
Environmental Communication and Sustainable Forest Governance Management in Cameroon

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Introduction

The global environmental crises, and their associated consequences, are more than ever before a cause for concern not only to international and regional organisations but also at national and local levels. There is much debate on how best to sustainably exploit the various natural resources. Anxieties about forest decline are significant because forests provide a complex array of ecological, social and economic goods and services to humans. About 25 per cent of the world's people depend to some extent on forest resources for their livelihoods and subsistence (GFW 2000).

In much of sub-Saharan Africa, deforestation is the major environmental problem and much deforestation in Africa is attributed to timber companies whose trade in wood responds to international demand. The resultant effect is that high-value tropical timber is increasingly becoming scarce especially at the local level of economically impoverished countries (Wunder 2000). Household energy consumption outside larger African cities depends almost exclusively on wood sources, and cooking is the most energy-intensive activity (Goldemberg 1996). Population growth and unsustainable wood uses are causing an ever-increasing imbalance between firewood demand and supply, which then triggers deforestation. Given its current rate of expansion, Africa's population is expected to triple from 642 million in 1990 to 1.6 billion in 2025. This astronomical increase portends a greater disaster for an already crisis-ridden continent whose

environment has been exploited and plundered for a long time (Lambi 2001). Furthermore, poverty and high population growth often induce land degradation and deforestation, which lead to growing food insecurity and loss of biodiversity. The severity of these mutually reinforcing constraints is compounded by low investment in human capital, which often forces individuals to continue to rely on their own unskilled labour and short-term exploitation of natural resources as the only way to survive (World Bank 1996).

Furthermore, poverty is linked to the environment in complex ways, particularly in African economies which depend on natural resources. It is also a factor in accelerating environmental degradation owing to the fact that the poor, with often less secured access to natural resources, are unable and often unwilling to invest in natural resource management (Mink 1993; World Bank 1996). This is compounded by the fact that about 80 per cent of forests in sub-Saharan Africa are state property, a tenure form that is usually exposed to severe degradation. State enforcement of forest tenure and access rules tends to be less efficient and more costly, and nationalisation can be disastrous for local management incentives. Insecurity of tenure promotes forest mining and discourages long-term timber management (Wunder 2000). Furthermore shifting cultivators, in many cases forest-dwelling ethnic groups, have traditionally been precluded from legalised forest tenure by an intentional state strategy towards forest colonisation (Wunder 2000). Government tenure and colonisation policies thus deliberately tend to favour deforestation activities over sustainable forest uses (Bedoya 1991; Rudel 1993). Last but not least, poor economic performance, together with colossal external debts, pushes African countries to exploit forest resources for short-term gains. Generally, economic crisis drives marginalised people towards the limit and forces countries to promote foreign exchange-generating primary export sectors, some of which are land-using (agriculture) or tree-consuming (timber) (Rowe et al. 1992; Wunder 2000). Increased primary product exports increase pressure on natural resources; and forest sustainability is part of the problem (Sedjo 2005). Concern over forest sustainability poses a serious challenge to Africa in general and Cameroon in particular.

The outcome of the composite research method employed in this study reveals a predominantly supportive and vertical or top-down communication approach adopted by MINFOF and collaborative partners, namely GIZ and ASSOFOMI. Hence, despite the use of multiple channels ranging from meetings, seminars/workshops, newspapers and television reports to the recognition and very frequent use of rural radio, as is the case in Bonakanda in the Mount Cameroon region, and community radio in the Mount Kilum region, the impact in enhancing sustainable forest exploitation has been minimal. This limited success is due to the fact that environmental communication ought to be a multi-stakeholder process involving information exchange, cooperation

and participation, and consideration of the opinions of all key target groups, that is, local people, municipal state institutions, NGOs and the media. The rise of democratisation around the world clearly shows the growing desire of people to participate in decisions that affect them. In Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, Latin America, Asia, and Africa, news of the past two decades has been of people's increased control over their governments. Participation by local residents and stakeholders changes the nature of policy. It also makes policy more likely to be effective. The need for public participation is a prerequisite for sustainable forest management. As a result, environmental communication and education techniques can enhance the effectiveness of people or groups seeking to participate. Therefore, providing information to forest dependents about forest policies and laws, the global consequences of deforestation as well as education on better land use management is definitely a useful environmental communication strategy. But it is not enough to bring about the desired behavioural change or solve environmental problems as well as enhance sustainable development that is so badly needed (USAID 2000).

