

PROTECTING FORESTS, IMPROVING LIVELIHOODS

Comparing Community Forestry in Cameroon and Guatemala



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Protecting Forests, Improving Livelihoods – Comparing Community Forestry in Cameroon and Guatemala

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Photo front cover: Houses in a community forest area in Cameroon.

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This paper conducts a comparison between the experience of community forests in Guatemala and in Cameroon. Community forests in Guatemala have met with some success, in some cases becoming effective enterprises at the same time as achieving some of the best conservation results in the country. By contrast, Cameroon's community forests have been plagued with elite capture, corruption and mismanagement by private logging contractors. This has caused devastation to forests, with the majority of community members seeing little to none of the revenues.

This study explores why Guatemala's community forests have done so much better than Cameroon's, with the hopes that this will offer illustrative lessons for community forest initiatives in other countries. Both countries have a common history of colonisation which was marked by large-scale dispossession of communities from forest lands.

However, there are important differences in the types of social organisation that existed between communities before the arrival of European colonists, as well as in the conditions in which community forests were developed: in Guatemala, communities won their community forests as part of a grassroots struggle, whilst in Cameroon community forests were created through policies influenced by International Financial Institutions.

Guatemala's experience suggests that communities must find a way of gaining control of forest exploitation and revenues themselves. To do this, they need support with forest production techniques and business skills, and they need national policies to give them the power and space to do this. Associations of community forest units have been vital in Guatemala in supporting the local financial and capacity-building needs of individual community forests, at the same time as pushing for favourable policies at the national level.

1 Key concepts

Defining community forestry

Throughout this report, “community forestry” is used to refer to the practices, rules and organisational structures a community uses to govern an area of forest in which it lives and over which it exercises *de facto* rights.

This definition includes the entire range of activities undertaken by individuals, families, and associations, from entrepreneurial practices to harvesting, hunting, production and processing, etc. It also includes a range of different rights—from rights to use forest resources, to rights to manage and set rules for a whole territory.

Types of forest communities and stakeholders

Communities living in and depending on the forest can be divided into three main types:

- **Hunter-fisher-gatherers:** these are often, but not always, the original inhabitants of a forest.
- **Slash and burn farmers:** forest-based farming is often based on a long rotation period. Areas tend to be cleared, cultivated and then allowed to regrow forest for several years or even decades. The fallow areas are an integral part of the “agricultural land”. If the rotation cycle of this “agricultural forest” is reduced, owing to the growth of the population, or because huge tracts of forest are destroyed in order to make way for other forms of production, systems that have previously been sustainable may quickly cease to be so.
- **Settled farmers:** farmers who work in areas where farmland and pasture have been definitively cleared, either through an evolution of slash-and-burn systems, or by landless populations that have migrated from their home regions towards the “agricultural frontier”.

Forest areas are also occupied by other economic actors:

- **Agricultural companies:** these can play an essential role in extending the “agricultural frontier”.
- **Forestry, mining and tourist enterprises:** these can be developed once concessions have been obtained from the government.
- **Conservation areas, national parks and protected areas:** these are established and enforced by the government.

2 Historical development of community forests in Cameroon and Guatemala

The colonial periods: parallel histories of land dispossession

Both Guatemala and Cameroon have been subject to colonisation by European powers, albeit in very different historical periods and for varying lengths of time: the former from the end of the 15th century until the start of the 19th century by Spain, and the latter from the end of the 19th century until 1960-61, first by Germany, then France and Britain. Both countries display a common legacy of local populations being dispossessed of natural resources and land, and of imposition of colonial legal systems.

Guatemala

In Guatemala's colonial period, all land came under the control of the Spanish Crown. Indigenous populations' land rights were not recognised, nor were their systems of customary law. The population was decimated by overexploitation and by diseases introduced by the Spanish. Huge areas remained practically unpopulated for centuries, and a system of apartheid was established in the populated areas. Indigenous peoples were confined to reserved areas, so that their Spanish overlords could make them work and pay taxes. These new "Indian communities" received "land titles" from the King of Spain, allocating them the land on which they had been resettled. After independence, the new Civil Code did not question this top-down allocation of land rights. The Guatemalan Government simply replaced the King of Spain: it became the default "owner" of all land that had not already been registered. Meanwhile, the nature of land rights had changed significantly over the centuries of Spanish rule: feudal rights, applicable to a territory and to populations, had become "modern" absolute property rights, recognising only one owner who enjoys – to adopt the terminology then in use – *usus* (use), *fructus* (fruits) and *abusus* (alienation). The denial of customary legal systems was reinforced in the new Guatemalan state: only rights supported by written documentation in accordance with national law were recognised. Nevertheless, customary management and governance systems still remain in place today and continue to play a key role in areas with Maya populations.

