

Forest Conservation in the South West Region of Cameroon: In Who's Interest?

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Abstract

In this study, we examine the context of “future generation” using empirical evidence from the South West Region of Cameroon. With the use of survey research method, the study suggests that the future generation as contained in the colonial legislature is actually European Industries and not the local population. This implies that conservation is actually not for the interest of the local populations. This finding was supported by the fact that the major logging companies around the conserved or protected areas under exploitation were non-indigenous and the output continues to be shipped directly to Europe or elsewhere with little or no transformation (value added) in the local economy. The provision of the law relating to corporate social responsibilities of the logging companies are not respected as there was no evidence of investment by the exploitation companies. Also, the level of poverty in the communities remains very high, making efforts to effective conservation difficult. This in part explains the paradox of natural resource endowment and underdevelopment of the South West Region.

Keywords: Forest Conservation, conservation beneficiaries, value addition, future generations

1. INTRODUCTION

The origin of public interest in nature conservation in Britain dates back to the early 19th Century when Wordsworth saw the Lake District as “a sort of national property in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy” (Oosthoek, 2015). In the United States, conservation measures covered the movement to preserve and protect America's wildlife, wild lands, and other natural resources from 1890-1920 for Americans. In these early years of resource preservation, outdoor recreation was the focus (Hammond, 1857).

Natural resource preservation in Africa has today been recognised as a land use form whose formal origin is out of the African indigenous civilisation processes. According to the African Development Bank (n.d), about 30 percent of the world's mineral reserves are found in Africa. Before the colonisation of the continent, natural resource availability and use was not a problem to the indigenous communities. Murimi (2015) reported that Africa is the target of resource grabs by foreign powers that have remained active in the continent despite the end of formal colonialism.

The African society had a long history of preservation for cultural purposes, and this was quite distinct from the rationale presented by the colonial masters (Maddox, 1999). Sacred sites were protected using customary laws which were generally accepted by everyone in the community (Lamarque et al., 2009). In this context, preservation was more or less democratic as villagers willingly accepted to preserve a portion of the forest for their own good.

In the early years of natural resource conservation, agricultural land for subsistence was not an issue in Africa. Population pressure was low and the soils were quite fertile for swidden or shifting cultivation. Today, the situation has changed drastically with many people living side-by-side the protected areas. This is the reason why Joppa (2012) opined that the problem of rapid population expansion around protected areas must be addressed. Millions of US dollars continue to be spent around protected areas for wild preservation while the human race languishes in abject poverty. It is important to integrate protected areas into land use plans as part of a larger and connected conservation network (Lopoukhine et al., 2012). In this way, it can offer practical and tangible solutions to the problems of both species loss and adaptation to climate change.

While the social goal of resource conservation is for every universal citizen because it is technically impossible to exclude some beneficiaries, the direct economic benefits are usually for some select few. In many parts of the world, adequate supplies of potable water depend on the functioning natural ecosystems, often within protected areas (World Bank and Global Environment Facility, 2010). This is an example of a social and non-excludable benefit for the society but when the forest is ready for harvesting, the communities that have sacrificed for long should be integrated into the management processes.

In many African countries, with the complicity of foreign colonial masters, the governments have been advised to restrict locals from cutting trees but grant exploitation permits to foreigners to exploit over time (Sumelong, 2017). Foreign corporations are given legal rights to harvest at the expense of the indigenous communities who may not even provide unskilled labour for the extraction despite the high level of educational attainment. This practice has resulted to illegal and unsustainable logging (Merlet and Fraticelli, 2016).

Forest exploitation in Cameroon dates back to the pre-colonial period when early ethnic settlers used the 'law of status' system to manage land and forests in the territory. With the arrival of colonial powers, beginning with the Germans in 1884, the law of status system was replaced by the top-down state-centred management system (Mbatu, 2009). The 1994 Forestry Law in Cameroon partitioned the forest resource into permanent and non-permanent forest estates. The permanent forest was to be set aside as reserves while the non-permanent forest could be cleared for other land use (Bruggeman et al., 2015).