Meanwhile, despite their adoption, due to proximity and accessibility, rural and community radio stations and their potential for information dissemination in English, Pidgin English (a lingua franca) or local regional languages have not engendered maximum cooperation and participation of the various stakeholders. This is explained by the fact that rather than adopt a 'pull' environmental communication strategy to draw the target audience in, engaging them, involving them and enhancing a relationship with them in a more proactive way, dominant stakeholders indulge in a 'push' strategy, literally pushing information out to the target audience. This type of strategy is not effective in generating political pressure from below, which is particularly important in developing countries, as it contributes to the reversal of the structural weaknesses of environmental ministries and agencies, and institutions in general. The solution lies in the adoption of a horizontal communication approach, still using radio as the dominant channel but employing a more interactive or participatory model such as the consensus conference model approach, bringing together journalists, experts, stakeholders and local inhabitants to discuss issues of sustainable forest management.

Despite the advanced level of technology in media production and distribution, radio remains the key communication channel to reach a greater audience in the delivery of environmental messages. This conclusion is arrived at based on an analysis of the overall media context in Cameroon, and the area of focus in this study in particular: specifically how information (mainly on environmental matters) is delivered and through which channels stakeholders receive information and can be best approached. However, while radio remains the most frequently used medium of environmental communication in Cameroon in general, and in the Mount Kilum and Mount Cameroon areas in particular, it is necessary

to also consider other traditional means of communication such as story tellers, local theatres, which are very influential in some rural areas, and annual cultural events, which are very popular in Cameroon, as key venues for active involvement and information sharing with those communities that cannot be fully reached through the modern media.

The evolution of the forest sector in Cameroon is related to the country's agricultural and political economy. Between 1950 and the early 1970s, with the blessing of the World Bank, the government encouraged the conversion of its moist tropical forests to small-holder coffee and cocoa agro forests. This yielded some positive economic growth, averaging about 5 per cent a year. Furthermore, due to the discovery of commercial oil fields, real GDP per capita increased by 7 per cent a year between 1978 and 1985. But a protracted decline in the terms of trade for its main agricultural exports actuated a dismal depression from 1986 through 1993. Per capita income and consumption fell by almost half and Cameroon's large external debt became unserviceable. In 1993, public-service employment and wages were drastically cut by 70 per cent followed by a 100 percent devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994. These measures seriously affected Cameroonians' income and expenditure potential, with a dramatic impact in the rural areas. Rural populations cleared additional forest for subsistence crop production while the government, on its part, granted more logging concessions. Impoverished city dwellers returned to the countryside to take up farming. The expansion of food crops, notably in remote forested areas, has accelerated deforestation. A decline in food imports during this period and the phasing out of agricultural input subsidies to farmers forced them to cultivate larger areas to maintain significant production.

Forests make a major contribution to export receipts with timber accounting for about 28 per cent of total export earnings, the second most important source of foreign exchange after petroleum (47 %). This figure excludes the considerable levels of revenues lost to illegal logging each year (DfID 2002). The economic compensation gained by government finances from timber revenue became more critical during the early 1990s due to the decline in economic productivity and the low prices of some of Cameroon's other major commodities. In the face of negative growth during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and a mounting debt burden, government identified timber as one sure means to mitigate the situation of inadequate finances (Tesi 2004; Geist and Lambin 2003; Essama-Nssah et al. 2002; GFW 2000).

Poverty in Cameroon is overwhelmingly concentrated in the rural areas. Approximately 86 per cent of the country's poor are rural. The entire rural population relies on forest products for food, medicine, fuelwood and construction materials. Also, non-timber forest products play an important role in the households of the urban poor and forest-dwelling communities. They are

an important source of cash revenue for Cameroon's forest-dependent people. The majority of women in rural Cameroon are poor, often refused land ownership and not guaranteed access to forest resources (GFW 2000; Ndoye 1998).

