

Center for Community-Based Resource Management (CBRM)

Natural Resources Institute, University of Manitoba

CBRM Database

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Case Study Name:	Institutional choice and local legitimacy in community-based forest management: lessons from Cameroon.		
Author:	Brown, H.C.P. and Lassoie, J. P.		
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Region:	Africa		
Country:	Cameroon		
Ecosystem Type:	Humid forest		
Social Characteristics:	Forest-dependent communities		
Scale of Study:	Community		
Resource Type:	Forest (timber and non-forest timber products)		
Type of Initiative:	Community-based		
Community-Based Work:	Resource management		
Keywords:	Africa, Cameroon, community forests, decentralization, traditional authorities		
Summary:	Decentralization of forest management has become a common policy globally which has allowed communities to regain rights removed through colonization and central state management of forests.		

However, socioeconomic and environmental outcomes of such community-based forest management schemes have been mixed. Studies have shown the importance of institutions in influencing the success of these new governance arrangements. Based on an extensive literature review supplemented by qualitative research, using focus groups and semi structured interviews, conducted in nine villages in the humid forest zone comprising three community forests, this research investigated the successes and challenges from decentralization of forest management in Cameroon. A key constraint on success was the inappropriate institutional structure at the local level with responsibility to manage community forests. Community forest management committees with no internally recognized legitimacy and dominated by local elites had replaced roles once played by traditional authorities. Qualitative research showed that in the humid forest zone of Cameroon, the system of accountability for forest resources, prior to the enactment of community forest legislation, included those with historical traditional cultural authority, in the form of clan or lineage heads, as well as the village chief, a legacy of colonial power. Village chiefs or other members of the village council are also selected on the basis of their good moral character. Community forest management committees that are a hybrid of customary authorities and other representatives of the population chosen following the criteria for local legitimacy may capture the best of historical social regulation and build on it so that the local committee may be seen as being accountable to the local population. Since such hybrid institutions are not without their risks, it is important that these institutions be accountable to a local democratic government to further increase their transparency and accountability. Models of community-based natural resource management that incorporate culturally appropriate requirements of legitimacy and accountability in crafting local institutions may have more success in accomplishing both socioeconomic and environmental goals.