Colonial policies were designed to achieve conservation goals even at the expense of the indigenous communities. The Industrial Revolution of Europe and America and the rapid exhaustion of natural resources in these parts of the world increased the pressure on natural resources in Africa. The above question is further buttressed when Etiendem et al. (2013) noted that in Cameroon, employment opportunities in surrounding villages to protected areas are rare and people only rely on agriculture and the collection of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) for food and income. According to the forestry legislation in Cameroon, at least 25% of the net benefit is supposed to be ploughed back into the communities as royalties.

The management of matured protected areas in Cameroon raises the question of who the ultimate beneficiary of natural resource preservation is. With over 40% of the Cameroonian land surface

covered by forest (Njeukam et al., 2012), there is much anticipated benefit by the population from the forestry sector. According to Sumelong (2017), indigenous communities are prohibited from maximizing benefits derived from the use of forest resources through the practice of conservation but the forest is later on awarded as logging concessions to foreign multinational corporations. Cameroon is blessed with different types of natural resources from fresh water to forest and sub-soil mineral. Yet, the citizens do not appear to derive any substantial economic benefits from it. In this context, the paper questions who the ultimate beneficiary of forest conservation in Cameroon is?. This paper is therefore designed to answer the above question by investigating into the short term and long term beneficiaries of forest conservation initiatives in Cameroon.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The controversy surrounding natural resource abundance and economic growth in Africa and other parts of the world has been a subject of investigation in many empirical researches. While different conclusions have been arrived at in the various countries and case specific investigations, the general consensus seems to weigh more on the resource-curse hypothesis. Harpa and Mensah (2007) found out that the abundance of natural resources such as oil, coal, gold and even forests have been the root cause of problems such as riots, wars, corruption, inflation, environmental degradation and reduced economic growth in many resource-rich nations especially within Sub-Saharan Africa.

The AfricanBank (2007) observed that the failure of natural resource wealth to lead to the expected economic growth and development has been attributed to several factors, including the so called “Dutch Disease”, rent-seeking by elites, volatility in prices, labour inflexibility and tension between oil producing regions and non-oil producing regions within countries. This paper further noted that there are resource-rich countries that benefit from their natural wealth. But overall, the economies of many resource-rich countries are in a surprisingly poor state.

According to Lawry (n.d.), the poor management of natural resources has often been attributed to obtrusive state policies which have undercut local institutions. Some recent policy studies conclude that authority over resources should be devolved to local authorities. He argued that state management is ineffective while incentives for individuals to participate in local

management activities are weak, and local institutions are usually unable to generate sufficient sanctions locally to enforce the existing rules and regulations.

Carmignani and Chowdhury (2012) found out that Sub-Saharan Africa was a special case whereby resources dependence retarded growth but not elsewhere on the globe. They therefore remarked that the natural resource curse is more specific to SSA. Although lower levels of investment are important for explaining Africa's slower growth, it is the slower productivity growth of its resources that more sharply distinguishes African growth performance from that of the rest of the world (Ndulu, 2007). Therefore, overcoming disadvantages arising from geographic isolation and fragmentation, as well as natural resource dependence is necessary for Africa to close the growth gap with other regions.

According to the African Capacity Building Foundation (2013), while many African countries are taking the necessary steps to advance their capacities for managing natural resources, progress on the whole is positive as most of the 44 countries included in the Index fall within the acceptable limits. The African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (2015) observed that achieving long-term sustainable development and poverty alleviation in Africa is dependent on the sustainable and optimal management of the natural resource base or its natural capital.

Escalating environmental problems today impact more disproportionately on the poor than the rich, whether in the developing countries of the world or in the wealthiest nations (Massard-Guilbaud and Mosley, 2011). According to them, a management philosophy that reduces such a disproportionate impact on the poor is required to restore an ecological balance. In a related study, Sanchez and Lefuente (2010) called for the application of preservation policies that reinforce cultural beliefs, values, attitudes and knowledge of the indigenous population.