The country's forested areas developed very differently from region to region.

- In the highlands and the south of the country, many Mayan communities successfully retain some *de facto* control (and in some cases, formal legal ownership) over the lands they occupy, left to them by the major European farms.
- The region of Petén, in the north of the country, was originally occupied by Mayan civilisations, but these vanished long before the Spanish arrived, and the region is once again covered in forest. New *mestizo* populations became established there after the Spanish conquest, living from harvesting *chicle* and *xate*. The region became largely controlled by soldiers, who received land titles from the government. Its southern fringes have also been the target of agricultural expansion and illegal forest exploitation.

Cameroon

In Cameroon, the status of land is also a hangover from the colonial era. However, because it was colonised by several different countries, it is more difficult to understand. The state is not considered the “owner”, but rather the “guardian” of the lands constituting the “national domain”, meaning all land not previously registered in the name of an individual or other entity.

Communities have customary occupancy of these lands, sometimes dating back a very long time, but these rights are not legally recognised by the state. Those forests that constitute the living environment of indigenous hunter-gatherer populations (Bakas and Bagyéli, in particular)¹, and peoples of Bantu origin also practising forest agriculture, are being gradually made available to logging companies with no regard for the affected populations.

Commercial exploitation of the forests dates back to the start of the 19th century, while Cameroon was still under colonial rule. With independence, the logging industry was partly nationalised and partly taken over by private companies, often European. This led to several decades of unsustainable logging, blighted by elite capture and corruption. In 1994, with the involvement of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), Cameroon passed a new Forest Law, in an attempt to impose order on the natural resource sector to boost the country’s export industry.

Emergence of community forests

Guatemala

During the second half of the 20th century, Guatemala was the scene of a civil war that lasted over 30 years. The roots of the conflict were the exclusion of the majority of indigenous and peasant populations, and the extreme concentration of land ownership. While the legislative framework and political and social conditions remained unfavourable to the recognition of community rights, the situation would take an unexpected turn following peace negotiations between the government and the guerrillas, which put an end to the civil war in 1996.

The peace deal gave communities a temporary shift in power, allowing them to insert themselves into plans for the newly-created Maya Biosphere Reserve in Petén. Petén’s communities were awarded forestry concessions in the northern part of the reserve, successfully convincing the government to entrust the largest part of this area to them (23 forestry concessions). Only two concessions were awarded to private companies. For more details on the Petén community forests, see Case Study 1.

Completely independently, at around the same time the indigenous communities of the Guatemalan highlands were making headway in securing state support for their forests. The 1996 Forest Act put in place a subsidy programme, PINFOR (*Programa de Incentivos Forestales*), to promote the creation of forest plantations. This programme was designed with major landowners and forestry companies in mind, and ruled out the participation of most communities by requiring the possession of land titles and plots larger than two hectares. Some communities that had successfully obtained land titles were able to participate in the programme, but 90 per cent of the funds, which are provided from the state’s budget, continued to benefit big business. The small group of communities that did have land titles began to set up cooperatives amongst themselves in order to facilitate access to the subsidies.

1 Often called pygmies by colonists.

These communities launched the Ut'z Ché association, which now includes 33 community organisations and has become a key player in Guatemalan forest management. It successfully pushed the government for further support for community forests: in 2006, a new subsidy programme— PINPEP (*Programa de incentivos para pequeños poseedores de tierras de vocación forestal o agroforestal*)—was set up, intended for small landowners who did not necessarily have a title deed. Initially, it was funded through Dutch development cooperation and in 2010, after publication of Decree No. 51-2010, it became a national state-funded programme. This represented a significant step forward and, even more importantly, was achieved directly because of the advocacy of community forest organisations—a political victory remarkable in a country like Guatemala, which has been dominated for centuries by large landowners. For more details on the highland community forests, see Case Study 2.

- Woman from a community forest in Altiplano, Guatemala.





- Representatives from Guatemalan and Cameroonian community forests share experiences in a meeting facilitated by AGTER.

