Government and non-government institutional collaboration in implementing community forestry: the case of Kilum-Ijim Forest Project

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SUMMARY

The Kilum-Ijim Forest is in the Bamenda Highlands, North-West Province, Cameroon. At 20 000 ha, it is the largest remaining patch of Afro-montane forest in West Africa and is recognized as a globally important centre of endemism. There is a large population around the forest, which depends heavily on it for a wide variety of products. In addition, the forest has significant cultural and spiritual value to the local people and also serves as a major water source. By 1986, the forest had been reduced to 50 percent of its 1963 area because of agricultural exploitation. The Kilum-Ijim Forest Project was established in 1987 to work with the local communities to stop further loss of the forest. The project has adopted a highly participatory approach to community forestry, which is loosely based on that developed in Asia but is adapted to the Cameroonian context. This approach is centred on the collaboration of the three main actors (the community, traditional authorities and government) and consists of five broad phases: information, investigation, negotiation, implementation and review. While collaboration between the three actors is vital for the success of the community forestry process, the socio-political context makes cooperation difficult because of the high levels of mistrust between the parties. The project has therefore evolved an approach of decentralized collaboration in which it provides opportunities at a local level for individual representatives of the three actors to work together on concrete issues. Consensus has been possible at this level and has led to positive action on a number of forest management issues. This collaboration at a local level has led to improved collaboration at higher levels, resulting in significant progress in the efforts to manage the Kilum-Ijim Forest for both biological diversity conservation and sustainable use.

Identification of the case

The Kilum-Ijim Forest, in the Bamenda Highlands of the North-West Province of Cameroon, is the last significant remnant of Afro-montane forest in West Africa and is recognized as a globally important centre of endemism. Population density around the forest is very high and human pressure on the forest is immense, particularly for new farmland. The Kilum-Ijim Forest Project, a collaborative effort of BirdLife International and the Cameroon Ministry of the Environment and Forestry (MINEF), was established to work with the communities surrounding the forest to conserve the forest, both for its biological diversity value and for its sustainable use by the local population.

Forests once covered the Bamenda Highlands region. Over time, however, they have been progressively cleared for farmland; and today there are only small patches left, generally along peaks and ridges where farming is more difficult. The Kilum-Ijim Forest, at 20 000 ha, is the largest of these remaining patches. The process of deforestation has accelerated over the last two decades, as a rapidly growing population has combined with declining economic conditions to increase the demand for new farmland. The most recent land rush came in the late 1980s when drastically reduced coffee prices sent many farmers further up the slopes for new land to plant alternative cash crops of beans and potatoes. In 1992, it was estimated that at then current rates of clearing, the Kilum-Ijim Forest would have disappeared in five years had efforts not been made to protect it.

Government efforts to conserve biological diversity in Cameroon have generally not been successful, with numerous State forest reserves now so degraded that some have hardly any trees remaining. However, a new forestry law promulgated in 1994 included a provision for community forests in which responsibility for forest man-agement could be devolved from the central administration to the local communities bordering a forest on the basis of an agreed forest management plan. Benefits from the forest would then accrue to the local community. Many organizations concerned with biological diversity conservation in Cameroon, including the Kilum-Ijim Forest Project, have used this opening to work towards the establishment of community-based forest management regimes.

Unfortunately, despite the legal provision for community forests, progress on their implementation has been slow. The procedures for establishing a community forest were not finalized until 1998 and only four community forests have thus far been officially approved. There is a lack of capacity within MINEF for community forestry but, perhaps of more fundamental importance, weak democratic structures permit the legitimate interests of the community to be subverted. Furthermore, there is often mistrust between government services and communities and between government services and traditional authorities because of the highly centralized nature of the administration and lack of support for local initiatives. A lack of real commitment to community forestry at the national level can also be seen in a recent decision to remove the newly created Community Forestry Unit from the official MINEF organizational structure. In this environment, communities are often understandably cautious about embarking on community forestry.

Many factors at a local level are also unfavourable to the establishment of community forestry in the Kilum-Ijim area. To start with, 34 different communities border the Kilum-Ijim Forest, each with its own characteristics and problems, with a total population of about 200 000 people. These 34 communities are spread over two administrative units, Bui and Boyo divisions, and three traditional *fondoms*, those of the Kom, Oku and Nso peoples. In addition, Mbororo pastoralists inhabit some of the grasslands within the Ijim part of the forest. Conflict between ethnic groups as well as between farmers and graziers is common. While the traditional authorities are generally still highly respected in the North-West Province and are a strong unifying force, there has been some weakening of the system as it has been partially incorporated into the State system and the loyalties of some rulers questioned. Overall, the situation is one in which collaboration

between the various actors in the community forestry process can be very difficult.