Sounders (2014) in testing how the theoretical assumptions of common pool resource theory may have inadvertently contributed to the unfulfilled expectations of commons projects, realized that it offers little or no direction to deal with the social embeddedness of resource use or implications of different stratifications. Environmental protection with "a common" property resources is therefore at the root cause of the historic failure.

While Frieder (1997) praised the New Zealand authorities for the establishment of the resource management act with the potential of making the country 'clean and green', he however noted that political wrangling has downplayed on the anticipated benefits of such an act. Poverty and

the failure to realize basic human rights are placing the environment under severe stress (Dias, 2000).

According to Danoush (1994), development models for third world countries are found to be most effective when they promote the participation of people in the communities they serve. Barbier (2003) argued that the environment and natural resources should be treated as important economic assets, called natural capital. Despite this observation, the services provided by natural capital are unique and, in the case of the ecological and life-support functions, are not well understood by many.

Mace (2014) noted that there is a continuous paradigm shift in conservation philosophy since the early 1960s. He noted that in the 1960s and 1970s, conservation thinking was all about nature for itself while between the 1980s and 1990s, conservation was about nature without people. The most radical shift was in between 2000 and 2005 when the doctrine of “nature for people” was emphasized. From 2010, the practice has been “nature and people” with an emphasis on environmental change, resilience, adaptability and socio-ecological systems being reiterated.

The society would not have developed much hatred for conservation if the 1960 conception placed focus on the people as we have today. To him, conservation failure today is basically due to the application of the 1960s radical ideology of ‘wilderness first’.

According to Panayotou (1993), policy distortions, market failures, corollary failure of underinvesting in human resources, and employment alternatives are the root causes of environmental degradation and natural resource depletion. He suggested that right policy formulation and implementation are crucial in averting the environmental crisis and resource paradox of the present generation.

This paper is anchored on the structuralist dependency revolution to underdevelopment as formalized by Cardoso and Faletto (1979) who argued why Latin America remains underdeveloped after over 200 years of relationship with Europe and America. Related to this framework are the New Classical dependence model, the false paradigm, and the dualistic-development thesis.

The fundamental of this group of theories is that the advanced countries of the world are either contributing directly or indirectly to the underdevelopment of the third world economies through

faulty advices or deliberate actions and inactions since it is impossible to maintain continuous growth in advanced countries without continued underdevelopment in LEDCs (Ferraro, 1996).

The basic idea represented by the false paradigm is that the underdevelopment of the less economically advanced countries can be explained from the basis of faulty advice and wrong directives from the economically advanced countries and institutions they represent. The premise here is that the world's advisers must have been misinformed or properly informed but deliberately have to advice to their advantage at the detriment of developing countries (Stiglitz, 2006). As Lord Macauley (1835) puts it,

“I do not think we would ever conquer this country unless we break their backbone which is her spiritual and cultural heritage and therefore I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture and if the Africans think all what is foreign and English is good, they will lose their self-esteem, their native culture and they will become what we want them to be”.

The conservation model in practice is not indigenous with many believing that the local people are being deceived by the westerners who are today the highest funders of resource preservation.

3. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The South West Region is one of the forest regions in Cameroon with a typical equatorial climate that allows for the evergreen nature of vegetation despite the short dry season. It is one of the forest regions of the state that lies closed to the coast line and shares boundaries with Nigeria. Apart from the mineral deposits of the region that produces significant income for the state, timber exploitation is reasonably the second highest income generator as the Cameroon Development Corporation remains a highly subsidized para-public enterprise.

This study adopts the survey research design in systematically collecting information from the sampled population. According to Glasow (2005), this research design is necessary to analyze trends across time in order to describe what exists, in what amount, and to what context. Polland (2005) also noted that survey research is useful for determining the degree to which a desired objective is attained as a result of a planned programme.

In this study, data were collected from 91 individuals randomly selected from 4 communities in Manyu Division of the South West Region of Cameroon. This division was selected because at

the time of the research, significant forest/timber exploitation continued to take place despite the heated nature of the crisis currently rocking the region. To complement the written survey, the researchers interviewed 15 elderly persons in the communities. These were supplemented by as well as personal observations from the field. The main tool for data analysis was descriptive statistics in which percentages, tables and pie charts were used. This method is important for eliciting deeper insights into the interpretation of the results (Fernando et al., 2017).

