Local intensification and diversification initiatives within the cocoa agroforests of southern Cameroon: lessons for participatory forestry in perennial crop-based systems of Central and West Africa

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SUMMARY

Forest cover has deteriorated less in Central Africa than in West Africa. The cocoa cultivation practised in West Africa, after felling of the forest, has contributed to the destruction of that cover. Unlike West Africa, cocoa cultivation in southern Cameroon (Central Africa) is done by smallholders' conversion of the natural forest (cultivation in the shade of the forest). This practice today constitutes a factor on which the cocoa farmers rely to counter the fall in the price of cocoa and fluctuations on the international market. In such agroforests, farmers thus manage timber wood, fuelwood, non-wood forest products, etc. by intensification and diversification. By doing so in the cocoa plantations, they attain, within the same ecosystem, the production and conservation objectives. These smallholder forestry practices in the cocoa agroforests are complementary to community forestry recently introduced in Cameroon.

The fall in the price and the liberalization of the cocoa line has exposed the economic fragility (e.g. falling income and fluctuating profit) of the cocoa monoculture systems (usually in the open) currently practised in West Africa. Such lack of economic strength coexists with an economic precariousness shown by low biological diversity, low carbon retention and the emergence of pests, such as capsids. In that part of the continent it is therefore now necessary to promote systems with several levels of application, using species that have both ecological and socio-economic functions (respectively, for shade and for nutrition, medicine, heating and income generation). The cocoa agroforests of southern Cameroon thus seem to be models that may well be reproduced, with variants, in West Africa during the establishment of new cocoa plantations or the development and/or renewal of existing ones.

Synergy among chocolate manufacturers, non-governmental organizations and national and international research and development organizations has been created in the subregion for the promotion of sustainable systems. The study presents the state of the Central and West African forest resources and proposes recommendations in favour of participatory forestry in the perennial crop-based systems (mainly of cocoa) of West and Central Africa.

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