Cameroon

Cameroon's state-sanctioned "community forests" were created by the 1994 Forest Law, where they appeared as a new legal category of forest concession. Cameroon's Forest Law divides Cameroon's forests into a "Permanent Forest Area" and a "Non-Permanent Forest Area", and is based on the concept of "zoning" forest spaces.

The Permanent Forest Area is assigned either to timber production, via concessions to private companies or municipalities ("local authority forests"), or to conservation. The 1994 Forest Law extended timber production to the entire south and south-east of the country, where forests had not yet been subject to logging. In 2011, the total area assigned to productive forests was eight million hectares, with six million organised in Forest Management Units (FMU) assigned to around sixty companies; protected areas represented 7.4 million hectares. Within production areas, local populations' usage rights to non-timber forest products (including hunted animals) are meant to be protected, provided that they do not affect protected species and that such exploitation is for "personal use" rather than for sale. On the ground, things often happen very differently: forestry production is consistently given priority over local populations' usage rights.

In the Non-Permanent Forest Area, unlike the Permanent Forest Area, it is possible to obtain a land title. This area provides the main supply for the national timber market, much of it illegal. It is the site of rapid agro-industrial plantation expansion, and where that the majority of problems related to non-recognition of communities' customary rights play out.

It is also this type of land that contains what the law calls “community forests” – but which are better referred to as “community forestry concessions”. Cameroon’s community forests were presented as a major advance in terms of allowing communities to legally manage forests. However, the conditions set out by the law severely limits this impact: communities wishing to request the establishment of a “community forest” must set up a formal organisation (Collective Initiative Group, association or cooperative), and the area granted may not exceed 5,000 hectares for a 25-year concession agreement. The creation of a community forest thus extinguishes existing customary organisational structures, gives a mere temporary access right, and leaves the community with an area of forest likely much smaller than their customary land. Despite their well-documented weaknesses, community forests continue to attract interest from communities, because they are the only feasible option for communities to protect their land use: one million hectares were under negotiation in 2011 and around 600,000 are subject to a final agreement.

Summary

Because of their colonial past, the legal framework for forest governance and land allocation in both Guatemala and Cameroon was imposed in a particularly top-down manner. The majority of economic and political power is concentrated in the hands of a very small minority of landowners, forestry companies and political elites, who have been able to appropriate a major proportion of the land and/or forestry resources. These players still consider traditional forest practices to be inadequate, backward and inefficient, and community forests struggle to establish and maintain themselves against more powerful actors.

International pressure to implement forest conservation policies has played a major role in both countries. Communities in both countries have struggled to assert their rights to forests, in face of a vision of conservation that wants to exclude indigenous populations believed to be responsible for environmental destruction.

The two countries are however very different in many other respects. In Guatemala, the long tradition of organisation, stratification and resistance of Mayan societies has allowed them to retain their culture despite centuries of oppression. By contrast, the social organisation of the hunter-gatherer peoples of the Congo Basin and the lineage organisation of Bantu communities are much less developed. These different historical trajectories and experiences likely influenced the capacity of peoples today to organise themselves to resist appropriation of forest resources.

The conditions surrounding the establishment of community forests were also very different between Cameroon and Guatemala:

- In Guatemala, under pressure from local organisations, community forestry concessions were established in Petén just after the peace agreements. They came together to influence the peace settlement, as major forestry companies were also doing. They took advantage of a specific moment in history when power relationships between indigenous populations, on the one hand, and soldiers and the oligarchy, on the other, were profoundly changed.
- In Cameroon, community forests emerged from forest laws that were drafted in the context of negotiations with the World Bank and the IMF. The stated intention was to channel a portion of logging revenues to local authorities, but the scheme did not come about from a community-led grassroots struggle as in Guatemala.

3 Community forests in practice

Community forests in practice in Guatemala

Case Study 1: The forest communities of Petén and the establishment of ACOFOP

The Association of Forest Communities of Petén (ACOFOP) was created in the context of a proposed nature reserve, the Maya Biosphere Reserve, which threatened to displace communities living on the land. In 1995, the leaders of several communities formed the Petén Forest Communities Committee, to defend the right to continue using resources that had been part of their livelihoods for decades. Two years later, this informal committee became a legally recognised association, ACOFOP. In the tense post-conflict period, these leaders managed to secure changes to the initial concept of the Maya Biosphere Reserve by convincing international conservation organisations and the government that their proposal for community concessions was preferable to private industrial concessions, in both social and environmental terms. They successfully secured 25-year community concessions on the state-owned land, relatively short given that felling cycles are around 40 years, but sufficient for community forest organisations to become established.²