In a bid therefore to bolster Cameroon's economic recovery process, the government initiated in the early 1990s a forest policy reform process in conjunction with a World Bank structural adjustment loan. The Bank sought to improve forest management in the region by using Cameroon as a model. This reform sought to address conflicting economic, social and environmental goals. Major innovations in the new forest management framework included community forestry, new pricing and taxing mechanisms, allocation of concessions through an auction system and the requirement of management plans. However, forests in Cameroon have continued to suffer degradation (DfID 2002; GFW 2000). Ndenecho (2005) attributes this perennial degradation to the fact that the indigenous people, in part, have not always respected forest legislation, especially when their livelihoods or interests are threatened, and also because, in most cases, protected area status has often been imposed with no prior consultation whilst ignoring the socio-economic and cultural situation of those whose survival depends on the forest. This approach has often provoked social tension and conflicts and has undermined the possibility of implementing and achieving sustainability objectives.

This chapter attempts an appraisal of the current approaches of environmental communication and forest management in Cameroon with the main objective of reconstructing a valid environmental communication and forest governance strategy for the mitigation of non-sustainable forest exploitation while enhancing sustainable development. The chapter illustrates that forest policies and laws are bound to be less effective unless accompanied by an auspicious implementation strategy. Lastly, the fact that effective environmental communication is an integral component of any effective sustainable forest management approach is underlined.

Environmental communication is defined as the 'planned and strategic use of communication processes and media products to support effective policy making, public participation and project implementation geared towards environmental sustainability' (OECD 1999b). It is therefore of prime importance as the foundation for establishing relationships between people and the environment and as a means for enhancing environmental literacy and sustainable environmental practices. However, despite its validity as an environmental management tool, it has not been effectively exploited in Cameroon.

According to Lambi (2007), a critical obstacle to the participation of rural people in sustainable natural resource usage and conservation is the lack of reliable and accurate information. Balgah (2007) attributes this to the lack of a viable environmental communication strategy which adequately addresses issues like deforestation and the loss of biological resources. Against this background,

this section investigates the state of environmental communication in Cameroon with a focus on montane forest areas. Given that this is mostly practised by local and international institutions in collaboration with the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife (MINFOF), officials from both the regional and divisional delegations of MINFOF, German Technical Cooperation, GTZ (now GIZ), Association of forest management institutions in Oku, ASSOFOMI, and journalists of two radio stations (Bonakanda community radio and Oku community radio) were interviewed. The reason for their inclusion is because the media, particularly radio, is the main channel for the dissemination of environmental messages. These interviews were backed up by personal monitoring and content analysis of the environmental slots on the various radio stations in question.

Cameroon and its Forests

Cameroon has one of the largest reserves of rainforest left in the world, which extends into neighbouring Congo Brazzaville, Gabon and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Ndenecho 2005; Ngwa and Fonjong 2003). Forests resources are estimated to cover 22 million hectares (an approximate area of 200,000 km²), of which 14 million are tropical forest and 8 million are in the savannah biome. Cameroon has the second forest reserve in terms of surface area after the Democratic Republic of Congo as well as the second biodiversity reserve after Madagascar (Ndenecho 2005). The rainforest covers about 42 per cent of the country and contains trees of economic importance such as iroko, *mahogany*, *obeche*, ebony and many others. The highly diverse forests of Cameroon are representative of the biological diversity of forests in the Congo Basin which is home to about 80 per cent of Africa's moist forests and 20 per cent of the world's moist tropical forests. Biodiversity in the moist tropical forest ecosystems of Cameroon is among the most extensive and unique to be found, both in Africa and across the globe. Cameroon is also one of the few places in the world where tropical montane forest systems are found. The montane forest is unique with the highest levels of endemism in the whole of Africa, particularly among birds and vascular plants. These are particularly important centres for plant and faunal endemism. On Mount Cameroon alone, over 45 endemic plant species have been described (GFW 2000). However, their sustainability is highly threatened as Cameroon has the second highest annual deforestation rate in the Congo Basin, after the Democratic Republic of Congo (Ndenecho 2005). Hence the focus of this study is on the montane forests of Mount Cameroon and Mount Oku respectively.

