

## **Women's Recognition and Involvement in REDD+ and Other Policy Processes in The Bimbia Bonadikombo Community Forest, Cameroon**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Cameroon is a key player in international Climate Change negotiations and strategy development due to its great forest potential (Wassouni *et al.*, 2013). These rain forests alone covers approximately 46.3 % of the national territory and accounts for 11 % of Congo Basin forests. Cameroon therefore has the third largest forest range in the Congo Basin, after Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Gabon. As it is the case with other countries of the Congo Basin, Cameroon is grappling with the adverse effects of Climate Change and with the increasing pressure on forests (Ngang, 2015).

To tackle these major challenges, the Cameroon government according to Cameroon's Vision 2035 is committed through its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to reduce emissions by 32% from its projected baseline of 2010 emissions. The forest sector is expected to contribute significantly to the realization of this objective. The contribution of the forest sector will be achieved through the observation of the conclusions of the Cancun agreement, which drew a basis for countries to reduce carbon emissions through a system of accountability to each other (UNFCCC, 2011).

### **REDUCING EMISSIONS, FROM DEFORESTATION AND DEGRADATION**

Reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation (REDD) is one of the two climate finance mechanisms established by the Kyoto protocol and used as a Climate Change mitigation instrument of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) for which Cameroon is a signatory (UNFCCC, 2010). In 2005, tropical countries including Cameroon initiated a discussion on deforestation within the UNFCCC negotiations (MINEPDED, 2018). These discussions led to the introduction of the REDD concept, which was later expanded to include conservation of forest carbon stocks, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks, leading to Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, the Conservation of Forests Carbon Stocks, Sustainable Development and Enhancement of Forest Carbon Stocks (REDD+). The REDD+ Programme was launched in 2008 and builds on the convening role and technical expertise of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (UN, 2013). REDD+ is an international Climate Change mechanism to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in 47 developing countries. These comprises 18 countries from Africa, 18 from Latin America and 11 from Asia-Pacific. REDD+ creates a financial value for the carbon stored in forests, and offers incentives for developing countries to reduce emissions from forested lands and invest in low-carbon paths to sustainable development (IPCC 2007). The processes on REDD+ decisions are guided by the Warsaw framework and included in the Paris Accord as one of the measures to help keep the global temperature rise at 2 degree Celsius and to limit temperature increase

by 1.5 degrees Celsius (MINEPDED, 2018). More specifically, the strategy is aimed at reducing projected emissions from deforestation and forest degradation of 50% by 2025 and to achieve net zero deforestation by 2035. This will improve on governance in forest conservation and sustainable management of forests for fair, equitable, sustainable economic and social development. REDD+ does not only focus on reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, but also recognizes the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks. Integrating REDD+ activities into Forests Management Plans is essential for a sustainable forest conservation program (ER-PIN, 2013).

### **GENDER CONSIDERATIONS IN REDD+ PROJECTS IN COMMUNITY FORESTS IN CAMEROON**

Forests Management Plan processes, promote the informed and meaningful involvement of all stakeholders, including, women, indigenous peoples and other forest-dependent communities, in national and international REDD+ implementation (UN, 2013). REDD+ objectives are attainable through the participation of all stakeholders, while providing space for gender as well as respect of local communities and indigenous peoples' rights (MINEPDED, 2018). UNFCCC decision 1/CP.16 (Cancun Agreement) requests developing country parties aiming to undertake REDD+ to develop a process that brings together the prediction of adequate financial resources, human resources and technical support to developing countries. These countries were requested to develop the REDD+ process along three overlapping phases. The first phase which is the readiness phase, entitles countries to prepare a national REDD+ strategy through inclusive multitask holder consultations, capacity building and demonstration. The second phase holds that countries implement policies and strategies to reduce emissions. In the final stage, countries are to be compensated solely for reduced emissions and enhanced carbon stocks relative to agreed reference levels. Cameroon is one of the countries that has gone through all three stages and has made available to the World Bank Forest and Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF), its Readiness-Preparation Proposal (R-PP) for REDD+ implementation (R-PP, 2013). MINEPDED coordinates REDD+ implementation within the country (MINEPDED, 2018).

Through the National Community Driven Development Programme (PNDP), the government is committed to implement a decentralized financing mechanism of councils and support the ongoing decentralization process in the country (PNDP, 2016). The ongoing REDD+ process, is intended to address the issues of unsustainability in forest exploitation (PNDP, 2016). It provides the opportunity to clarify issues regarding tenure rights, access to forest resources (PNDP, 2017) and gender equality which is key in the community of development practitioners to reaching goals for poverty alleviation and human development (Manfre and Rubin, 2012).