At present, ACOFOP represents 22 community organisations and a few individual members. It has around 2,000 members who work some 400,000 hectares to support around 14,000 people in the area. The status of workers and revenue distribution arrangements vary according to the set-up of the association: some divide income amongst individual members or families, whilst others use revenues for communal development projects. In the majority of communities, this collective management works well.³

From the outset, ACOFOP has worked on several different levels at once:

1. **Community level**, with the creation of an association, civil society, or cooperative organisation, depending on the preferences of each community's members⁴
2. **Inter-community level**, to coordinate political demands, and later to develop collective timber production, certification and processing activities

2 Today, many concessions have already run for more than half of their term, and community organisations are pursuing the renewal or modification of access conditions that will enable them to continue managing these forest areas.

3 However, two concessions have had serious problems, resulting in one of them being cancelled. These were the two smallest concessions in Petén and poor management was linked to the influence of drug-trafficking networks, which are very much present in the region around the Mexican border.

4 The requirement for receiving a concession from the state is to be constituted as a legally-recognised entity. The choice of entity was made by each community, depending on its objectives and revenue distribution arrangements. Generally speaking, community enterprises do not operate in the same way as capitalist enterprises and always seek to consider the interests of the community (job creation, social benefits), not simply to obtain the best financial results.

3. **With external stakeholders** (national and international), so as to be able to reach centres of power and secure the conditions necessary to ensure the community concessions' success.

These three levels have all played a critical role in determining ACOFOP's success, as they have enabled the association to support community concessions with production on the ground, at the same time as securing the necessary policy conditions at the national level.

Even though forest communities used to live solely from extracting non-timber products, many have also now decided to start commercial logging. This development has not always been easy, and ACOFOP has played an important role in supporting them to take on commercial activities. Communities have learned step-by-step how to carry out the entire logging process, from felling to processing, starting off by selling trees before they were felled, and gradually investing in training people and buying the necessary equipment to engage in later-stage processing and marketing. International development agencies have provided technical and financial support to facilitate this process, and communities have largely been able to become profitable.

Satellite photographs have shown that the forest is well-preserved in the areas covered by the concessions. By contrast, the strict protected areas further to the west are severely degraded, having suffered extensive colonisation by farmers and stockbreeders.

Case Study 2: The highland communities and the role of Ut'z Ché

In the Guatemalan highlands, wooded areas have always been of major significance to the local way of life; 30 per cent of forested land is still managed as communal land by indigenous and peasant communities. Long before the Spanish arrived, the communities maintained their own complex regulatory systems, setting out the rights and obligations of the members of each social group. Lands with pre-Hispanic lineage still constitute the basis of current indigenous territories, but underwent significant changes during the colonial era.

The lifestyles of these populations combine subsistence economies and trading. Agriculture is practised on small plots (*minifundios*). Communal land management systems are in place. The forests provide numerous indispensable resources for homes: wood for construction and heating, fertiliser for crops, pastoral areas, food, fibres and water. Forests also have a symbolic and cultural importance, as they house places of worship. It is thanks to their importance in the traditional way of life of these regions' populations that these forests are still very well-preserved; the persistence of community systems for managing these areas has guaranteed their preservation in the collective interest.

This densely-populated region is very different from that of the lowland community concessions, which is sparsely-populated by more recent migrants. The organisation created by the highland communities, Ut'z Ché, is thus very different from ACOFOP. Ut'z Ché was formed in 2006 by organisations, some very old, of indigenous Maya communities, but also of non-indigenous peasants. They originally associated in order to benefit from PINFOR, a state subsidies programme not intended for them. This association then enabled the establishment of a second-level body that now includes 34 different organisations. As with ACOFOP, it is a multi-level organisation aimed both at changing national community forestry policy, and at obtaining financial and technical support for communities on the ground.

The establishment of national and regional coordinating bodies

These two associations, ACOFOP and Ut'z Ché, along with a few others, have set up the Guatemalan National Alliance of Forest Community Organisations (ANOFCEG). They are also members of other Central American and international organisations, and work with an entire network of partners, including international development organisations and universities. Such levels of national and international organisation have played a key role in the recognition of these organisations by various sectors of society, contributing greatly to the success of their actions at the national and local level.