Forest Governance Strategy and the Case of Mount Cameroon and Mount Kilum Areas

The concept of governance recognises and emphasises the role of interdependence between and among state agencies and society groups, and between public and private spheres. It can thus be defined as a governing model that is not

produced exclusively by the state, but that involves social, economic, political and administrative actors that guide, steer, control or manage the society. This definition assumes that the relationship between state and non-state actors is non-hierarchical and therefore based on mutual dependence (Jachtenfuchs 1997).

The analysis of environmental governance is rather complex. It must consider not only the traditional setting of variables of the physical environment and the political, legal and administrative context, but also the set of variables which deal with stakeholders' cultural values, social norms, interests and socio-economic conditions (OECD 1999a).

In Cameroon, the evolution of forest policy reform in the post-1990s resulted in a certain degree of forest democratisation with a governance regime slightly more open to public consultation and transparency than the previous method of forest management prior to the 1990s. The overall objective of the forest reform is to improve practices of forest exploitation and management. Forest policy is meant to correct former non-sustainable practices in natural resource management. It assigns a high priority to the protection of the rich and important biodiversity of the country. In this regard, it seeks to eradicate institutionalised corruption, increase public participation in decision making, mitigate poverty, enhance socio-economic development as a measure of reducing livelihood dependence on forest exploitation, and improve accountability and transparency with respect to accrued revenue from forestry, particularly with respect to benefits sharing with beneficiary communities. But an assessment of the effective implementation of the above-mentioned forest governance strategies in the Mount Cameroon and Mount Kilum regions of the south west and north west regions Cameroon respectively reveals that very little has been accomplished.

Findings of the Investigation

The potential of Cameroon's forest policy to significantly mitigate forest exploitation has been compromised by inadequate logistics as well as incomprehensive and ineffective forest sustainability-oriented strategies. In fact, the much lauded 1994 forestry law, the 1996 environmental management regulation, as well as the concomitant institutional capacities and incentives to enforce them, have lagged behind in translating national policy into an effectively implemented forest strategy (Esama-Nssah et al. 2000).

Public Participation

In spite of the importance of effective public participation in enhancing forest sustainability, it is not yet a priority in Cameroon. It is therefore not surprising that more than half of the respondents, 64 per cent, agreed that there is no form of public consultation in terms of forest management decisions. Worse still, forest

dependents in these areas are not incorporated in the forest management scheme. Those concerned about and making use of the forest should be actively involved in its management. One of the approaches to sustainable forest management, and which reportedly seemed to have most potential, is the joint forest management paradigm. The system involves participative management between the government and local communities. The incentives for the people to participate include collection rights of most of the non-wood forest product, increasing the stakes of communities in the management and utilisation of forests, and creating alternative sources of employment to reduce pressure on forests (Abdallah and Kaoneka 1999). Meanwhile, focus group discussion revealed that women are often marginalised when it comes to decision-making. There is also need for gender equity in public participation for decision-making. According to Tiani (2001) women represent more than 51 per cent of the Cameroonian population, and 80 per cent of them live in rural areas. They are important not only because of their numbers but more significantly because they are the actors most closely related to the forest. Hence, their indispensability to forest management that claims to be truly sustainable.

Government Partnership with Local Institutions

Another form of public participation is through partnership with local institutions. The emergence of local indigenous institutions in the form of a Common Initiative Group, for example, Mount Cameroon Prunus Management Common Initiative Group (MOCAP-CIG), working in collaboration with the government is proving to be an auspicious approach to sustainable forest resource management. A growing number of scholars and practitioners recognise the crucial role played by local people in natural resource management (Ostrom 1990; Ascher 1995). They also assert the need for local-level institutions considered better than central government institutions at providing, *inter alia*, rules related to access, harvesting and management. Local-level institutions can respond to conflict quickly and cheaply and implement monitoring and sanctioning methods that are effective. The problem with this approach is that it is not very well formalised; hence, maximum collaboration cannot be attained.

Partnership with International NGOs

In a bid to mitigate unsustainable forest practices in the country, the government has reached technical and financial agreements with international NGOs working in this domain. NGOs like Birdlife International, World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) and Living Earth have been working with local forest dwellers, transferring technology and knowledge in the domains of agriculture, bee farming as well as other alternatives to livelihood (Ngwa and Fonjong 2003). This has greatly boosted Cameroon's sustainable management efforts.