While many African countries like Ghana and Kenya are fast incorporating gender within their REDD+ and Climate Change projects, other countries like Sudan and Cameroon are yet on the rise. Cameroon's Forest Policy is known to be one of the most advanced in the Congo Basin (Agrawal, 2007) but is less implemented and has inadequate inclusion of women. Over the years, different institutional changes have been made to Cameroon's forestry law, which aim at increasing rural people's participation in forest resource

management and contributing to the socio-economic development of Cameroon's economy (Nuesiri, 2015). The central government made the decision in the hope that indigenous communities will participate in governing their own forest, which will help in the improvement of conservation of forest resources (Ofoulhast-Othamot, 2015). This is so that they tend to manage and control the forest units that henceforth developed community forest like the Bimbia-Bonadikombo Community Forest (BBCF) (Nuesiri, 2015). Amidst several policies that relate to conservation and sustainable management of forest resources in Cameroon, are the wildlife and forestry policies, found in the Law No. 94/01 of 20 January 1994 to lay down Forestry, Wildlife and Fishery Regulations (Mbatu, 2016). These laws are substrates for the establishment of the Cameroon Readiness Preparation Proposal (R-PP) of January 2013. The conclusions in the R-PP says that women should be represented at a minimum of 30% in the management committees at all levels, however, Cameroon has still found it difficult to do so. (R-PP, 2013).

## **INTRODUCING THE BIMBIA BONADIKOMBO COMMUNITY FORESTS IN THE SOUTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON**

The Bimbia-Bonadikombo Community Forest (BBCF) is situated in the eastern part of Limbe, South West Region of Cameroon. It has a surface area of 3.735 ha (Ahimin & Mbolo, 2010) and lies between latitude  $4^{\circ} 00'46''$  to  $9^{\circ}$  North of the equator and longitude  $9^{\circ} 13'11''$  to  $13^{\circ}$  east of the Greenwich meridian (Akoa, 2007). Its relief ranges from 0m to 500m above sea level. The BBCF was created on May 18, 2002 and comprises 14 villages with a total population of 16,000 with 4 major villages which include: Bonagombe, Bonabile, Mondoli, and Dikolo. It has 10 creek mangrove towns: Mabeta, Moboko I, Moboko II, Ijaw Mabeta, Kanye, Mboma I, Mboma II, Bimbia, Ijaw Mboko and Iselele (PNDP, 2016). The forest is divided into nine groups to ease management and control as follows: Dikolo peninsular, Likoroba La Mbeng, Likomba La-Lelu, Bimbia, Mawoh (motond Luwanda, Moliwe hills, Bonadikombo and It has a surface area of 3,735 hectares (BBF Management Plan Document and Nuesiri, 2008).

The Bimbia- Bonadikombo Community that resides adjacent to the forest has always depended on products harvested from the forest. Over the past years, the uses of these products have evolved from basically traditional and subsistence to more economic driven to support the livelihood of the people (Nuesiri, 2008). Different groups of people, local institutions and users make demands in the BBCF. The BBCF area is unique for its mixture of stakeholders as opposed to other areas in the Mount Cameroon region, which are mainly homogeneous. The heterogeneity of the area stems from the diverse economic activities and varied tribal groups within the adjacent villages. Human activities are increasingly fragmenting, degrading and isolating the remaining forest patches in the BBCF (Nuesiri, 2008).

Amongst 10 councils with community forest sectors in Cameroon, the Tiko-Bimbia council area has benefited to undertake REDD+ pilot project processes being promoted by PNDP. It was facilitated by local development non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like, the Cameroon Wildlife Conservation Society

(CWCS), for the development of REDD+ Project Idea Note (PIN) for Tiko and Limbe III councils (PNDP, 2016).

## **WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN FOREST GOVERNANCE**

Research conducted amongst 100 women in the Bimbia Community Forest Council area in 2020 revealed that over 52% of the them visit the forest for farming, gathering of NTFPs, gathering of medicines and foraging and women in this area access forest land by virtue of marriage or inheritance from their families. They are usually involved in food crops cultivation on these plots. According to the Cameroon law, all land is officially owned by the state and Cameroonians only have land use rights (Belaunde *et al.*, 2010). When it trickles down to the level of communities, customary laws align with government laws to limit women's access to these land rights. Forestland infringement is prohibited in this area and women can lose land through several factors, which include divorce, dead of their partners, or use of fraudulent documents. These views are similar to those of other African countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia, Malawi and Kenya where it is believed that "a woman and cows (in this context, land) are the man's property" (Carr and Hepkins, 2020) While political, economic and social development has opened up new opportunities for men and women and challenging traditional gender roles, communities around the BBCF remains largely hierarchical, and women continue to be politically and economically marginalized. In his publication, Slavchevska (2016) mentioned that advancing women's land rights is a priority for the international development agenda as highlighted in at least two targets of the SDGs and linked to the success of several others.

