

Strengthening Women's Participation in the Sustainable Management of the Bimbia-Bonadikombo Community Forest of Cameroon: Challenges and Blueprints

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Abstract: Much emphasis has been placed on the issue of community forest management due to the important role forests play in climate change mitigation, watershed protection and the provision of other valuable resources to mankind, among others. Varied opinions exist on the role of women in the management of the forest. Significant research attention has been given to issues of forest governance and management challenges in Cameroon have been researched upon including forest conservation and poverty alleviation. In addition, the role and challenges of women in resource conservation including forests have been investigated with the conclusions pointing to the fact that the role of women in the management of these resources is still weak. Although the conclusions from previous studies point to the fact that there is a need to improve women's role in forest resource management, very little has been done to investigate ways of stepping up women's participation in community forest management. This study made use of field investigation and the interview of 50 inhabitants, including authorities of the Bimbia Bonadikombo Natural Resource Management Council (BBNRM) to examine the opportunities, challenges and blueprints involved in strengthening women participation for the sustainable management of the Bimbia Bonadikombo community forest of Cameroon. The results show that women are yet to be given their full opportunities to participate in the management of the BBCF. Major challenges to women participation include tradition and culture. It was equally noticed that most of the women view forest management as a tedious exercise which should be reserved for men.

Keywords: Women Participation, Sustainable Forest Management, Bimbia-Bonadikombo Community Forest, Opportunities, Challenges and Blueprints

1. Introduction

Community forest management involves the management of forest resources by local people, for commercial and non-commercial purposes (RECOFTC 2004). It involves the exploitation and management of forest resources by local people, on an individual or household basis, for consumption and sale, and the community management of forests, which refers to a collaborative enterprise conducted by a group of local people who manage forest either independently or with outside support for the production of resources for consumption and sale (Sam and Shepherd, 2011).

The notion of community forest management gained recognition in the international scene around the late 1970s in recognition of the need to curb deforestation, the fuel wood crisis, and the resultant negative impacts on livelihoods (Fisher *et al.*, 2007; Nurse and Malla, 2005). Focus within this period was on the restoration of degraded areas (Rights and Resources Initiative, 2008). It was discovered in many areas that rules for the communal management of natural resources already existed, and could be built on by donor-funded initiatives (Shepherd, 1992; Shepherd and Messerschmidt, 1993). The concept shifted in focus toward a sustainable livelihoods framework in the 1990s, a framework

emerging from natural resource managers rather than social scientists, and spreading in forestry and agriculture programs as a result. The concept was followed by a change in the development paradigm emphasizing decentralization and community involvement in decision-making. However, decentralization has yet to be fully integrated in the conservation and natural resource management sectors (Barrow 2004). From an international scene, community forest management eventually evolved to include rationales for improving conservation, increasing biodiversity, and reducing rural poverty (Fisher *et al.*, 2005).

It was only introduced in Cameroon through Law No. 94/01 of January 20th 1994 which was passed to regulate forest exploitation, protect it and preserve the biodiversity, improving on the integration of forest resources in rural development, ensuring forest resources development, and revitalizing the forest sector by setting up an efficient institutional framework. Its decree of application of 1995, and also the 1996 environmental law are worth noting. This law has enabled adjacent forest communities to form corporate management bodies and create community forests with a dual aim of achieving social, economic, cultural and spiritual benefits from the forest on the one hand and at the same time, conserving the forest's ecological diversity (Orock and Kometa, 2009).

Gender mainstreaming is an essential way of contributing to the effectiveness of forest resource management. Avoiding potential conflicts among competing uses of forests and their by-products, and ensuring that women and men's traditional and indigenous rights to forest use aren't diminished when new projects are implemented (Li, 2010). Although women have great potentials to contribute to community forest management, only about 20% or less women worldwide participate in management of natural resources (World Bank 1996). This inequality that exists in the management of community forest produces poor results and compromises success in community forest management. Women participate in the management of community forests through the of conservation farming especially in developing countries. This is done through mixed cropping and crop rotation rather than shifting cultivation and bush fallowing which has reduced the incidence of deforestation and therefore helped in the management of the forest. Within the context of Cameroon in general and Bimbia-Bonadikombo in particular, the situation is not different with very few women involved in the management of the community forest especially in terms of representation in the Bimbia-Bonadikombo natural resource management council (BBNRC) as compared to the men of this community. This calls for an assessment of the opportunities and challenges to strengthen women's participation in community forest management.

2. The Problem

An estimated over one billion people live in or around forests and rely on them for all or part of their sustenance. In

most cases, these people do not have the legal tenure and are often forced to act illegally to maintain their livelihoods (Muller and Johnson, 2009). Access to forest resources and their management is governed by a set of interlinked forces to include economic and socio-cultural factors including gender. Gender mainstreaming in forest management ensures a wide range of opportunities for a win-win mechanism in livelihood sustenance and forest conservation. Women, men and youths obtain differential rates of forest benefits, and have different knowledge, access and control of forests and forest resources. This also implies that women and men contribute differently to forest conservation and management.