Community forests in practice in Cameroon

With its 1994 Forest Law, Cameroon's government aimed to involve local and indigenous populations in managing forest resources and to enable these groups to benefit from their exploitation. However, the law did not put in place enough mechanisms to ensure forest management was either equitable or sustainable. Income from forestry continues to be monopolised by a minority of players. Communities' rights to forests have become weaker, not stronger. Important forest management experience has been gained in some regions but, unlike in Guatemala, there has been no substantial change to power relationships at the national level. Cameroonian communities' forests are thus increasingly threatened with the rapid growth of large-scale farming and mining activities, and lack the tools to effectively resist this.

Cameroon's community forests: A Story of elite capture, corruption and environmental degradation

Cameroon's community forests suffer from a number of weaknesses. Firstly, the regulatory framework for obtaining and managing a community forestry concession is extremely complex and costly, not realistic for local and indigenous communities. These communities also do not have the necessary skills to engage in commercial extraction processes, and local capacity-building processes have not been put in place, meaning communities generally have had to call on external entrepreneurs to help them log their timber.

As a result, many community forests have been appropriated by local "elites" with superior knowledge of administrative procedures and commercial logging skills, and with close relationships with the central government. As such, the profits from forestry have been monopolised by a small group, rather than being shared with the rest of the community. This has caused new conflicts within communities around the distribution of revenues and management of forest resources. Moreover, the introduction of commercial logging contractors has progressively weakened traditional forest management practices and organisations. In many cases, working conditions imposed by sub-contracting companies are extremely degrading, jeopardising the health of workers; it has thus not been possible to offer sustainable job opportunities for young people. Government checks were insufficient and corruption extensive, meaning commercial loggers have not respected the exploitation rules set out in the management plan, causing severe environmental degradation and the plundering of forestry resources.⁵ Although exploitation cycles were 25 years, most forests within "community forestry concessions" were stripped of all the timber with the highest commercial value within the first five years.

These numerous difficulties has not stopped communities from trying to set up community forestry concessions, as they often offer the sole opportunity to have the state recognise a community's rights to the lands it occupies. Yet despite the growing number of community forestry concessions,

5 Simple management plans are the plans a community forestry group need to submit to have their project accepted by the government.

communities' rights to manage their forest resources are becoming weaker and weaker. Rather than using new revenue to consolidate community members' rights over their resources, wealth has been expropriated by a few individuals, and communities have been weakened and divided. Big logging, agricultural and mining companies are increasingly taking control of land.

A dark future for Cameroon's forests?

Cameroon has made a clear choice to favour industrial logging companies in its forest policy. It is therefore unlikely that they will promote sustainable development of forestry resources in the long term. Once the centuries-old trees have all been felled, forestry extraction profits will diminish drastically and logging companies will disappear in search of better profit opportunities. The weakened forests, stripped of their most in-demand timber, will then be accessible via the logging roads that will have been opened up. Local populations, confined to agro-forestry areas in the spaces between FMUs, will have lost a source of employment and will have learned nothing about managing the shared forest heritage.

When this has happened in other countries, degraded forests have been converted to farmland by players with the means to do so quickly and on a large scale. Degraded forests offer the opportunity for plantation-style agriculture: oil palms, sugarcane or crops for mechanised annual production that can benefit from the fertility of forest soils, at least for some years. In areas classified or liable to be classified as Non-Permanent Forest Areas, legal uncertainty about land ownership and difficulties in building communities' capacity to manage shared resources sustainably suggest that the agro-industrial plantations the Cameroonian Government currently appears to favour will intensify. It is therefore unlikely that withdrawal of forest companies will lead to the flourishing of community forests, as it did in the less-arable Himalayan foothills of Nepal. Many forested areas will also suffer the negative effects of the expanding mining sector, through the construction of railways and pipelines, and other environmental damage usually associated with mining.

Case Study 3: The trinational agro-forestry cooperative – an exception to the rule?

In eastern Cameroon, in the isolated district of Ngoyla, the Trinational Agro-forestry Cooperative (CAFT) was set up in 2004. CAFT comprises nine grassroots community organisations that have obtained small community forestry concessions for 25-year periods. It was created during a long process of organising local populations to fight a logging project by a Lebanese company.