4. PRESENTATION OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This study examined the nature of forest conservation in the South West Region of Cameroon by assessing whether conservation practices are for or against the interest of the people. Out of the 106 individuals involved in this investigation, 70 were males while 36 were females.

The interview involved 8 traditional rulers, and 7 other community members selected on the basis of age and wisdom. Out of the 91 questionnaires retained for this study, 70 of the respondents reported that government is keen to enforcing forestry conservation laws in the area of study. This means that every effort is being made by the forestry administration to ensure a proper conservation of the forest.

The stakeholders in the forestry sector in the South West Region include the local communities, the local councils, the local and central forestry administration, the central government, and the timber exploitation companies and labourers. According to the result in Figure 1, the community represented by the survey participants perceived that the timber exploitation companies are the highest beneficiaries of forest exploitation (34%), followed by the local and central forestry administration (27%), the central government (20%), and the local communities (7%), while only about 3% of the respondents perceived that local council benefits from forest conservation.

In a nutshell, the population perceives that external stakeholders benefits from forest conservation at their detriment. According to Mulugeta, Allan and Yvan (2015), command and control approaches to protecting common property resources such as forest and rangelands without actively involving local communities have failed to control deforestation and habitat destruction.

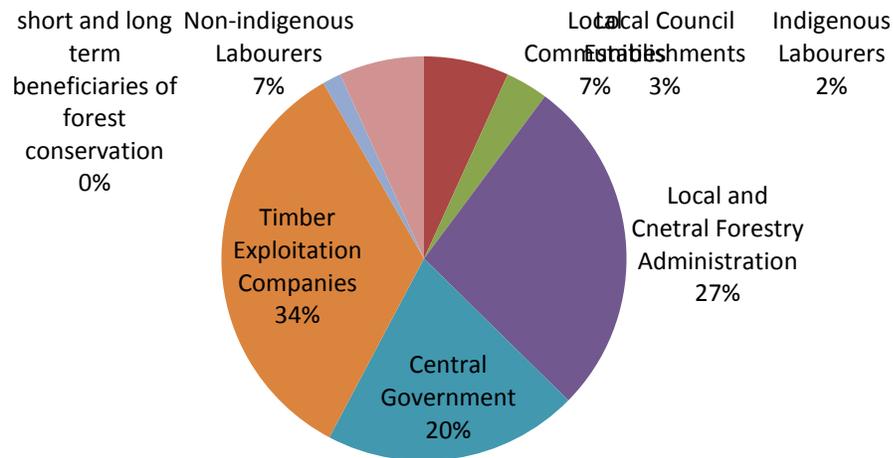


Figure 1: Community perception on long term beneficiaries of forest conservation

Source: Authors, 2018

It must be noted that a majority of the benefits that accrue to the forestry administration is not legal. This has, however, been made possible because of the high level of corruption reported in the sector. As Rosa (2011) puts it, entrepreneurial activities can be destructive when actors engage in rent seeking and other opportunities linked to unethical and illegal practices such as corruption and organized crime.

On the issue of past protected forest, the study found out that the previously conserved forest is now being exploited under what is known as “Forest Management Units, (FMU)” in some of the localities visited. Unfortunately, about 97% of the respondents believe that the local populations are not involved in the exploitation of the timber from their forests. This means that the communities sacrifice by foregoing their short term benefits such as harvesting of NTFPs, the logging of timber for domestic use and other forest benefits. But when it is time to exploit, they are relegated by the government in favour of multinational and non-indigenous companies.

It is important to note that the level of poverty and underdevelopment of the rural communities that live beside the forests in Manyu Division of the South West Region is significant. These rural people depend almost entirely on the forest for their basic needs or livelihoods. Amongst other illegal practices, Nsom (2013) reported that the social requirements of the law which contribute to the local development of the people are not respected by the exploitation companies. Amin (n.d) also reported that the net gain to companies in forest exploitation in Cameroon is over 95% while the community that harbours the resources languishes in poverty.

