



Why wood harvesting for fuel is hard to contain in the South West of Cameroon.

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Summary:

This paper explores the difficulties in asserting a viable conservation environment in the South West of Cameroon due to excessive wood harvesting for fuel. It argues that conservation is marred by the fact that wood harvesting is a tested poor livelihood option in the area and that conserved areas and forests are porous and under implicit legal disputes on ownership between conservationists, government and neighbouring village communities. It also argues that cooking gas is very expensive and beyond the reach of most wood fuel users hence the reason why they are drawn to wood fuel. It proposes price reduction and better access to cooking gas, education and training of wood-fuel users into other professions as ways of curbing dependence. It concludes by encouraging good will from forest workers and other stakeholders.

Wood harvesting for household energy needs is very widespread in the South West province. This area is forested with many timber species around the Mount Fako Forest region and the Manyu and Kupe Mwanenguba forest enclaves. However the South West is also the centre of much of Cameroon's conservation schemes including Korup National Park, Bimbia Bonadikombo forest reserve which is the only low lying coastal tropical rainforest in the area, Lake Barombi Mbo forest reserve created by order No.17 of 1940 (in accordance with Forestry Ordinance. 38 of 1938, published in the supplement to Gazette No. 20 of 25 April 1940 page B.42 of Laws of Nigeria) and Southern Bakundu Forest reserve crafted in 1937 hence questions about how conservation and wood fuel harvesting can be housemates are also fuelling development debates in the region.

According to Javier Mondoia interviewed by this reporter and working for the Bimbia Bonadikombo Forest reserve conservation is failing due to excessive wood harvesting as fire wood for poor households and is enhanced by the fact that conserved areas are very porous.

His arguments reiterate other major points that need to be considered in order to understand why wood harvesting for fuel is had to contain in the South West province of Cameroon. They include the following;

- Firstly the price of cooking gas stands at about 6000 to 6,200 francs CFA per bottle hence unaffordable by many households living below the poverty line. This has driven many of these households to harvesting wood for fuel from near by forested areas in the province or to buy wood from sometimes illegal dealers. These households can buy a bundle of firewood depending on the size of the

wood-bundles within a price range of even 200francs, 300 francs to 1000 francs cfa depending on the needs of the households or the number of people living in these households.

- More over many livelihoods in this area depend on the drying and selling of fish as a livelihood option. With the amount of fish they dry it is considered illogical to depend on alternative fuels from wood-fuel judging from the fact that “dry fish women” as they are called locally are wives of poor fisher women or sometimes vulnerable women heading households that are very poor.
- Besides it is very easy to access many of these forested areas including conserved areas because they are usually situated near tribal communities that implicitly challenge the ownership of these areas with conservation authorities. Many indigenes think that these areas are their tribal lands and therefore have the right to harvest wood from these areas. This makes it difficult for conservationists to mainstream them into conservation management especially when they engage in unsustainable farming practices within these forested areas.
- Besides the dietary preferences of local peoples in the South West supports wood harvesting incidentally. Many people are engaged in roasting of corn as an income bringer along sidewalks of informal economies in Kumba and Limbe during corn season, to eating roasted fish in the Down Beach sea side resort regularly and even at home. These activities need charcoal which is mostly gotten from harvested wood thereby reducing the possibility of containing wood harvesting for fuel in the area.
- The officials in the Ministry of forestry who are to check on such activities are sometimes corrupt and will receive stipends from illegal dealers thereby worsening the situation. They also run poor households with fuel needs and with their low incomes they are likely to receive these bribes or to buy these harvested woods at cheaper rates from the illegal dealers.
- Many poor households in rural areas or in some distant towns like Kumba and Mamfe are too far from the major cooking gas depots in Douala and now recently Limbe with Glocal gas to the extent that supply is sometimes slow, marred by bad roads and bad seasons hence forcing them to harvesting from their forests.

- Despite the call for conservation many peoples still see the forest as full of wood for fuel hence making it imperative for authorities concerned to step up sensitization campaigns which cannot be very vigorous in a Cameroon recently just benefiting from the HIPC initiative.
- High population movements from the North West and East Cameroon for jobs and farming opportunities in the South West province have also brought in new wood fuel dependent users as most of these migrants are poor and incapable of buying gas cookers or cooking gas.

For wood harvesting for fuel to be contained in the South West of Cameroon therefore, there must be the following policy issues to be considered;

- wide stakeholder consultations involving beneficiaries, policy makers, conservationists, civil society, government and local governments so as to design best policies to encourage conservation or to create alternative employment opportunities in the area.
- There must be research into ways of producing local dietary preferences like roasted corn, pap or fish at cheap and affordable prices in order to reduce dependence on charcoal.
- There must be alternative means of sensitisation via partnerships with local radios or the creation of radios exclusively targeting issues related to the local realities of the people. These radios must design participatory learning slots with various stakeholders as most radio slots in the area are mediated by commerce due to the high taxes they pay to central government. This instrument is very vital as radio is still the main source of communication in most poor households in the South West province (Based on this author's interviews with the producer and presenter of Matango Club over Eden Radio and Ocean City Radio in 2005 and 2008).
- Cooking gas needs to be subsidised in order to be cheaper and price hypes aggravated by far distance from depots to points of consumption can be checked with better roads or the construction of depots in other towns especially connecting towns like Mutengene that links Tiko, Douala, Limbe, Buea to Kumba and Mamfe. It must be noted however that the construction of Mutengene/Kumba/Ekok/Abakiliki road is ongoing despite its rather slow pace.

- Women and girl children engaged in just drying fish or the roasting of corn can be encouraged to be trained into other lucrative professions or to be educated so as to assist in other ways to income bringing to their households. Men and boys who actively engage in harvesting and the trade should also be encouraged to take other trades or to be educated. Therefore more professional schools and more subsidised educational opportunities are invaluable to the South West province in order to curb massive wood fuel harvesting.

These measures are likely to reduce the impact of massive wood harvesting on conservation and may also reduce the dependence of harvesters on wood fuel. They may however not replace wood fuel harvesting as a livelihood option in the region but contain it. If conservation of forest or replanting of timber for exports is part of Cameroons forest Law the threats caused by contemporary wood harvesting would not have been this great if these laws were applied and defaulters were punished. So let every one work so that every one will survive in Cameroon even wood harvesters of the South West of Cameroon.

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