The government of Cameroon has taken steps to enhance forest conservation. For instance, Law No. 94/01 of January 20th 1994 was passed to regulate forest exploitation, protect it and preserve the biodiversity, improving on the integration of forest resources in rural development, ensuring forest resources development, and revitalizing the forest sector by setting up an efficient institutional framework. Its decree of application of 1995, and also the 1996 environmental law are worth noting (Orock and Kometa, 2009). Articles 27 to 32 of the law states that...*forests which may be subject to a community forest shall be those situated on the outskirts of or close to one or more communities and in which the inhabitants carry out their activities. Local communities living within or beside a forest are given the right to create community forests whose spatial extent should not exceed 5000 hectares. The area concerned must be free of any forest exploitation rights.* Significant research attention has been given to issues of forest governance and management challenges in Cameroon (Orock, 2014; Kimengsi, 2014; Lambi *et al.*, 2012; Balgah, 2001) have been researched upon including forest conservation and poverty alleviation (Muller and Johnson, 2009; Wunder, 2001). In addition, the role and challenges of women in resource conservation including forests have been investigated with the conclusions pointing to the fact that the role of women in the management of these resources is still weak (Fondufe, 2009; Ndenecho, 2006; Naila, 2003). Although the conclusions from previous studies point to the fact that there is a need to improve women's role in forest resource management, very little has been done to investigate ways of stepping up women's participation in community forest management. This study seeks to examine the opportunities, challenges and blueprints involved in strengthening women participation for the sustainable management of the Bimbia-Bonadikombo Community Forest of Cameroon.

3. Research Methodology

Bimbia-Bonadikombo is an area that shares boundary with Limbe, Mutengene, Ombe all in the South West Region of Cameroon (Figure 1). It lies between latitude 4⁰⁰'46' to 9⁰ North of the equator and longitude 9⁰13'11" to 13⁰ east of the Greenwich meridian (BBNRC, 2012). Its relief ranges from 0m to 500m above sea level. The Bimbia-Bonadikombo Community Forest was created in the year 2000 and covers a

surface area of 3735 hectares of land and managed by the indigenes. The forest stretches from the Ombe River to Bimbia Mabeta and to the Jamstone River to the east and the Atlantic Ocean in the south. The community forest is a partnership of three groups that include the local community, central government and the local government (BBNRM, 2012). 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 Bamukong).

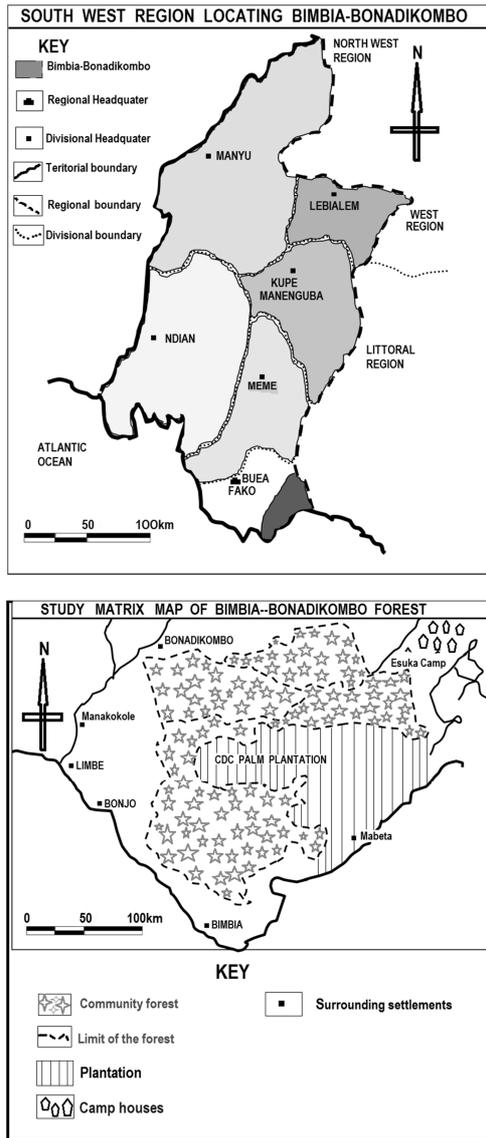


Figure 1. Map of the Bimbia Bonadikombo Community forest Source: BBNRM (2012).