Though women's representation has gradually increased from 03 to 11 women in six years (2014-2020) in local community councils, gender disparities still stand out as the youngest woman in the council is between 31-40 years old. These occupy roles of secretary or women leaders. Distinctions in roles is because of reliability on the older generation compared to the vibrant youths who are always in search of greener pastures when need arises. This thought is contradicting to the study by UN (2005), which explains why involving young people in decision making platforms and development programs is necessary. The study states that, involving young people in the decisions that affect society is beneficial from both a policy-making and a youth development perspective, it is not always effectively practiced. The nature of youth engagement ranges from manipulation and tokenism to the assumption of full responsibility for the design and implementation of programmatic responses. Effective youth participation requires fundamental changes in the way societies perceive young people. As a proposal, to induce such changes, the work by the United Nations list that it is necessary to provide adequate funding, introduce innovative ways to spread information, furnish training to facilitate inter-generational collaboration, and create organizational structures that welcome new voices. Strategies for youth participation must move away from ad hoc, activity-based approaches and focus instead on making youth input a central component of social structures, institutions and processes. Efforts should be undertaken to foster inter-generational relationships and strengthen the capacity of young people to participate meaningfully and equally with other

generations in programs and activities that affect them. Girls and young women, in particular, may need additional support to overcome social, cultural, and economic barriers to full participation.

The continuous under-representation of local women in community decision-making platforms could be as a result of the neglect of an effective stakeholder analysis. Stakeholder analysis provides a more in-depth look at stakeholder group interests, how they will be affected and to what degree, and what influence they could have on a project. The answers to these questions provide the basis from which to build a stakeholder engagement strategy. It is important to keep in mind that not all stakeholders in a particular group or sub-group will necessarily share the same concerns or have unified opinions or priorities (IFC, 2007). Women's opinions are significant when it comes to community projects, because they comprise an important part of these communities. Creating them space for leadership opportunities within community projects like the management of the BBCF and its emerging REDD+ projects ensures commitment to project success.

Aside from neglect, marginalization and relegation by project promoters, some other challenges to women's participation in decision-making have included tradition and culture. Discussions point that most of the women view forest management as a tedious exercise, which should be reserved just for men. This finding aligns to studies by leading experts, coupled with research carried out by Hodge (2017), which demonstrated that some of the strongest forces behind persistent gender gaps are harmful social norms and stereotypes about women and men. The research presented that norms and stereotypes shape the perceived value of women relative to men, determine what is considered 'appropriate' work, burden women with disproportionate shares of unpaid household and family care, normalize the idea that men should have control over women's choices and justify restrictions of all kinds against women.

Women's cultivated low self-esteem, inadequate knowledge and education on land rights and ownership is a major reason for their failure to participate in community forest management and other local decision-making platforms (Kimengsi 2016) in BBCF. Inadequate female education is amongst the same reasons women are absent from REDD+ and Climate Change projects in these communities. Project promoters assume it will take extra efforts and resources educating an 'illiterate' population of women on the concept of REDD+, Climate Change and forest management than moving ahead with project implementation to meet deadlines. This could be wrong since similar study carried out by the Pan African Centre for Climate Policy (2018) across four African countries proved that female education is a key contributor to achieving better decisions and solutions to climate change issues. The ability to participate in and benefit from REDD+ is determined by; women's access to Climate Change education, land rights and acknowledgement as distinct stakeholders. Engaging them in REDD+ policies is key to successful implementation of REDD+ projects as well as achieving sustainable results. In other countries in East Africa where REDD+ pilot projects are carried out, lands are purchased for women to manage for carbon stock enhancement and payment of ecosystem services are provided to conserve forestland for up to 30 years (Agarwal 2010). The more women are educated and included in forest management, the more likely it is that women's issues are tackled (Mai *et al.*, 2011).

## **CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

Few institutions in Cameroon have incorporated gender into their activities and plans, despite the evidence of women's extensive engagement in local forest management. It is important to note that about 57.1% of women invest in the health of the forest for their survival and livelihood. Deliberations around the development of REDD+ have not fully considered the gender dimension, and only a few pilot projects have taken actions to begin to incorporate a gender perspective. The inadequate inclusion of gender issues and women's roles as stakeholders within REDD+ policies, plans and projects globally provides evidence that little has changed in the way that members of the forest sector view these concerns. This has led to a small number of individuals benefiting from the forest resources, contributing to the marginalization of the rural populations from decision-making in the community forests resources. The poor participation of local population especially women in community forests management stems from their marginalization in decision-making.

There is a need for specific gender provisions in REDD+ mechanisms in Cameroon; however, this will not be achieved if current REDD+ projects are not engaged in incorporating a gender perspective and generating necessary data to highlight good practices and produce guidelines for other projects. Above all in the execution of projects, awareness raising and effective sensitization should be emphasized to ensure that communities understand properly the goals of the projects they will be involved in. Education and formal trainings must not be considered a yardstick for selection or inclusion of rural women in local community projects, rather project executors should make provisions for intensive capacity building and trainings for diverse placements in projects. Introduction of adaptive and sustainable programs that help to build rural women's capacities towards forest management, climate change and the REDD+ mechanism should be considered.

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