do not respond to the rest of the people in their villages. In such circumstances, and in the absence of strong internal shared rules – as cause of stable behavioral patterns influencing individual choices (Castro Caldas and Coelho 1999:2) – and downward accountability mechanisms enforcement, the prime concern of the majority of representatives is to obtain financial benefits from forests. Their ‘impulses’ are

automatically transferred to intensive logging in community forests in order to generate important sums of money. Ambara (2003: 8) reveals that in 2003, two management committees have opted to sale off community forests for their own account. In fact more and more, community forest management committees are ready to sign contracts - or to negotiate - 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 within less than two months. All this enriches the thesis of the transformation of community forests management experiment into an 'ecological disaster', in the absence of relevant mechanisms leading committee members to account downwardly.

The success or the failure of local forest management – in other words decentralized management – depends closely on the issues of representation and accountability. Those designated by the citizens to represent them in the 'public sphere' of forest management at both the local, regional and national level are making the choice consisting in acting for their own interest. Such an 'informalization' of the process will certainly lead to its failure. To reverse the trend, two key recommendations could be formulated: i) help local communities to built up strong internal arrangements for the functioning of local management; ii) identify and establish mechanisms and indicators aiming at monitoring accountability at the local level; iii) establish and promote, in this particular issue, a face-to-face communication between the local communities and external agents until then in connection with, exclusively, management committee members (mayors, administrative authorities, logging company directors, contractors, etc.); iv) incorporate local communities' expectations and public values into decisions; v) increase local communities understanding of the issues of powers transfer and of local representation.



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