CAFT aimed to promote local development and recognition of the rights of the Baka and Bantu populations to manage forest resources. In this region, the state had marked out areas intended for future Forest Management Units (FMUs) to be awarded to companies as concessions; as of last year, however, it still had not started to award the concessions. The community forestry concessions were allocated outside these potential FMUs, in areas on the edge of the trails where the communities were established. Although they have enabled some of the Ngoyla's forest communities' lands to be secured against outside players appropriating the forestry resources, a significant proportion of the community-reserved lands extends into the areas intended for FMUs.

CAFT developed a programme of small community forestry enterprises, aimed at making profit from timber and non-timber forest resources, agricultural products and eco-tourism activities. This was intended to promote community development, as well as providing a model for sustainable management of forest resources. After a small-scale experiment raised serious problems, CAFT decided not to become involved in logging, as this would have entailed significant dependence on logging subcontractors. This makes CAFT's experience quite different from the vast majority of community forestry concessions in Cameroon, where logging is the main economic activity. At present, CAFT's leaders believe the decision not to exploit their timber could be turned to their advantage, enabling the payment of carbon credits under Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) or Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) projects.

Although CAFT's history and projects demonstrate real care, the cooperative's future remains uncertain. CAFT members have not yet initiated any activity to market forest resources. This is due in part to the isolation of the area, difficulties in accessing markets for non-timber forest products, and the communities' lack of experience in these fields. Although cacao is the main product sold by these communities, the cooperative has not considered it a priority for their economic development.⁶ Local people's quality of life remains very poor.

The region is on the point of being opened up with new access roads over the next few years, and large-scale mining and logging concessions have been announced as part of the government's development plans. If present power relationships are not changed, there are fears that a large-scale dispossession of Bantu and Baka communities will take place.

6 The leaders of the cooperative have perhaps judged it too dangerous to challenge the powerful merchants who buy this product from even the most remote communities.

4 What lessons can be learned?

Latin American community forest models are often presented as being applicable elsewhere. A comparative analysis of a few situations in Guatemala and Cameroon clearly shows that it is not that simple. In Guatemala itself, we have seen that the types of social organisation that developed in the highlands—where there have been densely populated Mayan communities for centuries—were very different from those established in the lowlands of Petén, with low population density and where communities are a much more recent creation, comprising migrants from different ethnic groups. However, the impossibility of establishing models that could be transferred from one location to another does not mean one has nothing to learn from the others.

How important is getting the “right” legal framework?

In assessing what makes community forests successful in one country but not another, one cannot limit one’s analysis to how far the national legal frameworks protect community rights. Although a country’s laws do have an influence, many other factors influence the protection of communities’ rights in practice. A comparison of Guatemala and Cameroon illustrates this well:

- The Constitution of Guatemala states the absolute nature of property rights even more strongly than the majority of Latin American constitutions. Moreover, the country’s Civil Code no longer recognises rights acquired over time and recognised by society. It could be deduced from this that this legal framework would be very disadvantageous to the development of community forestry and the recognition of communities’ rights.
- In contrast, the Cameroonian Government’s role as “guardian” of the country’s unregistered land might seem far more favourable at first glance to recognition of populations’ rights over their customary territories.

Although Cameroon’s legal framework seems better on paper for protecting community rights, in practice several factors were present in Guatemala—most importantly, strong local organisation—that meant communities have come together to take control of their forests, where in Cameroon community forests have mostly served to divide them.

Importance of economic self-sufficiency

To be successful, community forests must find a way to generate revenues.

- CAFT in Cameroon has carried out effective work to organise itself internally, and has managed to create genuinely community-run forests. In this sense, it has avoided the environmental destruction, elite corruption and internal conflict of most of Cameroon’s community forests. However, it has not been able to find a way of making profit by exploiting timber or creating alternative sources of income. Its position is now precarious.
- By contrast, the majority of the community-forestry concessions in Petén have been able to combine economic success with social and political consolidation, improving the living standards of community members whilst ensuring conservation of the forests. Taking control of forest exploitation has played a decisive role in enabling Petén communities to raise their living standards and enhance their credibility with other players. It is no coincidence that

the Petén leader who participated in the research trip to Cameroon continually stressed the need not to limit oneself to what one has always done. In the Guatemalan highlands as well, communities actively pushed for a programme of government subsidies to benefit them.

An important element of the Guatemalan communities' success was the fact that they managed to actively take control of forest exploitation, as well as political processes, in order to secure a model that worked for them.