At the same time, however, there are a number of other factors that do favour community-based forest management of the Kilum-Ijim Forest. First, the population has a strong interest in the forest and a genuine consensus about the need to conserve the forest is developing. Almost all watercourses in the area originate in the forest and people have seen what has happened in other nearby communities where forest degradation has led to the drying-up of rivers and streams. The population also depends heavily on the forest for a wide variety of products, the most important being fuelwood, medicines, honey, building materials and carving wood. In addition, the forest has significant cultural and spiritual value to the local population. The three ethnic groups bordering the forest all perform certain rites and ceremonies in the forest to ensure good crop yields and good health. A second factor favouring community forestry is that the culture in the North-West Province is one that values community self-reliance, resulting in a long and successful history of community initiatives in education, health, road construction and water supply. Community forest management builds on this tradition. Finally, there is little commercial interest in the forest as the montane tree species present in the forest are generally too small to be of interest for timber extraction. At present, the only product of commercial value found in the forest is the bark of *Prunus africana*, which is used in the production of a medicine for treating prostatitis. Thus, community management of the forest poses little economic threat to anyone.

Status of the forest resources

As mentioned above, the Kilum-Ijim Forest is the last significant remnant of Afro-montane forest in West Africa. The forest area is about 20 000 ha, of which about half is montane forest and the rest montane grassland and various types of recolonization formations (post-burning or post-farming scrub). Found on Mount Kilum (3 011 m) and the adjoining Ijim Ridge (2 000-2 500 m), the forest is home to a large number of rare plants and animals, including 15 montane bird species endemic to Cameroon. Two of these, Bannerman's Turaco (*Tauraco bannermani*) and Banded Wattle-Eye (*Platysteira laticincta*), are restricted to the forest and a few nearby forest fragments and are classified as endangered. The Kilum-Ijim Forest almost certainly represents the only possibility for the conservation of viable populations of these two species. At least six species of mammal found in the forest are endemic to the Bamenda Highlands and ten to the Cameroon Highlands. While reptiles and amphibians have been less thoroughly studied, 11 species endemic to the Cameroon Highlands have been identified, of which two are restricted to the forest. There are at least 40 species of plants endemic to the Cameroon Highlands, and five of these are found only in the forest. Of the 75 African forests reviewed for their conservation status by Collar and Stuart (1988), the Kilum-Ijim Forest was ranked tenth in priority because of its high degree of biological differentiation and the degree of threat to the forest.

Attempts to conserve the Kilum-Ijim Forest began in 1931 when the Conservator of Forests for the Bamenda Division drew limits for the proposed Kilum-Ijim Forest Reserve, known then as the "Bush of Hill Forest Type". When notice of the proposed reserve was published, the Oku people objected very strongly. Agreement was then reached between the conservator and the local population, with the latter given certain use rights in the proposed reserve. Subsequent efforts by the conservator to gazette the proposed reserve (i.e. give it legal recognition) failed in 1938, 1961 and 1963. Finally, in 1975, the conservator was successful in demarcating part of the forest, although the boundary was not universally respected. All further attempts to demarcate the entire forest failed and by 1986 the forest had been reduced to

50 percent of its 1963 size because of agricultural encroachment and other human activities and their results, such as forest fires and grazing animals, especially goats. Other, more subtle influences of human use that resulted in forest degradation were the commercial exploitation of *Prunus africana*, which began in 1976 (now illegal but still occurring), and the selective removal of plant and animal species for food, medicines, carving and fuelwood.

In 1983 and 1985, the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP), now BirdLife International, carried out research in the area. Its findings were published in 1986, leading to the establishment of the Kilum and Ijim Mountain Forest projects in 1987 and 1992 respectively to stop the loss of the forest. (Since 1995, the two projects have been joined together as the Kilum-Ijim Forest Project.) Respecting the government's intention of gazetting the forest as a State reserve and learning from past attempts to demarcate the forest, the projects worked in collaboration with the communities adjacent to the forest to negotiate boundaries beyond which no further clearing for farming could take place. This work was carried out by commissions consisting of representatives of the community, traditional authorities and administrative authorities, and was completed in 1991 in Kilum and 1994 in Ijim. This demarcation has been largely respected and has halted the rapid destruction of the forest.