The logging industry in Cameroon currently threatens the rainforest biodiversity and the indigenous communities' survival. The communities are largely excluded from the timber exploitation processes which have been described as unsustainable (Morgan, 1999). The financial entitlement to the local councils as provided by Law has been stifled by administrative bottleneck and the lack of transparency.

Amin (n.d) found out that the failures in forest exploitation in Cameroon has resulted in unsustainable timber trade, and among other things, created heavy environmental costs to the nation. The weakness of the state with regard to law enforcement has created a market for the illegal exploitation of timber such that the economy loses a lot. In 2011, the licenses of some 72 logging companies were suspended because of the non-respect of the legal framework. In 2006, four more companies were suspended with about 35 others warned (Cameroon Tribune, 2016).

Table 1: Short and long term benefits from forest conservation

Nature of Benefits	Short term		Long term	
	Expected	Realized	Expected	Realized
Training on income generating activities	✓	✓	✓	x
Alternative livelihood support	✓	✓	✓	x
Direct cash benefits	✓	✓	✓	x
Community development support	✓	✓	✓	x
Job creation	✓	x	✓	✓
Corporate social responsibility acts	✓	x	✓	x
Taxes to local councils	✓	x	✓	x
Ecosystem benefits	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fuel wood and construction	✓	✓	✓	x

Source: Computed by the Authors, 2018

Table 1 indicates that though the indigenous populations expect much from forest conservation, very little is achieved especially in the long term. In the short term, some piecemeal benefits are flushed into the communities to gain their support for conservation but in the long term, the same conservators in collaboration with extraction companies are missing in community action. Interestingly, most of the momentary gifts and benefits that flow to the communities during the conservation phase are largely unsustainable.

On the whole, the local communities largely believe that what they benefit both in the short and long terms are far below expectation as prescribed by the law. When expected benefits are less

than achieved benefits as clearly indicated in Table 1, tension and conflicts are bound to exist between stakeholders. Mbatu (2009) reported that communities are not benefiting from the legal forest exploitation in Cameroon despite the bottom-up management system prescribed since 1994. With over 95% of the logging companies being non-indigenous, the long term consequences of repatriated profits cannot be underestimated. In the reasoning of Njiforti and Tchamba (1993), this study questions whether the resources were meant for the local people or for the foreigners as most of the benefits to the communities are usually insignificant, short-term and also not sustainable.

The study also found that no value added is initiated within the production area in particular and in Cameroon in general as the timber is mostly exported in its natural form. Value added is very necessary for job creation and increased revenue generation for the country. Unfortunately, over 85% of the finished timber resources used in the public service in Cameroon such as tables, chairs, cupboards, amongst others are imported. With increased technological advancement and level of education, Cameroon can add value to the timber resources before export and save resources from re-importation.

It can only be described as a development paradox that the policies of the central government do not favour local development. Government is expected to work for the interest of the poor citizens and should not be seen as an institution that makes lives worse-off for the population. Sumelong (2017) reported that the local populations who are extremely poor have no means of survival because of the high social injustice.

This conclusion was arrived at following investigations that led to the discovery that the government restricts poor citizens from exploiting the natural resources in their environment but grants mining and exploitation permits to foreign companies. In these circumstances, one would be quick to conclude that forest conservation in particular and environmental conservation in general are not for the interest of the local population.

In the momentary period, the indigenous forest communities are illusively made to understand that forest conservation is for global good such as the protection of water sources, regulation of the climate, ensuring ecosystem balance, amongst others. The study remarks that long term economic interest to funding and conservation agencies surpasses any local community benefits. Njeukam et al. (2012) reported that logging companies consider the forest only in its economic

dimension and their single objective is to maximize financial benefits. They further noted that the 1994 Forestry Law and the new Forest Law Enforcement, Government and Trade (FLEGT) process launched by the European Union provide for the civil society to improve on forestry management in Cameroon. But the economic rationale of extracting timber from the peripheral poor regions and exporting it to Europe in this new policy remain what prevailed during the colonisation period.