Technical and commercial capacity-building is necessary

If communities are to take control of forest exploitation, particularly if they wish to sell products commercially, they need support with forest management skills. For example, traditionally, the Baka populations of Cameroon did not see the timber of large trees as an exploitable resource. The extraordinarily precise knowledge that these hunter-gatherer peoples have developed is thus not transferable when implementing commercial forest extraction, leaving them dependent on commercial logging operators. Mechanisms must be put in place to ensure transfer of this knowledge.

As far as possible, learning should be spread across the whole community so that all members can decide how they want to use their shared resources. Management of a natural resource cannot be reduced to maximising income: communities must be able to ensure they have means of economic and environmental subsistence for the long term. It is also important to remember that learning mechanisms take time to develop, and it is not always possible to work in the same way; a method that would suit highly structured societies may not work for those with little stratification.

Importance of strong inter-community organisation

Strong networks of community organisations can, as in the case of ACOFOP and Ut'z Ché in Guatemala, help provide this capacity-building function. They can also be vital in pushing for political change to create genuine space for community forests, as ACOFOP successfully did in the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Solidarity between the ACOFOP communities has since enabled them to fight together to access concessions and deal with common issues, thereby avoiding, in large measure, abuses at the level of local community forest organisations. The network plays an important cross-checking function: FSC certification, for example, is managed at ACOFOP level rather than by individual communities. This saves money but also means that communities are more likely to be alert to the practices of other members, as if one community loses its accreditation, all the ACOFOP member organisations risk losing their accreditation as well. This situation occurred in a community heavily affected by drug trafficking, leading to ACOFOP excluding this community from the Association.

Such mechanisms seem to be absent from community forestry concessions in Cameroon. In Cameroon, community forestry concessions have not provided the foundations for a resistance movement among local people, capable of mounting a defence of their customary lands. In contrast to Guatemala's experience, a handful of non-governmental organisations are struggling to defend community rights, but no regional or national organisation dynamic can yet be seen. The experience of CAFT is an exception in this respect, but it is still too weak to tackle the current challenges.

Changing the balance of power is essential. Sometimes, international recognition can tip the scale to change relationships at the national level. ACOFOP members enjoy recalling that it was in Johannesburg, during the 2002 Earth Summit, that they met the president of their own country for the first time, while they were receiving an international award for their actions. The fact that this

first meeting took place on another continent is no coincidence: social relationships in Guatemala do not easily allow such dialogue. ACOFOP's leaders were then able to keep these top-level contacts, in order to effectively strengthen their own practices and be accepted in different sectors of Guatemalan society.

Importance of flexibility and building on existing community institutions

In order to allow the development of strong community organisations, there must be sufficient flexibility and community engagement in the formal legal framework. A regulatory framework that does not take account of pre-existing forms of organisation and resource management will only benefit two types of rights-holders: the state and individuals. It rules out all collective forms of social organisation that enable land management at intermediate levels. The consequences are significant: community forests are subject to increased competition between individuals, between large families from the same village, and between villages. Above all wealthy and political players are in the best position to appropriate forest revenues. This is what happened in Cameroon.

To avoid this, firstly, a framework for community forests should build upon pre-existing forms of organisation and resource management developed by local communities, rather than attempting to replace them as in Cameroon. Legal frameworks for community forests rarely incorporate the complexity and diversity of communities' local management systems. Yet these management systems persist, and in many cases are optimal at protecting the environment because the forests are so central to the communities' culture and survival.

Secondly, a legal framework should also allow enough flexibility to allow communities to adapt their management rules over time. As new production systems are brought into forest areas by powerful players, the way forests are managed is changes dramatically, and old methods of community governance become unusable. Local organisational structures for managing forest resources need time and space to adapt to this shifting context.

Devising a successful policy will require numerous exchanges and adjustments between communities and the state. Communities must be allowed to reflect on their resource governance practices and come up with proposals for how to move forward. All of this takes time and commitment from the state.

5 Conclusion

In both Guatemala and Cameroon, large political and financial actors are increasingly taking control of natural resources. Dispossession and exclusion are therefore permanent threats to local communities, and the forests they have protected for generations. Whether you are interested in defending the rights of communities or preserving the major expanses of tropical and equatorial forest, the answer is still the same: partnerships must be built from the local to the global scale and with stakeholders from across society (peasant, indigenous, rural, urban, etc.). With an issue such as forest protection which eventually affects us all, one of the main challenges is how to create long-term processes that promote change. There will not be one single answer that works for all, but learning from the experiences of others is an absolute necessity.

- Cameroonian Baka woman outside a traditional dwelling.



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