The community forestry process

From their inception, the Kilum and Ijim Mountain Forest projects adopted a highly participatory approach to the conservation of the Kilum-Ijim Forest and aimed at high levels of community involvement in the management of the forest. The new 1994 forestry law provided the framework for the establishment of legally recognized community forests and since 1994 the project has been working with communities towards this formal end. It should be noted, however, that this is only one part of a broader strategy for the long-term conservation and sustainable use of the Kilum-Ijim Forest. On the one hand, the project works with communities to establish an effective community-based system of forest management and ensure that the main actors in this process have the capacity to implement this system. On the other hand, recognizing the pressure to clear the forest for farmland, the project also works to improve local livelihoods in ways that contribute to conservation of the forest. Programmes in farming systems, afforestation, livestock and beekeeping all contribute to this end. In addition, the project is developing and implementing a permanent system for monitoring the effectiveness of forest management. While the focus of this paper is the community forest management programme, it must be recognized that the other programmes are integral to the overall success of forest conservation. A recent study (Abbot *et al.*, 1999), for example, showed that the livelihood programmes have contributed significantly to positive changes in people's attitudes and behaviour with respect to forest conservation. Working with people to improve livelihoods from the land around the forest has decreased pressure on the forest and so contributed towards conservation objectives.

The community forestry process adopted by the project is based loosely on that developed in Asia, but takes into consideration the Cameroonian context. The approach is centred on three main actors, the community, traditional authorities and the government forestry administration, and consists of five broad phases.

1. Information. In this phase, the idea of community forest management is discussed with and within communities, as well as with the traditional authorities

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and government services. Communities become aware of the new forestry law, particularly the section on community forests, and receive the joint proposal of the local forestry service, the traditional authorities and the project to work together to develop a community forest to conserve the Kilum-Ijim Forest. The communities learn the main steps involved in creating a community forest and are familiar with the difficulties expected in this process.

2. Investigation. If communities accept the proposal to create a community forest (and all have done so thus far), present and past forest use and management are investigated using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools such as mapping, historical matrices, time lines, semi-structured interviews and forest walks.

3. Negotiation. Community-based forest management institutions are then created by the community, representing all sections of the population and in particular involving those who use the forest intensively. Internal forest boundaries between communities are negotiated and marked. The distribution of benefits from the forest is debated and consensus reached. Forest management objectives are determined. Using the information generated in the investigation phase, a forest management plan is negotiated that is agreed by the forestry service and reflects both the community's objectives for forest use and forest conservation objectives. The legal steps necessary for the establishment of a community forest are undertaken.

4. Implementation. Communities implement their management plans with the technical assistance of MINEF. The condition of the forest and the health of the forest management institution are monitored by the communities.

5. Review. Management plans are reviewed and revised by the community and the local forestry administration as the need arises.

While conceptualized as consecutive phases, in practice these stages tend to overlap and iterate so that, for example, certain forest management measures (e.g. fire control) have been negotiated while investigation work is still ongoing. Similarly, implementation of certain forest management measures (e.g. a ban on goats grazing in the forest) has occurred before any forest management plan has been negotiated.

Central to the success of this approach is collaboration between the three main actors, the community, traditional authorities and the government forestry administration. At the most basic level, all have a strong interest in the forest and to exclude one of these would create unnecessary conflict. More crucially, each has its own strengths and abilities that together provide a firmer foundation for community forest management than those of any one partner alone. Community forest management institutions, for example, require the support and recognition of the traditional authorities for legitimacy within the community and for the setting of norms by which they can interact with different sections of society. Both require the backing of the State to ensure legal recognition and enforcement of decisions taken with respect to forest management. To provide some concrete examples, traditional authorities are generally best able to handle forest boundary disputes between neighbouring communities, while local MINEF staff are better able to legally pursue those illegally exploiting *Prunus africana.* From the perspective of the long-term conservation of the forest, the presence of all three partners in the forest management system reduces the risk of the system not working should any one partner be institutionally weak at a given moment as a result of factors such as political upheaval, staff transfers or community disputes.