The practice of corporate social responsibility by logging companies seems not to exist in the communities visited. The population was found to be frustrated with the state and the logging companies as they have abandoned the localities to themselves for development initiatives. The roads leading to the localities where exploitation takes place remains largely not motorable especially by smaller cars as the companies use heavy trucks to transport timber. This finding contradicts Lempianinen (2011) who observed that most logging companies social responsibility activities are designed to impact communities and create wealth.

The logging companies use heavy duty trucks to access the usually inaccessible areas to harvest and transport timber resources for the external markets. The law governing corporate social responsibilities by these enterprises have been abandoned as the communities hardly get any significant benefits. The local councils reportedly do not even receive royalties as they are paid directly into the central treasury.

Rainforest Alliance (2016) reported that with the aid of government agencies, large firms have been seizing parcels of land in forested areas that were traditionally under ancestral tenure and are rapidly converting them to mono-crop plantations in Cameroon. We continue to question why the interest of MNCs continue to override those of the indigenous population in these era even at the dawn of the 21st century when we know much better than ever before. This brings to mind the Garrett Hardin's (1968) tragedy of the commons.

5. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While the social, ecological and other rationale for forest conservation cannot be underestimated, the activities of the stakeholders in forest conservation in Cameroon point to an undisclosed economic agenda. After 55 years of political independence, economic dependence continues to drag on in Cameroon. This reinforces the concept that the west granted political independence to

Cameroon but created an accompanying platform of Cameroon's economic and policy dependence on the colonial powers (Lambi, 2009). It is this unbridled dependence that keeps the poor poorer thereby energizing the vicious cycle of poverty and overdependence within our developing communities.

Forestry policies continue to be influenced by foreign powers and the shipment of timber resources to Europe continues in the trend and magnitude established during the colonial days. The political class has shown a complete lack of will to set up major timber processing plants in the country which can create jobs for the many graduates who roam the streets.

While this practice hinders technological transfer with long term consequences on the economy, the short run implications of the lack of meaningful jobs especially in timber exploitation sites and other economic opportunities to better the livelihood of the rural masses remain a sad story that calls for a critical re-evaluation of our government policy in the wake of the disturbing realities.

Community members pay a heavy prize for forest conservation through forgone benefits while in return, they receive insignificant benefits. Most of the benefits are in the form of false and unfulfilled promises. In this context, conservation in general and forest conservation in particular cannot be sustainable. We therefore conclude that forest conservation in the South West Region of Cameroon largely benefits the western allies and political elites than the local populations as expected benefits are lower than actual benefits.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy failure has been identified as a limitation to enhancing the contribution of the forestry sector to the local economy. Addressing policy failure to tackle the question of what value is added to the timber exploitation process in Cameroon would be a key in harnessing the contribution of the timber sector to poverty reduction in the country. Adding value to timber before exploitation would not only create jobs for the many graduates, it will also generate more income to boost the national income of the country through direct and indirect taxation.

Though the law in place provides for a decentralized forest management procedure, every decision continues to come from the central government. Effective decentralization of forest management by empowering both technically and operationally, the local councils to effectively

follow up forest governance would strongly reduce most of the current managerial lapses. The central government should ensure that local taxes be paid directly to the councils to fast track local community development. The local arms of the central government are weak and corrupt because of no direct benefit. The strong central government cannot control all grassroots operations linked to forest exploitation effectively from Cameroon's capital, Yaoundé.

In order to ensure that forest conservation is beneficial to all stakeholders and sustainable, measures must be put in place to enhance local community benefits significantly from the process, both in the short term and in the long term. The state and its partners should not only focus on conserving natural forests. Other models of forest conservation such as reforestation should be implemented so as to meet household needs of forest communities.

A follow up mechanism should be put in place to ensure that logging companies comply with the law relating to corporate social responsibility in the communities that live beside forest areas under exploitation. In the meantime, the government should support this policy by making provisions for social amenities to the population as compensation following the long period of near neglect.

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