Benefits-sharing Mechanism

The mechanism of benefits-sharing in state managed forest domains in Cameroon constitutes a serious disincentive for cooperation and collaboration from the forest adjacent communities, thereby jeopardising any sustainable management endeavours. This is the case in the Mount Cameroon region where more than 95 per cent of forest is state-owned. Here only 10 per cent of benefits are allocated to the community. Worst still, for the community to even access the meagre 10 per cent allocated to them, they must initiate a good project. And since the local people are poor at making project proposals, the council authorities, the custodian of this money, usually syphon it. Paradoxically, the government retains 50 per cent while the remaining 40 per cent is doled out to the council of the area. According to Tainter (2001) people are more likely to manifest stewardship towards forests from which they derive benefit. Hence, unfair distribution of benefits can stimulate the intentional retaliatory degradation of forest resources as well as other undesirable conflicts.

Transparency and Accountability

Besides the irrational benefit-sharing mechanism described above there is also overwhelming evidence from the respondents' viewpoints that the procedure is marred by lack of transparency and accountability. Considering the various percentages of responses about transparency and accountability in benefit sharing, it is evident that these constitute a serious cause for concern. However, given the pervasive nature of corruption in Cameroon, it is not surprising that only 10 per cent of respondents, exclusively in the Mount Kilum region (MKR), agreed strongly with the application of these variables while 14 and 12 per cent in the Mount Cameroon region (MCR) and MKR respectively simply agreed. But of greater significance is the 59 and 31 per cent of respondents who disagreed in the MCR and MKR respectively, while another 19 and 35 per cent, respectively, also disagreed strongly. Respondents, meanwhile, attribute this vice to the corruption syndrome in Cameroon as reflected in their perception of corruption as an incentive for unsustainable practices. This seriously undermines policy implementation and good forest governance.

Poverty Alleviation

Poverty is an important determinant of the rate of forest exploitation. On average 60 per cent of respondents from the case study area attributed their reason for forest exploitation to poverty. Consequently, their primary objective of forest exploitation is to enhance human welfare by either direct usage (personal) or by monetisation (commercialisation) or both (personal and commercial). Each of these strategies either mitigate expenditure or supplement income or provide

badly needed legal tender (Asanga 2001; Ndenecho 2007). This of course raises serious concerns given the relatively high degree of non conformity to policy requirements within a wider scope and intensity of forest exploitation. The challenge, therefore, is to reconcile forest exploitation with economic development and poverty alleviation. Empowered communities may focus more on accessing credits, creating community assets or investing in non-farm economic activities (bee-farming, snail propagation, mushroom cultivation). These economic benefits are often long-lasting and sustaining. McDougall (2001) seems to support this idea when he posits that contributing to human well-being makes a direct and significant contribution to sustainable forest management.

Socioeconomic Indicators

The status of certain socio-economic indicators as well as forest-dependents' access to them is crucial in dictating the pace and pattern of forest exploitation. Thus, in spite of the fact that over 65 per cent of the respondents in the MCR reportedly have access to drinking water and 60 per cent have access to good transport networks, they have continued to violate forest policies by invading the forest. In fact, the good road network in the MCR, rather than being an asset, is more of a liability as it facilitates the evacuation of illegal forest products (Tesi 2004). But these are no substitute for the limited access of other social welfare elements such as healthcare, education and micro credits. Unfortunately less than 40 per cent of respondents in the MCR have access to these. The scenario is worse in the MKR. In this part of the north west region, the majority of villagers rely heavily on traditional medicine. In fact the MKR is famous for its traditional medical practitioners and practices (Ndenecho 2005). However, despite the assiduity and industrious nature of the people of this region, the lack of any form of microfinance or concessional loan scheme is an obstacle to the economic endeavours of the people. Cases in point include the Oku Honey Cooperative with 209 registered members and the Kilum Craft Paper Group, the only one in the whole north west region. These two common initiative groups have contributed enormously to mitigating forest exploitation. The cooperative employs villagers and also facilitates the buying and selling of honey from bee farmers. However, due to the poor state of the road and high cost of transportation, dividends that members receive are seriously affected, and by extension, their wellbeing and also their families' wellbeing. Government subsidies could alleviate the effect.