This study made use of field investigation and the semi-structured interview of 50 inhabitants, including authorities of the Bimbia-Bonadikombo Natural Resource Management Council (BBNRM) to examine the opportunities, challenges and blueprints involved in strengthening women participation for the sustainable management of the Bimbia-Bonadikombo community forest of Cameroon. In addition,

analysis of topographic maps was conducted. Since studies on community forest involves multi-sectoral approaches in acquiring primary information, fieldwork was carried out using participatory action techniques. descriptive and content analysis was employed in reporting the findings of the study.

4. Results

Forest exploitation in the BBCF by women is done for varied purposes to include food collection and the collection of fuel wood, collection of medicine, timber exploitation bee keeping, and as a source of water.

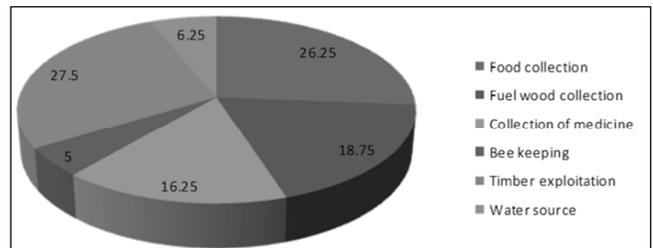


Figure 2. Women's activities in the BBCF.

These activities carried out have gone a long way to improve on the livelihoods of their various families, community and the neighboring towns around them that is improvement in health, education of children, increase their revenue and enable the provision of some basic necessities like food. In addition, women have also been involved in forest management through a number of activities to include practicing conservation farming and mixed system of agriculture, exploitation of non-timber resources, afforestation and re-afforestation. The activities of these women in the forest have brought about some benefits such as the protection of water shed protection of plants and animal species, reduction of soil erosion and equally ensuring the continuity of the forest through afforestation and reforestation (Figure 3).

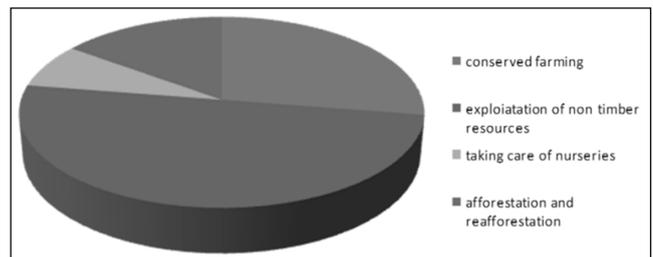


Figure 3. Management strategies by Women in the BBCF.

The women of Bimbia-Bonadikombo practice conserved farming are a way of managing the forest. The Bimbia-Bonadikombo community forest has been divided into nine compartments with different activities going on there like agriculture, ecotourism, timber exploitation, charcoal production. However the farming compartment is very small coupled with the fact that the population of this area is fast increasing. Therefore the high demand for land and equally

the increasing demand for agricultural products for family needs and the markets provided by Limbe, Idenua, Mutengene, Tiko, these women have tend to practice conservation farming within the farming compartment and practice mixed farming system which involve, the cultivation of different crops on single ridges. This farming systems have helped in forest management because the other compartments are not threatened most especially the core forest which is nearest to the farming compartment.

In addition, the exploitation of non-timber products by women is another management strategy. These non-timber resources include Njangsang, Eru, Kola, Bush pepper, Bush mango, Ngongo leaf and Mushroom. The people explained that these resources are the fruits and bearings of these trees in the forest and so harvesting the fruits and leaving the trees to continuous grow ensures continuity of the forest and equally reduces deforestation it should however be noted that this is the most important management strategy practice by women based on the number of people who outlined this fact. The people went further to indicate that once these resources mature at different times, it reduces the aspect of over exploitation since in the event where one of this resources gets finish, another resources ripens up and ready for exploitation. This strategy is important because of its economic gain. This strategy practiced by the women of Bimbia-Bonadikombo has gone a long way towards management and protect the forest from deforestation and degradation while improving on the livelihood of the community and its surrounding.

The women of Bimbia-Bonadikombo could also play a great role in the management of the Bimbia-Bonadikombo Community Forest through the development and caring for the forest nursery. This forest nursery was created in 2003 in Liwanda by a group of women as a strategy to ensure the proper management and conservation the forest. Since it was created the women have continuously taken care of the nursery by nursing the various species of trees especially those that are very medicinal can be extinct easily but equally very important such as *Azelia* spp (Doussie), *Alstonia congensis* (milk stick), *carapa procera* (monkey no climb), *cuba pentandra* (Boma tree) and others. It was equally outlined that the development of the nursery has raised revenue for the BBNRMC because those who are exploiting timber must plant two trees for every timber that is cut and so the nursery sells some of the trees to forest exploiters.



Figure 4. Bimbia Bonadikombo Community Forest Nursery.

