

The opening session

The conference was an unprecedented opportunity for the sharing of experiences between countries in Africa



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The Cameroon forest sector has undergone a number of reforms. One of the most important, in 1994, was the adoption of the forest law, which strengthened efforts to pursue sustainable forest management (SFM) and stipulated that communities should be able to participate in forest management in order to improve their lives. Since 2000 there has been an increased push for the recognition of community rights.

Despite such efforts, however, there are many obstacles to community forestry in Cameroon. For example:

- the legal framework does not encourage CFES;
- Cameroon's zoning plan does not reflect the realities of land use, thus creating conflict between communities;
- several UFAs (concessions) are still unclassified. This lack of certainty about resource allocation exposes forests to illegal exploitation and deprives communities of development opportunities;
- conflicts over natural resource management are often the result of an inequitable allocation of forest concessions, which marginalizes the people and reduces their access to forests;
- forest governance is poor;
- forest communities have insufficient access to funds to develop their CFES, which would generate significant employment opportunities;
- there is no program to create an effective industry based on non-wood forest products; and
- capacity building is needed in all forest communities across the country.

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This conference is a major opportunity to share experiences and learning. It is also a chance for us to highlight the problems that impede the sustainable development of forest-dwelling people and the sustainable management of the forests and to put these on the agenda of ITTO and other organizations. It is not possible to arrive at sustainable development without security of tenure, or if people are disempowered or feel unsafe. Local communities are convinced that the move to reformulate the forest law in Cameroon is an opportunity for them to improve their lives.

Notwithstanding the huge influence of regional and global economic forces, deforestation ultimately happens at ground level and can only be contained by those who do it. In most countries in the region, the political system grants local communities only a minute role in the decision-making process relating to the management of forests. Yet, in many places, local communities are the custodians of the forests, manage it on a daily basis, and derive a major portion of their livelihoods from them. Actions aimed at bringing forests under sustainable management will remain doomed as long as the rights and duties of these local communities as managers of forests are insufficiently recognized.

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Although the obstacles are many, I am inspired by examples that are emerging in which the clarification of forest land tenure, especially when done for the benefit of local communities, has made a substantial difference to efforts to achieve SFM and, ultimately, has led to a reduction in local poverty and an increase in social harmony. During this conference we will draw from these positive cases and share our views on the conditions that have enabled their emergence. Particularly now, when new options for funding SFM—such as through climate-change mitigation—are opening up, it is critical to address the issue of land tenure and to thus clear a path (without clearing the forest!) towards truly sustainable development.



Illustration: Agni Boedhihartono (Intu)



Dr Raymond Mbitikon

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His Excellency Dr Elvis Ngolle Ngolle

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The rights of communities have not really been taken into account in the Central African region. Many communities do not have access to resources. Consistent with this, COMIFAC has developed a short- and long-term convergence plan that encourages, across the region, the recognition of community rights and the securing of tenure rights. Legislative reform processes to protect the rights and livelihoods of communities are under way in several countries in the region. COMIFAC is delighted that this conference is being held and hopes that it will strengthen reform initiatives.

The question of land reform is a prime concern in our country. We are conscious of the need to establish the rights of the various actors in the management of the land. Cameroon law distinguishes between permanent and non-permanent forest land. Nevertheless, the law is open enough to accommodate a new tenure system and, in this sense, this conference will make a difference. Moreover, it is impossible to address human rights and climate change without addressing the issues of this conference.

Cameroon is embarking on a new forestry law. The process put in place involves all stakeholders, and rights are clearly addressed. Cameroon guarantees all companies and people the right to own lands, except in areas of strategic interest. Cameroon undertakes to defend the rights of Indigenous people, including in the forest; for example, we have just signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Social Affairs in the implementation of a development plan for the Pygmy people within the framework of the forest and environment sectoral program.

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Cameroon is convinced that ITTO should be a meeting point for dialogue. Cameroon's concern is to see that this meeting ends with practical and concrete solutions. I appeal to all forested countries to develop a synergy with regard to the sharing of experiences. I hope that ITTO consumer countries will continue to accompany us in our initiatives.



Stakeholder interest: The conference was attended by a wide range of people *Photo: A. Sarre*



Illustration: Agni Boedhihartono (Intu)