Similarly, the absence of any government subsidies has caused this lone budding paper industry to stagnate. According to the manager, Solomon Chimtom, the resulting quality has remained poor. Ordinarily, government ought to encourage this lofty initiative as the local paper industry no longer debarks trees to produce paper, a factor which hitherto contributed to forest degradation and deforestation. The industry now uses corn stalks and the leaves of Indian bamboo. Hence,

beyond the obvious environmental impacts, there are also socio-economic implications especially with regard to economic empowerment.

Road Map to Forest Sustainability and Sustainable Development

In view of mitigating non-sustainable forest exploitation and enhancing sustainable development in Cameroon as a whole, the government should provide the Ministry of Forestry, MINFOF, with all the necessary logistics and adequate financial resources to enhance the effective implementation of the forest policy currently in force. One pragmatic way of acquiring the required funds is through tourism in protected areas. Eco-tourism contributes to raising awareness of national and international visitors, as well as creating jobs, and sometimes leads to infrastructure development that contributes to poverty alleviation, provided the funds generated are managed in a transparent and accountable manner.

In place of the often empty threats and verbal rhetoric of ministry officials, corruption and all forms of illegal and unsustainable exploitation of forests should be severely sanctioned. Owing to the potential success of third party monitoring, international NGOs should also be involved in the fight against corruption which pervades the forestry sector in Cameroon. For instance, according to Essama-Nassah et al. (2002) Global Witness, an international NGO, was involved in monitoring corrupt practices and illegal logging in Cameroon from 2002 to 2005. The NGO registered significant results and impacted on some of the companies logging activities outside of agreed limits. And finally, as proposed by Nalini and Naresh (2001), there should be greater decentralisation and participatory and transparent sharing of forest management responsibilities with local communities as a means of minimising corruption.

Effective decentralisation by government and participatory sharing of forest responsibilities with local communities could be an effective and significant way of minimising corruption, enhancing forest governance and ensuring sustainable management and development. A good example is the delegation of responsibility to the Mount Cameroon Prunus Management Common Initiative Group (MOCAP-CIG) by government. The CIG which was created on the 31 July 2000 (in accordance with Law no. 92/006 of 14/8/92 and its Decree no. 92/455/PM of 23/11/92) has the global objective of contributing to poverty alleviation around the Mount Cameroon region through sustainable management and conservation of *Prunus africana* and other forest resources. This has drastically reduced the illegal exploitation of *Prunus africana*. Hence government should collaborate with various civil society groups which share similar or the same objectives.

There is equally a need for government to create a special trust fund dedicated to poverty alleviation to ensure long-term financial support for addressing the livelihood and employment needs of the forest-dependent poor, especially where the incidence of poverty is large. Access to economic alternatives to meet the

social requirements of indigenous people is still a big challenge. One way of enhancing this is through integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs) such as the improvement of road and school infrastructure, provision of support for educational training, healthcare and welfare services and investment in non-timber forest activities such as bee-farming, snail propagation, cultivation of *eru* (*Gnetum africanum*) and domestic livestock and fish farming. The fund, apart from promoting traditional income generating activities, should also be dedicated towards the promotion and support of creative and self-help initiatives. These notwithstanding, government should encourage the creation of technical schools and rural artisan centres in Cameroon to train young Cameroonians to be self-employed and hence divert their attention from natural resources. In this regard, there is need for greater cooperation with international NGOs, especially in the domains of participatory management activities in the field of training, technological dissemination and the training of women's group. The focus should be on building social capital. Above all, the government should create employment opportunities for Cameroonians and also reduce the high taxes levied on private businesses so that more people can be self-employed and the pressure on natural resources will reduce.

Benefit-sharing is a very sensitive issue as people are more likely to manifest stewardship towards forest from which they stand to gain. Fair and equitable revenue-sharing with local communities increases their stakes in sustainable management. Unfair distribution of benefits can spur intentional and retaliatory degradation of forest resources as well as other undesirable conflicts.