In line with the development of the nursery women equally play a great role in forest management through afforestation and reforestation. In this light women have carried out reforestation in Bimbia-Bonadikombo, Motondo and Bamukong which were areas that were under forest exploitation and so it had been deforested. In Bonadikombo, Moliwe hills and the Dikolo Peninsular, afforestation has been carried out in some parts of these areas. This strategy as outlined by those interviewed is very important and considered a management strategy because before the women practice it they take into consideration the importance of reforestation and afforestation in the different areas.



Figure 5. Reforested area within the BBCF.

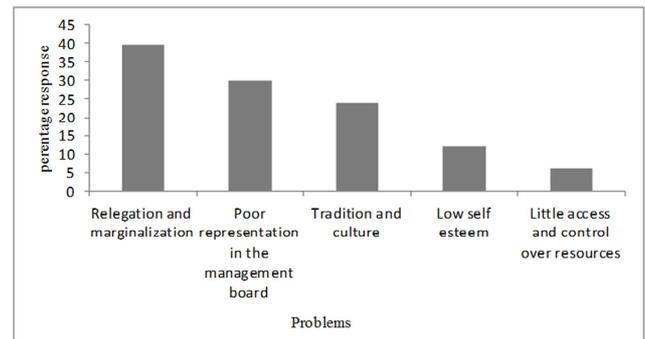


Figure 6. Problems faced by women in the forest management process.

The major issues faced by women include their relegation and Marginalization (39.7%) therefore giving them little or no room for participation the women feel left out and their suggestions towards forest management are equally shot out and therefore making it difficult for the women to contribute significant to forest management, poor Representation of Women in the Management Board (30%). The issue of underrepresentation is common in the Bimbia-Bonadikombo Natural Resource Management Council (BBNRM) in which women account for less than 10% of the members of this decision-making board. This implies that the voices of women and their concerns are usually not given the necessary attention although they are the key stakeholders since they are largely involved in farming activities and in the collection of Non timber forest products (NTFPs). This is made worst by the fact that they hold very insignificant positions which may not even require their contributions in decisions making. The respondents went forward to explain

that the board which is made up of twenty five members has only three women who hold positions of Secretary, Technical Adviser and President of the Board.

Tradition and culture is equal a problem that outlined during the field work. 24% of those interviewed mainly the BBNRMC board members lamented that tradition and culture has affected the women's voice and representation in the management of the community forest. They explained that the tradition of the Bakweri people is so strict and strong on women position up to the extent that women sell in the market and take the money to their husbands. Of the people interviewed 12% of them highlighted low self-esteem as a problem women face with regards to forest management. The people outlined that this problem of low self-esteem is further aggravated by the tradition and customs of the people regarding women as the inferior human beings who are very weak and are only good for domestic activities. With this situation women, equally look down on themselves therefore giving men the upper hand to dominate the women. The problem of low self-esteem have made the women comfortable and not being part of decision making but rather achieving their interest through male representation. 6% of the people interviewed outlined this as a problem facing women in forest management. It was outlined that women have little access and control over natural resources including forest management.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Sustainable forest management in the BBCF can be assured by increasing the role of women in its management. Women are yet to be given their full opportunities to participate in the management of the BBCF. However, key opportunities include their willingness to participate in forest management, and their ability to collaborate in community forest management. Major challenges to women participation include tradition and culture.

There is a need to increase awareness among women needs on their potentials in supporting forest management through sustainable farming practices, the domestication of NTFPs, afforestation and re-afforestation programmes. Women need to become more involved in BBCF management meetings and to demand for their voices to be heard; they should be given the chance to learn more about forest management and support the process. Furthermore, the lessons on green business initiatives (pig and poultry farming) which have been introduced by WWF Cameroon in the Bakossi National Park should be adopted in the BBCF by women who have the potentials to be actively involved in these initiatives. Such initiatives will augment protein source and reduce poaching. Furthermore, the benefits accruing to women from participation should be made tangible while gender equity in benefit sharing should also be ensured. The policy provisions regarding women's participation should be clear and mandatory.

There is a need for sensitization and training campaigns to be carried out in the community, most especially, to educate the women about the importance of their participation in

forest resource management. With respect to training, the women should be given scientific and local training on how to take care of the nursery and equally develop new ones.

Having noted the role of women in the management of the Bimbia-Bonadikombo Community Forest and the benefits that are realized due to the management strategies of these women, certain rules should be instituted to guide the continuous benefits of increasing women participation in forest management and therefore reducing the incidence of over exploitation and the degeneration of the forest environment

Women should be encouraged to participate in forest management by making them hold leadership positions in the board and their opinions should greatly be considered in decision making. The poor representation of women in the BBNRMC board and the neglect of their opinions in decision making was one of the reasons for the low participation of women in forest management. If they are part of the board and their ideas are taken into consideration, it would encourage them to be more involved in forest management.

There is equally a need to revise the organizational structure of the BBNRMC to include women's committee; the committee will be charged with the responsibility of identifying management needs and supporting the management process through afforestation and re-afforestation programmes.

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