While collaboration between the three actors is vital to the success of the community forestry process, the socio-political context described earlier is one in which such collaboration is very difficult given the high degree of mistrust among the parties. The project has therefore had the role of facilitating the formation of a working partnership for community forest management under somewhat adverse conditions. It has made some errors along the way but over time has developed an approach that might be called "decentralized collaboration", which seems to have had some success. Essentially, it is an approach in which the project provides opportunities at a local level for individual representatives of the three actors to work together on concrete issues. As individuals work together to accomplish specific tasks, the level of mistrust diminishes and the possibilities for cooperation increase. Consensus that might not be possible at

higher levels is possible at this individual level and has led to positive action on a number of forest management issues. Notably, these include the prevention of forest fires, action against illegal exploitation of *Prunus africana*, action against agricultural encroachment and the negotiation of community forest boundaries.

This approach evolved because of the project's efforts to ensure the full participation of all three actors at each stage in the process. For example, community meetings held during the information phase were facilitated not only by project staff but by a team comprising project staff, MINEF staff and representatives of the traditional authorities. All team members had an opportunity to speak from their own perspective about the importance of the forest and of the possibilities of community management of the forest. Similarly, all partners participated in investigation work and gained a better understanding of how people use and manage the forest. Government staff who might initially be distrusted by communities were accepted much more readily after spending four or five days in a village working through various PRA exercises. MINEF staff and traditional authorities working together to solve minor encroachment problems were subsequently better able to work together on the more serious problem of illegal exploitation of *Prunus africana.* As the foundation for cooperation grew steadily stronger, collaboration at higher levels became possible. Recently,

this culminated in fondom-wide meetings of community representatives, MINEF staff and traditional authorities to develop common rules for forest use, something that would not have been possible even a year or two ago.

The idea underlying this approach is a simple one; one would normally expect people who know each other and who have worked together in the past to be better able to work together in the future. However, it does require considerable patience and a real commitment to full participation by all actors to make it work. Of course, in a situation as complex as that described here, there will always be conflict of one kind or another. Indeed, there are several major problems at Kilum-Ijim that have yet to be resolved, including illegal grazing on the Kilum summit and a boundary dispute between two fondoms that has led to violence in the past. However, now that a basis for collaboration and cooperation has been established, one can expect that there is a better chance of resolving these conflicts.

The impact of community forestry on the conservation and management of the forest

Although the first communities are still some months away from completing the process of legally establishing community forests, community forestry has already had a significant impact on the Kilum-Ijim Forest. Most important, destruction of the forest has been halted and consequently endemic species have been conserved. Analysis of satellite images shows that the extent of montane forest has actually increased since 1991 through the regeneration of degraded areas within the forest boundary, in contrast to other areas in the Bamenda Highlands where forests have decreased in size over the same period.

Forest management institutions now exist in all but two of the communities bordering the forest and these are taking responsibility for an increasing number of forest management functions, the most important being the prevention of forest fires. Many are undertaking regular patrols of the forest and problems such as agricultural encroachment or the illegal harvesting of particular

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species are being handled at a community level. Some communities are undertaking activities such as enrichment planting in degraded areas or the removal of exotic species such as *Eucalyptus.* In general, the forest is being managed for the conservation of biological diversity and sustainable use, something that did not happen in the past. There is still considerable work to be done to develop complete forest management plans, but the foundations of community management are in place.

The communities and traditional authorities are being supported in their endeavours to manage the forest by local MINEF staff who are actively engaged in the community forestry process. Initial reluctance has given way to more active participation as capacity for community forestry has increased.

Despite the achievements to date, there is a danger that initial enthusiasm for community management of the forest may wane in time, as people become more familiar with the difficulties and effort required. While a permanent water supply and access to useful forest products are important benefits to be gained through forest management, there is a possibility that in the long term these are not enough for all communities to remain committed to the process. The tangible economic benefits to be gained from the management of a montane forest are much less than those from a lowland forest from which timber can be harvested. In the long term, it is proposed that MINEF create a special operational unit to ensure ongoing technical support to community forest management institutions.

Recommendations for the promotion of community forestry

Perhaps the main lesson from the experience at Kilum-Ijim is that despite adverse conditions at a national level, community forestry is possible given at least some favourable local conditions and a community forestry process that builds on those strengths. Community forestry is young in Cameroon and it is to be hoped that successful examples will encourage further efforts throughout the country. Already, the Kilum-Ijim Forest Project has received numerous requests for assistance from other communities in the North-West Province who have seen what is happening at Kilum-Ijim and wish to conserve their own forests. It is by different communities in diverse settings experimenting with different ways of doing things that community forestry will develop, more successful examples will be established and community forestry will become more widely accepted.

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