Given the indispensability of fuelwood in the short term, it is important to exploit all the potential byproducts of the timber industry such as sawdust and chipboards for use by locally designed cooking stoves oriented towards firewood reduction. The formation of briquettes from the dust of charcoal production such as in Kenya by a company called 'chardust' is not only energy efficient but also enhances the efficient use of woody biomass products. Government should further invest in both solar and wind energy, and in biogas and pellets production from the colossal amount of municipal solid waste generated in the area. And government should exploit the ubiquitous presence of rivers and waterfall in the area for purposes of hydropower, which could eventually be used both for domestic and industrial purposes. The inauguration of the Memve'le and Lom Panghar hydroelectricity dams by Paul Biya are steps in the right direction.

Meanwhile, since smallholder agriculture is a major source of forest degradation, an active policy-led effort to intensify perennial crop and food crop systems to deflect further encroachment on the forest edge is needed. Government should revive the loan and credit facilities available to farmers prior to the economic crises through structures such as micro-finance banks. The same holds true for other agricultural inputs or subsidies such as fertilisers. Public knowledge of soil

management through conventional practices of organic manure, use of cover-crops and composting should be enhanced. Furthermore, the entrenchment of agroforestry practices through public education could supply part of the badly needed environmental services.

For purposes of more effective environmental communication, there is need for the adoption of the 'consensus conference model approach', whereby environmental communicators, local people and experts are engaged more equitably in the problem solving and management process. The idea here is a kind of public debate in which a consensus is reached, followed by agenda setting for policy makers and the general public. Last but not the least: in addition to the need for government subvention to sustain and promote the good work of the rural radios, government should also facilitate the public's access to the audio-visual media.

One of the most heinous push-factors of forest degradation is poverty. Given a sliver of financial opportunity, many forest dependents will resort to various options of eking out a living. Thus, there is need not only for government financial handouts but more importantly for a review of the loans and credit policies in both state and private banks to accommodate even the poor. Current lending conditions, *inter alia*, collateral security and high interest rates are inimical to socioeconomic development, the growth of small local and medium-size industries and entrepreneurship. Based on practical experience from Bangladesh, micro-credit accessibility by the poor could be a potential tool for mitigating forest degradation.

According to Muhammad Yunus, Nobel laureate and founder of the Grameen Bank in 1974, the poor are neither too stupid nor too passive to earn money. Instead, the struggle for survival has honed their innovative skills such that all they need is a little capital to get them going. Defying all his sceptics and continuing with his vision of providing loans to the poor, Muhammad reveals that 95 per cent of Grameen's loans are paid back. He further stresses that loans should be given on acceptable terms while condemning the issuing of handouts: 'Give someone a handout, he will feel and act like a helpless beggar. Give him a loan, and you treat him (or her) as a responsible business partner.'

Conclusion

The unsustainable exploitation and management of forest resources in Cameroon, and in the Mount Cameroon and Mount Kilum regions in particular, is inextricably linked to the rural poor's limited and unequal access to information and basic necessities. The government of Cameroon is primarily responsible for this state of affairs. It has failed to consistently articulate a vision of socioeconomic development compatible with poverty alleviation and forest sustainability. Government lacked the goodwill and logistics to implement reforms while the

majority of local communities were left out of the process. Government agencies in the sector are weak while international logging companies that dominate the sector continue to have a free hand in the exploitation of forest resources due to widespread corruption.

Like the burgeoning democratisation process in Cameroon which was stamped by the media, the sustainable management of forest resources in Cameroon will also depend to a great extent on effective environmental communications, particularly through the radio, which is the dominant channel of information dissemination. Information also brings education: a pathway out of poverty. When people are empowered educationally through training for capacity building, they can further empower themselves economically. Empowered communities may focus on accessing credit, creating community assets and investing in non-forest timber products (bee-farming, snail propagation, mushroom cultivation, fisheries and livestock breeding etc.), the economic benefits of which are often long lasting and sustaining.

As a veritable tool of sustainable forest management, environmental communication should not only supply policy related information and cosmetic livelihood survival education but also set an agenda for an effective forest governance strategy which includes economic empowerment and sustainable development.

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