



IMPROVING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The challenge

In Cameroon, issues related to environmental degradation, persistent poverty and a lack of social equity have led to various problems, including:

- increased deforestation;
- social inequality in terms of access to resources and benefits;
- the degradation of environmental services;
- low land and labour productivity; and
- the fragility of the political and institutional environment.

Despite several successive reforms, the implementation of policies to correct these problems is still limited.



A) Campo Ma'an Model Forest

Established: 2005 | Area: 769 445 ha

B) Dja et Mpomo Model Forest

Established: 2005 | Area: 2 700 000 ha

Facts

- Forests in the Campo Ma'an and Dja et Mpomo region have exceptional diversity of flora and fauna.
- The local population of Campo Ma'an almost doubled between 1987 and 2001 and is currently numbered at approximately 60 400 inhabitants. In 2007, 55% of rural households were living in poverty. Women and children are particularly affected by this situation.
- The populations of Campo Ma'an and Dja et Mpomo are comprised of different ethnic groups including seven indigenous peoples.
- Many households practice slash-and-burn subsistence farming. They also rely on hunting and fishing, handicrafts, tourism, agro-industry, logging and mining.

The various stakeholders from civil society are often disorganized and often have difficulty maintaining constructive collaboration, especially with regard to resource management, partnerships, local capacity building, understanding of forestry laws, information sharing and the level of participation by local communities. It is therefore difficult to establish a common vision and joint action to enable sustainable resource management. In addition, women, who are the main income generators in rural households, are still often excluded from court procedures. This fact is corroborated by Mrs. Mélanie Lebom, Director of Centre d'appui au développement de la femme, who stated that what led her to become involved in the Model Forest is the fact that women still remained on the sidelines of every activity initiated in this expanse of forest.

Finding a solution

Players in these two Model Forests have formed collaborative groups¹ to meet the challenges of sustainable development and conservation in these areas undergoing transformation. Rural women in particular have seized the opportunity to increase their visibility and increase awareness of their role and contribution in the social and economic life of their community and society in general. They have taken advantage of the implementation of Model Forests to meet other players who can help them to improve their business performance and take advantage of these new opportunities.

“This is an area in which we can express ourselves, because the Model Forest allows us to position ourselves among other players, which has not been easy in the past, because our customs do not always allow women to go sit with others and join in discussions. But in the Model Forest arena, we find ourselves not only among men, but also with chiefs and leaders. This is a space for dialogue where women are in the process of finding their place”, explains Mrs. Lebom.

Several factors worked in the women's favour: the national political context at the time which advocated the decentralization of forest management, the devolution of management powers to local communities, the fight against rural poverty and the advancement of women. All of these factors helped to shape a strong group of committed and determined women, despite a limited variety of capabilities, meagre financial resources and the restricted communication channels available to them.

“There is a system of governance connected with the Model Forest that you really don't see elsewhere. In my opinion, it is a very, very positive concept for the local communities”, said Héléne Eboto, Focal Point for Campo Ma'an Model Forest in the Akom II Commune.

¹ Commonly called «platforms» or «actor groups»

The Réseau des femmes entrepreneurs des Forêts Modèles d'Afrique

The aim of this network of female entrepreneurs, which brings together women's groups from Model Forests in Cameroon and other African countries, is to share a variety of female experiences and expertise in the creation of rural enterprises. These African women aspire to step outside of the framework of informal economy in order to maximize the potential of their activities in terms of socio-economic development. By structuring themselves in groups, cooperatives and networks, they develop funding and marketing mechanisms adapted to their needs.

Results and impact

Since 2010, the African Model Forest Network (AMFN) and its partners, including Cuso International, have undertaken a series of training and coaching sessions for women and other players in both Model Forests to promote creation and business operation. With this knowledge, male and female project leaders have been able to identify ways and means to turn their activities into true successful enterprises.

According to Myriam Stein, rural entrepreneurship advisor and cooperant with Cuso International, Model Forests have allowed local populations to come together and discover common interests. Women can now approach industrial, economic and government stakeholders to find solutions to their problems related to logging, agro-industry and even wildlife conservation.

Development of local entrepreneurship

Since the establishment of these two Model Forests, rural women have been working on strategies for the production, marketing and processing of non-timber forest products. For example, they have initiated projects focused on allanblackia (*Allanblackia floribunda*) and njansang (*Ricinodendron Heudelotti*) oil and cosmetic products, or on mushroom production and shrimp and giant snail farming as an alternative protein sources. Nurseries of native and fruit trees

in the Model Forest allow community forests and households to count on improved seeds. The production of honey, rattan furniture and other products from the forest helps to improve the incomes of women and their families.

Towards a more resilient business model

With funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) through its Canada Fund for African Climate Resilience, Cuso International and the AMFN have been working to strengthen eco-agricultural entrepreneurship in Cameroon's Model Forests. In 2013–2014, some 250 male and female “model” producers received training along with the mission to receive and spread knowledge related to soil biofertilization² techniques and improved seedlings. Up to 2,000 households received training and coaching in order to capitalize on resulting business opportunities.

Conclusion

With the support of Model Forests, changes are now being seen in women in relation to local development dynamics. From a subsistence economy essentially for the fulfilment of basic needs, women's dreams and visions have broadened towards a market economy and the achievement of innovative projects.

And according to Mrs. Eboto, the hope of Africans with regard to the Model Forest concept is that it has come to help communities rise out of poverty.

To find out more

- International Model Forest Network: imfn.net
- www.cusointernational.org/programs/impact/impact/a-forest-for-the-trees
- Video: youtu.be/NwTT8atwWaM
- Anne Marie Tiani et al (2012): *Dynamiques sociales et stratégies féminines dans la Forêt Modèle de Campo Ma'an, Cameroun*. *The Forestry Chronicle* Vol. 88 (3): 283-290.

² An organic fertilizer containing live microorganisms that colonize the root system or interior of the plant.

The International Model Forest Network brings people together to test and apply innovative approaches to the sustainable management and use of the world's landscapes and natural resources.

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