

Another look at the law

The Cameroon government is embarking on a process to revise Cameroon's forest law

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Fifteen years after the enactment of Cameroon's 1994 Forest Law, a process has been put in place to revise it. A revision is needed for several reasons, including: problems in the community management of resources (the rules are not well codified); repercussions from the decentralization of taxation; the vagueness of property rights in the field and in the distinction between permanent and non-permanent forest; the need to improve policy measures to encourage sustainable forest management; the livelihood impacts experienced by people living in or near protected areas; and the need to increase the contribution of the forest sector to sustainable development nationally. Moreover, there have been several national and regional developments since proclamation of the law that, to some extent, render it obsolete. Perhaps the most significant of these was the Yaoundé Declaration, which committed COMIFAC countries to a range of measures aimed at improving forest management in the region.

The revision aims to:

- address the observed flaws in the practice of the law;
- integrate the regional dimension in the management of our forest resources;
- integrate the commitments entered into by the country at the national level and under regional and international agreements;
- address the concerns of climate change: forests are part of the global solution;
- take more account of the real capacities of forests in development;
- reinforce transparency and governance in the sector;
- encourage a timber-processing industry that assists the country to develop sustainably; and
- encourage the full adherence of forest users to the sustainable management of the resource.

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Forests are a renewable resource, but to ensure that they are managed sustainably it is necessary to establish a mechanism that is transparent and understood by all actors. The process of revising the law is a delicate and iterative process. It is the first revision to take place after the Yaoundé Declaration and the installation of COMIFAC. We are proud to unroll this process. I ask and challenge all the partners present here to accompany us in the process. We believe this initiative will enable Cameroon to hasten towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

We are not revising the law for the sake of it. We are doing it to solve problems. People in the field can propose solutions so we can move faster. We should take into account the experiences we have had in Cameroon. In 1994 we put forward a reform that was too advanced for the rest of the system: we gave resources to communities that did not have the governance systems to manage the forests adequately. It is only now that governance is following ...

The forestry law is based on the land law, which dates back to 1994 and has also had two revisions. The land law has not changed. MINFOW cannot carry out zoning and land reforms. These are political issues and I hope that in the following days we will take a note of these so we can move forward faster.

Denis Koulagna Koutou in response to a question from the floor.



Invitation: The Cameroon government wants all partners to participate in the process of revising its forest law *Photo: A. Sarre*

After colonization, people who had customary rights quickly ended up not having rights because there were written laws that didn't take into account existing unwritten laws. We kept these mechanisms after independence and there was acknowledgement of customary rights but on a very limited basis. We had to prove that we had developed the land, which didn't mean much because, in many places, to do management was to do very little. I don't think we are talking about solutions, we are talking about processes to arrive at local solutions adapted to our particular conditions. In revising the law we are going to involve all the players. Have we done that in the past? No. Will we find a national consensus? Probably not, but everyone will be heard.

Samuel Nguiffo, Cameroon Center for Environment and Development, in response to a question from the floor.